

Central European Journal of Communication

Scientific Journal of the Polish Communication Association

Cringe Culture in Politics in the Digital Age

Volume 19 Number 2 (43) Special Issue 2026

EDITORS

Editor-in-Chief:

AGNIESZKA STĘPIŃSKA, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland

Executive Editor:

BARTŁOMIEJ ŁÓDZKI, University of Wrocław, Poland

GUEST EDITORS

GABRIELLA SZABÓ, ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest, Hungary

LENKA VOCHOCOVÁ, Charles University, Prague, Czechia

EDITORIAL TEAM

KINGA ADAMCZEWSKA, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland

DENIS HALAGIERA, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland

ROKSANA GŁOC, Jagiellonian University, Cracow, Poland

AGNIESZKA WĘGLIŃSKA, University of Wrocław, Poland

SCIENTIFIC NETWORK

List of members of Scientific Network is available on cejc.ptks.pl

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This Special Issue is based upon work from COST Action CA21129 – *What are Opinions? Integrating Theory and Methods for Automatically Analyzing Opinionated Communication* (OPINION), supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) is a funding agency for research and innovation networks. Our Actions help connect research initiatives across Europe and enable scientists to grow their ideas by sharing them with their peers.

This boosts their research, career and innovation.

www.cost.eu

Central European Journal of Communication

Volume 19 | No 2 (43) | Special Issue 2026

Scientific Journal of the Polish Communication Association

Table of Contents

- 188** *Cringe Politics in the Digital Age: Humor and Affective Boundary-Making in Central and Eastern European Political Communication*
Gabriella Szabó, Lenka Vochocová
- 197** *“His Squareness” Filip Turek and his Engine Boys: A Case Study of Cringe Political Communication Centered Around Gender-related Issues*
Jonáš Syrovátka, Lenka Vochocová
- 220** *The Politics of Golden Fries: Cringe Culture and Its Rise in Czech Political Discourse*
Jan Zapotocký
- 246** *Cringe Communication in Hungarian Politics: Insult Humor as a Campaign Tool in 2024*
Gabriella Szabó, István Benedek
- 271** *Cringe as a Public Evaluative Affect: Negotiating Authority–Public Relationships in the Platform Society*
Snežana Bajčeta, Aleksandra Krstić
- 289** *Cringe as a Form of Emotional Manipulation in Albanian Digital Campaigns (2025)*
Edlira Gugu
- 307** *Text versus Audience: Where Does Cringe Emerge?*
Interview with Professor Irena Reifova
by Jan Zapotocký
- 315** *Book Reviews*

Cringe Politics in the Digital Age: Humor and Affective Boundary-Making in Central and Eastern European Political Communication

In recent years, political communication has increasingly moved into digital platforms, which are shaped by entertainment logics and affective dynamics (Papathanassopoulos & Giannouli, 2025). Political actors are no longer judged solely by their policy proposals or ideological positions but also by their ability to perform authenticity, relatability, and cultural competence within rapidly evolving media environments (Luebke, 2021). Within this landscape, a particular communicative phenomenon has gained remarkable visibility: cringe. Cringe describes a distinctive emotional reaction triggered when audiences observe behavior that appears socially awkward, norm-violating, or incongruent with shared expectations of competence and authenticity (Mayer et al., 2021; Strohl, 2026). In everyday language, „cringe” refers to feelings of embarrassment or awkwardness experienced either directly or vicariously when witnessing another person’s socially inappropriate behavior. Recent scholarship also argues that the concept has evolved into a polysemous and multi-functional category that extends beyond a simple emotional reaction, distinguishing between everyday and analytical understandings of cringe and cringe humor (Iché et al., 2026). We argue that in contemporary political communication, cringe operates not only as an emotional response but also as a communicative strategy and a mechanism of political evaluation. In this Special Issue, we approach cringe as a form of affective political communication in which failed political performances become publicly evaluated through embarrassment, humor, and moral judgment, thereby producing symbolic exclusion and reputational hierarchies.

The rise of cringe in political discourse reflects broader transformations in the nature of political communication (Jones, 2010). Over the past decades, politics has become increasingly personalized, shifting attention away from institutions, parties, and policies toward the personalities, performances, and emotional displays of individual political actors (Van Aelst et al., 2012). In this environment, the credibility of political actors is evaluated not only by ideological positions but also by perceived authenticity, charisma, and social competence (Valgarðsson et al., 2021). Political actors are thus required to perform convincingly across multiple communicative arenas, from parliamentary speeches and

televised debates to social media videos and influencer-style content (Kissas, 2024). Within such conditions, the boundaries between politics and entertainment have become blurred. Scholars have described this phenomenon as *politainment*, referring to the fusion of political messaging with entertainment formats and popular culture (Van Zoonen, 2005; Diehl, 2026). Political actors increasingly adopt communicative styles associated with celebrity culture, stand-up comedy, or online influencer communication in order to capture attention in crowded digital media environments (Cervi et al., 2023). Humor, irony, parody, and spectacle have thus become central components of political performance (Gournelos & Greene, 2011).

Cringe emerges precisely within this intersection of personalization and *politainment*. When political actors attempt to adapt to entertainment-driven media environments, such as participating in viral challenges, using youth slang, or performing humor, they expose themselves to new forms of evaluation (Cepernich et al., 2026). Attempts to appear authentic, relatable, or entertaining can easily backfire, producing performances perceived as forced, inauthentic, or socially awkward. These moments frequently trigger cringe reactions among audiences. Digital media environments provide particularly fertile ground for the emergence and circulation of cringe. Platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and X facilitate the rapid dissemination of short, visually striking, and emotionally charged content. Within these infrastructures, moments of awkwardness or performative misalignment are easily extracted from their original context, transformed into memes or short clips, and circulated through networks of users who collectively evaluate and comment on them. As a result, cringe has become a recognizable aesthetic and communicative mode in digital political discourse (Ray & Bhattacharya, 2026).

Despite its growing prominence, cringe has received relatively limited systematic attention in political communication research. While scholars have extensively analyzed political humor, satire, populist style, and emotional communication (Wagner & Schwarzenegger, 2020; Beck, 2024; Prakken, 2025; Bliuc et al., 2026), cringe occupies a somewhat ambiguous position at the intersection of these phenomena. It combines humor with embarrassment, ridicule with discomfort, and moral judgment with amusement. In addition, cringe often centers on failed performances, awkward self-presentation, and perceived cultural incompetence.

Importantly, cringe reactions are rarely emotionally neutral. They often involve forms of moralized judgment, particularly emotions such as contempt and communicative practices including humiliation and ridicule. When audiences experience cringe, they frequently position themselves as morally or culturally superior to the performer whose behavior appears inappropriate or incompetent. This evaluative dimension distinguishes cringe from simple embarrassment: it involves not only witnessing a social misstep but judging it. Such dynamics resonate with broader processes of moralization in political communication. Contemporary political discourse increasingly frames conflicts in moral terms, portraying opponents not merely as ideological adversaries but as morally flawed, incompetent, or socially deviant actors (De Luca & Buell, 2005; Szabó, 2024; Metz, 2025;

Tyler, 2025). In digital environments, humor and ridicule can turn such evaluations into collective acts of moral judgment (Momen, 2018). By presenting political opponents as laughable, awkward, or embarrassing figures, communicators invite audiences to participate in a collective act of moral judgment.

The emergence of cringe as a recognizable feature of political communication is closely tied to broader transformations in media environments and political performance. Political discourse increasingly unfolds within a hybrid media system, where legacy media institutions coexist with digital platforms, influencers, and user-generated content. Within this environment, visibility and attention have become central resources (Marwick, 2013). Political actors must compete for attention within crowded information spaces characterized by rapid content turnover and algorithmically driven distribution. Emotional intensity, humor, and visual appeal tend to determine whether content gains traction within these environments and their networked affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015). Such moments thus lead to instant wide circulation, as the logic of digital platforms further intensifies these dynamics. Content that evokes strong emotional reactions – whether positive or negative – tends to be more widely shared and circulated (Cervi et al., 2023; Papacharissi, 2015). As a result, cringe-worthy moments frequently become viral phenomena, spreading through networks of commentary, parody, and ironic reinterpretation. In this sense, cringe can be understood as part of a broader attention economy of affect, in which emotional responses drive the circulation of content. Cringe reactions do not necessarily indicate rejection; they often combine discomfort with amusement, encouraging audiences to share and comment on the content precisely because it is awkward or embarrassing.

HUMOR, SUPERIORITY, AND THE EMOTIONAL LOGIC OF CRINGE

Understanding cringe communication also requires situating it within broader theories of humor. Classical humor theory distinguishes several mechanisms by which humor operates, including superiority, incongruity, and relief theories (see Bardon, 2005; Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017). Among these, superiority and incongruity provide particularly useful analytical tools for understanding the emotional dynamics of cringe. According to the superiority theory, humor arises from a sense of superiority over others who appear foolish, incompetent, or socially inferior (Ferguson & Ford, 2008; Stone, 2021). This perspective emphasizes the hierarchical and often aggressive dimensions of humor. Laughter can function as a social mechanism that reinforces group boundaries and hierarchies by ridiculing those who violate shared norms. Cringe humor strongly resonates with this mechanism (Scheel & Zekavat, 2025). Similarly, when audiences experience cringe, they frequently position themselves as socially or culturally superior to the individual whose behavior appears awkward or inappropriate. The discomfort generated by witnessing the performance is often accompanied by a sense of judgment: the performer is perceived as lacking self-awareness, cultural competence, or social intelligence. At the same time, cringe

humor also reflects the logic of incongruity, which emphasizes the role of mismatches between expectations and outcomes in generating fun. In political communication, such incongruities may arise when politicians attempt to perform roles associated with digital culture or popular entertainment but fail to meet the implicit expectations of those roles.

Recent experimental research on political attacks further clarifies why humor is such a powerful ingredient in hostile political communication. Verhulsdonk, Nai, and Karp (2021) show that combining political attacks with “other-deprecatory humor” reduces the likelihood that the attack will backfire against the attacker, while preserving its effectiveness against the target. Humor, in other words, can make negative campaigning more acceptable without blunting its persuasive force. These findings are highly relevant for the study of cringe. Cringe communication does not merely rely on humor to entertain; it uses humor to package moral judgment, ridicule, and hostility in ways that are more easily circulated, more affectively engaging, and less vulnerable to normative sanction. Whereas Verhulsdonk (et al., 2021) focuses on experimental campaign messages, cringe extends this logic into the realm of digital political culture, where awkwardness, failed self-presentation, and exaggerated inauthenticity become raw material for humorous attack. In this sense, cringe can be understood as a stylized and multimodal form of humorized negativity: it does not simply “soften” political attack, but transforms it into pleasurable, participatory, and highly shareable moral devaluation.

Cringe, therefore, represents a hybrid of these mechanisms: the incongruity of a failed performance combined with the superiority-based judgment of the observing audience. In political contexts, such dynamics can easily escalate into practices resembling symbolic humiliation, where political opponents are framed not merely as mistaken but as ridiculous and socially incompetent figures.

WHY CRINGE MATTERS FOR POLITICAL COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

The growing visibility of cringe in contemporary political communication raises important questions for scholars interested in the emotional, cultural, and performative dimensions of politics. While humor, satire, and ridicule have long been part of political discourse, cringe highlights a particular affective configuration that has become increasingly salient in digital media environments.

First, cringe offers a useful lens for analyzing the performative cruelty and vulnerabilities of personalized politics. As political communication is now overwhelmingly centered on individual actors and their mediated performances, political legitimacy is evaluated not only through policy positions but through perceived authenticity, competence, and cultural fluency. Cringe thus exposes the fragility of mediated political authority. Second, the circulation of cringe content illustrates how affective publics shape contemporary political discourse. In networked media environments, emotional responses such as embarrassment, ridicule, or amusement quickly become collective experiences that structure

political communication flows. Third, cringe communication sheds light on the moralization of political conflict. By framing political actors as ridiculous, incompetent, or socially inappropriate, cringe often operates as a form of symbolic exclusion that delegitimizes opponents through affective judgment rather than ideological debate. Finally, studying cringe contributes to broader debates about the democratic implications of platform-driven political communication. While humor may foster engagement, the widespread circulation of ridiculing content may also reinforce personalization, polarization, and reputational attacks at the expense of substantive political discussion.

CRINGE ACROSS POLITICAL CONTEXTS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Although the phenomenon of cringe communication is observable across many political systems, the contributions in this special issue highlight its particular relevance within the political landscapes of Central and Eastern Europe. Across the cases examined in this issue – Hungary, the Czech Republic, Serbia, and Albania – cringe emerges as a versatile communicative mechanism operating across different political contexts.

Despite important differences in political institutions and media systems, several common patterns become visible. Cringe often emerges at the intersection of digital platform culture and political authority, where politicians attempting to adapt to platform-native communication styles risk producing performances perceived as culturally out of place. At the same time, ridicule-based communication frequently contributes to political polarisation and identity formation, as audiences use shared humor to reinforce in-group cohesion. Across these contexts, cringe operates both as a strategic communicative tool used to ridicule political opponents and as a spontaneous affective response to performances perceived as culturally inappropriate or excessive. In either case, cringe reveals how political legitimacy is increasingly negotiated through affective and cultural evaluations within digital media environments.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The articles included in this special issue examine these dynamics across various political landscapes and digital platforms in Central and Eastern Europe. While each study focuses on a different political environment and methodological approach, together they illustrate the diverse ways in which cringe operates within contemporary political communication.

The first paper, authored by Jan Zápotocký, investigates how social media actors from a Czech conservative party employ hypermasculinity, heteronormativity, and misogyny in their political messaging, often ridiculing gender diversity and female opponents to enforce societal norms and deepen polarization. The second study by Jonáš Syrovátka

and Lenka Vochocová offers a case analysis of TikTok as a performative arena where Czech politicians deploy affective discomfort and social awkwardness, revealing how these digital rituals shape emotional engagement during electoral campaigns. Moving eastward, the third paper, co-authored by Gabriella Szabó and István Benedek, examines Hungarian political humor through the lens of Trombi, a YouTuber who uses insult comedy to reinforce partisan identities and legitimize government narratives amid a polarized media environment. The fourth article by Snežana Bajčeta and Aleksandra Krstić delves into Serbia's public sphere, highlighting how cringe content functions as a battleground between authoritarian regimes and citizen protests, with the production and reception of cringe serving to reinforce deep societal divides. Lastly, the fifth paper, authored by Edlira Gugu, analyzes the use of cringe strategies by Albanian politicians on social media, demonstrating how humor and shame are harnessed to discredit opponents and deepen political polarization. The empirical papers are accompanied by two additional pieces: an interview with Associate Professor Irena Reifová from Charles University, who specializes in cultural phenomena in communication, and a review of the most recent book on cringe humor in digital media and film by Associate Professor Damian Guzek. The interview explores the complex nature of cringe, highlighting its ambiguous emotional and cultural dimensions. Reifová emphasizes that cringe is both a biological affect rooted in discomfort and a cultural construct shaped by social norms, with its perception varying across different communities and contexts. She also discusses how cringe can reveal societal inequalities, serve as a form of resistance, and reflect collective anxieties, making it a valuable but challenging subject for scholarly investigation. Damian Guzek from the University of Silesia in Katowice offers an insightful review of *"Cringe Humor on Screen and in Digital Media: Pragmatic Perspectives,"* edited by Virginie Iché, Célia Schneebeli, and Lynn Blin. He emphasizes that the volume provides a comprehensive framework for understanding cringe humor as a polysemous, relational, and context-dependent communicative phenomenon, exploring its historical, cultural, and media-specific dimensions. Guzek highlights the book's theoretical sophistication and empirical richness, noting its relevance for scholars interested in media studies, digital culture, and humor, while also pointing out its Western cultural focus and the need for further exploration of platform-specific dynamics.

Taken together, the contributions demonstrate that cringe constitutes a multifaceted and distinct communicative phenomenon embedded within contemporary digital political culture and political communication, shaped by the interaction between personalized politics, entertainment-driven media environments, and affective forms of political evaluation.

TOWARD A RESEARCH AGENDA ON CRINGE IN POLITICS

The analyses presented in this special issue suggest several directions for future research. First, further work is needed to clarify the conceptual boundaries between cringe and related phenomena such as satire, ridicule, embarrassment, and humiliation. While these categories overlap, cringe possesses distinctive affective dynamics that merit systematic theoretical attention. Second, comparative research could explore how cultural norms shape the perception of cringe across different societies. Behaviors that appear awkward or inappropriate in one cultural context may not evoke the same reactions elsewhere. Third, audience research is essential for understanding how individuals interpret cringe content and how such reactions influence political attitudes, trust, and engagement. Finally, scholars should examine the democratic implications of cringe communication. While ridicule and humor have long been part of political discourse, the increasing prominence of cringe may contribute to personalization of political conflict and the erosion of substantive policy debate. Cringe has emerged as a distinctive feature of contemporary political communication, particularly within digital media environments where emotional reactions drive visibility and circulation. Combining embarrassment, ridicule, and amusement, cringe functions both as a cultural category and as a communicative practice through which audiences evaluate political performances. By examining different empirical contexts, this special issue suggests that cringe is not merely an accidental by-product of political performances. Rather, it constitutes a cross-cutting communicative mechanism that intertwines humor, moral evaluation, and political power, through which political actors are hierarchized, judged, ridiculed, and mobilized within contemporary media environments. Understanding cringe, therefore, provides valuable insights into how political legitimacy, cultural competence, and authority are negotiated within the affective and performative arenas of digital politics.

Gabriella Szabó

ELTE CENTRE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCES, BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

Lenka Vochocová

CHARLES UNIVERSITY, PRAGUE, CZECHIA

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This publication is based upon work from COST Action CA 21129, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) is a funding agency for research and innovation networks. Our Actions help connect research initiatives across Europe and enable scientists to grow their ideas by sharing them with their peers. This boosts their research, career and innovation.

WWW.COST.EU

REFERENCES

- Bardon, A. (2005). The philosophy of humor. *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*, 2(1), 462–476.
- Beck, D. (2024). Humorous parodies of popular culture as strategy in Boris Johnson's populist communication. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 26(3), 830–847.
- Bliuc, A. M., Yilmaz, I., Norrie, R., De Groot Heupner, S., Morieson, N., & Belanger, M. J. (2026). The emotional logic of populist communication: A systematic review. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1–26.
- Cepernich, C., Fubini, A., & Martella, A. (2026). Make campaigns dance again: The Trumpdance and the memeaesthetic logic of TikTok. *Social Media + Society*, 12(3), 20563051261472313.
- Cervi, L., Tejedor, S., & Blesa, F. G. (2023). TikTok and political communication: The latest frontier of politainment? A case study. *Media and Communication*, 11(2), 203–217.
- De Luca, T., & Buell, J. (2005). *Liars! Cheaters! Evildoers!: Demonization and the end of civil debate in American politics*. NYU Press.
- Diehl, P. (2026). Understanding the normalization of the far right: Populism, mass media, and politainment. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 1–16.
- Driessens, O. (2013). Celebrity capital: Redefining celebrity using field theory. *Theory and Society*, 42(5), 543–560.
- Ferguson, M. A., & Ford, T. E. (2008). Disparagement humor: A theoretical and empirical review of psychoanalytic, superiority, and social identity theories. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 21(3), 283–312.
- Gournelos, T., & Greene, V. (Eds.). (2011). *A decade of dark humor: How comedy, irony, and satire shaped post-9/11 America*. University Press of Mississippi.
- Iché, V., Schneebeli, C., & Blin, L. (Eds.). (2026). *Cringe humor on screen and in digital media: Pragmatic perspectives*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-93002-7>
- Jones, J. P. (2010). *Entertaining politics: Satiric television and political engagement*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Kissas, A. (2024). Populist everyday politics in the (mediatized) age of social media: The case of Instagram celebrity advocacy. *New Media & Society*, 26(5), 2766–2785.
- Larkin-Galiñanes, C. (2017). An overview of humor theory. In S. Attardo (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of language and humor* (pp. 4–16). Routledge.

- Luebke, S. M. (2021). Political authenticity: Conceptualization of a popular term. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 26(3), 635–653.
- Marwick, A. E. (2013). *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. Yale University Press.
- Mayer, A. V., Paulus, F. M., & Krach, S. (2021). A psychological perspective on vicarious embarrassment and shame in the context of cringe humor. *Humanities*, 10(4), 110.
- Metz, R. (2025). (Don't) fear the bad leader: Three influential myths about bad leadership. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 7, 1589496.
- Momen, M. (2018). *Political satire, postmodern reality, and the Trump presidency: Who are we laughing at?* Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Papathanassopoulos, S., & Giannouli, I. (2025). Political communication in the age of platforms. *Encyclopedia*, 5(2), 77.
- Prakken, B. (2025). Humorous political rhetoric in the US: Analysing Trump's and Ocasio-Cortez's use of humour. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 13(4), 36–56.
- Ray, A., & Bhattacharya, D. (2026). Hero Alom and the politics of cringe: Bengali-networked publics in the age of platform visibility. *Celebrity Studies*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2026.2643513>
- Scheel, T., & Zekavat, M. (2025). Humour and laughter in communication. In O. Hargie (Ed.), *The handbook of communication skills* (5th ed., pp. 339–370). Routledge.
- Stone, S. A. (2021). Why you're not worthy: The superiority theory of humor. In J. Marra Henrigillis & S. Gimble (Eds.), *It's funny ,cause it's true: An introduction to philosophy through humor* (Chapter 3.1). LibreTexts. <https://spiral.lynn.edu/facpubs/1077/>
- Strohl, M. (2026). Cringe comedy as social horror. *Rivista di Estetica*, 91, 142–155.
- Szabó, G. (Ed.). (2024). *Managing moral emotions in divided politics: Lessons from Hungary's 2022 general election campaigns*. Springer Nature.
- Tyler, C. (2025). Analyzing pluralized moral panics using morphological framing: The case of the transgender debate. *Deviant Behavior*, 1–25.
- Valgarðsson, V. O., Clarke, N., Jennings, W., & Stoker, G. (2021). The good politician and political trust: An authenticity gap in British politics? *Political Studies*, 69(4), 858–880.
- Van Aelst, P., Sheaffer, T., & Stanyer, J. (2012). The personalization of mediated political communication: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings. *Journalism*, 13(2), 203–220.
- Van Zoonen, L. (2005). *Entertaining the citizen: When politics and popular culture converge*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Verhulsdonk, I., Nai, A., & Karp, J. A. (2021). Are political attacks a laughing matter? Three experiments on political humour and the effectiveness of negative campaigning. *Political Research Quarterly*, 75(3), 720–737.
- Wagner, A., & Schwarzenegger, C. (2020). A populism of lulz: The proliferation of humor, satire, and memes as populist communication in digital culture. In B. Krämer & C. Holtz-Bacha (Eds.), *Perspectives on Populism and the Media. Avenues for research* (pp. 313–332). Nomos.

“His Squareness” Filip Turek and his Engine Boys: A Case Study of Cringe Political Communication Centered Around Gender-related Issues

Jonáš Syrovátka

 0000-0001-9898-9547

Charles University, Czechia

Lenka Vochocová

 0000-0001-9873-4536

Charles University, Czechia

Abstract: This paper relates cringe political communication on social media to gender-based disinformation and identity politics. Our analysis employs qualitative coding (Grounded Theory) of social media content produced by representatives of the rising Czech conservative political party Motorists and its youth faction, Generation Engine. Their cringe political communication, strategically targeting young men, has three dimensions: hypermasculinity, hetero-/cisheteronormativity, and misogyny. It ridicules gender diversity and humiliates political opponents while emphasizing and celebrating the alleged normative masculinity of Motorists' representatives. We argue that cringe political communication, employing gender issues schematically as an anti-discourse but disguised as humor, is used to enforce societal norms and discipline the objects of cringe, including political opponents. The experience of cringing also reinforces the sense of subculture among Motorists' supporters and alienates them from society, presented as deranged, confused, and blinded by progressive ideology.

Keywords: cringe humor; Motorist for Themselves; social media; far-right political communication; gender-related misinformation

INTRODUCTION

Anti-feminist and anti-gender discourses are increasingly becoming part of European politics, with mainly right-wing parties across Europe politicizing these issues (Dergiç et al., 2022; Kováts & Póim, 2015). At the same time, concerns stemming from data revealing the rising misogyny and conservatism of young

European men (Deutsch, 2024), stimulated by the so-called manosphere in the digital space (Botto & Gottzén, 2024), are flooding the public spheres in a form resembling a moral panic. In such a political and socio-cultural climate, a conservative, right-wing political party, Motorists for Themselves (generally referred to as Motorists further in the text), promoting strong hetero-/cis-normative and patriarchal values, emerged in 2022. The party entered the Czech Parliament in autumn 2025 and formed the current government coalition. An important element of the party's success has been its ability to gain support among young males (Volební model, 2025) – to capitalize on this appeal, the party established a youth organization, Generation Engine, in November 2024.

The extensive social media presence is one of the crucial factors of Motorists' success, and the use of humor keeps their audiences on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok engaged. Jokes, memes, or short video clips are used to promote their political messaging, including conservative values. In this sense, Motorists resemble other right-wing parties utilizing humor to support their political objectives (Bauer, 2023).

The aim of this paper is to relate Motorists' cringe humorous communication to gender and identity politics, specifically to gender misinformation. We analyze gender aspects of online political communication of Motorists for Themselves and Generation Engine in the year before the 2025 Parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic. We are interested in how this very specific form of humorous content relates to the discursive construction of gender relations and sexuality as political issues in the official online communication of the party.

We theoretically approach the study from a perspective of political communication. More specifically, we are inspired by two theoretical areas. First, we follow studies thematizing the anti-gender discourse as part of the right-wing backlash against liberalism and the rise of authoritarianism in the Western liberal democratic countries (Dergić et al., 2022). We are particularly inspired by studies on anti-gender mobilizations (Dergić et al., 2022; Kováts & Pöim, 2015) and rejection of gender diversity and inclusivity as one of the “anti-discourses” (Martinsson & Ericson, 2015) employed in political communication (Barla & Bjork-James, 2021). We also borrow from studies connecting political expression to collective identity building, specifically those studying discursive intolerance towards different groups as tools of community building and political radicalization (Hogg, 2023; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2024).

Second, we are informed by theoretical and empirical scholarship studying cringe as a specific, humorous communication strategy not only in the context of specific political agendas and goals (Bauer, 2023), but also with regard to broader power relations and norms-enforcement in democratic countries (Billig, 2005). We pay particular attention to research conceptualising cringe as “a hostile social emotion” linked to disgust, rather than merely embarrassment. As such,

it enables political actors to express hostility and denial in a seemingly acceptable, non-violent manner, while simultaneously constructing certain identities (in our case, related to gender issues) as being outside the acceptable norms (Spiegel, 2025 p. 229).

POLITICAL PARTY MOTORISTS FOR THEMSELVES: HISTORY, REPRESENTATIVES, AND IDEOLOGY

The Motorists party was established in 2022 by Petr Macinka, who previously collaborated with former president Václav Klaus, known for euroscepticism, climate change denial, and criticism of "progressivism" allegedly dominating Western societies (see, for example, Klaus, 2023). These views resonate in the party's communication and programmatic documents. In 2024, their coalition with the Oath party (Přísaha) gained 10% of votes and two seats in the European Parliament (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2024).

Their representatives joined the right-wing political group, Patriots for Europe. One of them has been Filip Turek, the former racer, car enthusiast, and president of the Jaguar Club. Turek entered the Czech information space in 2022 when he started to host the show *Po žních k Turkovi* (the title references a punchline from a popular Czech comedy) on the YouTube channel V.O.X. TV. Turek has significant reach on social media – his Instagram has 260,000 followers. He is also active on his X-account with handler @DolphSegal referring to actors of 1980s action movies (49,000 followers), Facebook (87,000 followers), and TikTok (62,000 followers). His communication is supported by a profile Hranatost (Squareness), that is active on Facebook (93,000 followers), Instagram (132,000 followers) and TikTok (62,000 followers). The name of the account refers to sharp features of Turek's face which he turned into his personal trademark. Turek, for instance, uses the term "Square legend" on his promotion materials or calls his supporters by the neologism "Squares" (Hranatci). While the "Squareness" accounts claim not to be affiliated with Turek personally, journalists uncovered that it is operated by his former assistant in the European parliament (Tomeš & Prchal, 2025). Turek is a controversial figure due to his sympathies to far-right ideologies exemplified by bragging about collecting of Nazi memorabilia, making comments that could be interpreted as endorsement of Nazism, or giving a Nazi salute while driving. Turek explained such statements as "youthful stupidity" and "black humor" (Stein, 2024).

In the parliamentary elections in 2025, the party gained 6,77% and 13 seats in the Parliament and became a member of the coalition government. The key group of the party voters has been men between 18 and 29 years old. According to sociological polls, 14% of respondents from this group would vote for Motorists

(STEM, 2025). To take advantage of the fact, Motorists launched its youth organization, Generation Engine, in November 2024, led by Matěj Gregor, a student of history, local politician in the city of Ostrava, and former activist promoting leaving the EU (Trojan, 2025). Similarly to Turek, the youth organization became infamous for its “humorous” photo corner at its convention with posters referring to nazism, racism, and violence against political opponents. Gregor downplayed the seriousness of such claims with reference to exaggerated humor (iDnes, 2024).

ANTI-GENDER DISCOURSES AS A PART OF SHARED ONLINE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

The subject of our study, the right-wing political party Motorists and their youth faction Generation Engine, perceive themselves as opposition to liberalism and progressivism, which they view as destabilizing social changes that bring uncertainty and confusion. We thus theoretically frame our research by studies connecting uncertainty with identity theory and the online environment. Such scholarship stresses that online political communication provides people with a possibility to connect and identify as a group with clear characteristics and a common “worldview and sense of self” (Hogg, 2023, p. 828), reducing their uncertainty by providing them with a readily available identity confirmation and validation (Hogg, 2023, p. 832).

Martinsson and Ericson (2022) specifically point out the process of identity formation facilitated by digital technologies and their connectivity and performativity. In this process, social media are providing people easily with an opportunity to belong to a community and to be recognized as its valid members. However, alongside these generally positive aspects, they argue, the (online) shared identity is typically constructed by the simultaneous rejection of the “Other” (Martinsson & Ericson, 2022), resulting in societal fragmentation and intolerance towards other groups (Hogg, 2023; Törnberg, 2022). Törnberg and Törnberg (2024) describe the process of “discursive community formation” (p. 6) in which people are socialised into specific communities through conversational rituals forming a shared discourse “within which certain beliefs become sacred and unquestionable”. Authors add that these processes, intensified by digital media, may result in strongly negative perceptions of other groups and in “a breakdown of social cohesion” (Törnberg, 2022, p. 1), as well as in the creation of “identity silos” – groups of people who identify with intolerant beliefs because it helps them reduce their self-uncertainty and sense of marginalisation (Hogg, 2023, p. 832). Saucier et al. (2016) specifically mention the role of racial humor in group identification and in shifting norms of expression. The intentionally antisocial humor, they argue, “may reinforce the social hierarchy and

stereotypes about the individuals it targets, potentially loosening societal norms that discourage expressions of prejudice" (ibid, p. 75).

Given the focus of our study on gender aspects of cringe political communication of a right-wing party, we further build upon scholarship concerned with anti-gender discourses and misogynist and sexist agenda as inherent parts of conservative discourses. Studies consider politicization of individual (gender) identities as typical strategies of right-wing backlash against liberalism (Dergić et al., 2022) and a "symbolic glue" connecting conservative political forces across Europe (Barla & Bjork-James, 2021, p. 379; Kováts & Póim, 2015, p. 147). Anti-gender discourses and their intersection with other "anti-discourses" are thus seen as a form of self-legitimization and identity protection (ibid, p. 380), with a constant flow of anti-gender content serving as ideological mobilization and contributing to the "transformative struggle about how gender, sexuality, and multiculturalism must be understood in a national and transnational context" (Martinsson & Ericson, 2022, pp. 2– 4). With regard to the post-socialist context of our research case, Donskikh and Akopov (2024) mention gender-based humor in Russia's president Vladimir Putin's speeches as a strategy to maintain a heteronormative gendered order and associate the collective identity of the citizens and country with masculinity. From a different perspective, other scholars consider misogynist attacks as a form of not only discrediting female opponents in political debates (Vowles & Hultman, 2021; White, 2021), but also of preserving the "capitalist values and order which provide power and privilege only to those identities that the authors call 'industrial/breadwinner masculinities' or 'petro-masculinities'" (Barla & Bjork-James, 2021, p. 380), stabilising "the position of white heterosexual men" and maintaining traditional worldviews (White, 2021, p. 399).

HUMOR AND CRINGE AS COMMUNICATION TOOLS IN FAR-RIGHT POLITICS AND ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND

In recent years, cringe comedy emerged as a popular genre symbolized by TV series like *The Office*, *The Inbetweeners*, or *Borat* movies. The essence of their humor is constructing a situation in which characters unknowingly break social norms. The audience's understanding of the inappropriateness creates a mix of shame, amusement, and discomfort, resulting in masochistic pleasure (Mayer, Paulus and Krach 2021). Some researchers argued that the experience of vicarious embarrassment can have a positive impact on generating empathy (Hye-Knudsen, 2018), pointing out societal problems such as prejudice or racism (Wöhrle, 2021) or breaches of social taboos, including gender-related issues (Havas & Sulimma, 2018). However, more skeptical voices emphasize that cringing is inevitably

linked with feelings of aversive disgust and represents a socially acceptable form of hostility (Spiegel, 2025).

We argue that the potentially negative aspects of cringe humor become more apparent when analyzing different types of content than the often-referenced TV shows, which are written and produced under constraints imposed by the logic of the entertainment industry. Borat films or female-centered cringe dramedy can serve as a tool of empowerment by disturbing the “gendered expectations of mediated femininity” through “violations of social and cultural taboos [...] and expectations about appropriate enactments of femininity” (Havas & Sulimma, 2018 pp. 83-89). However, the cringe humor applied by the far-right – represented by the Motorists’ party in our research – can be used to promote the anti-gender agenda and construct and enforce social norms that they present as natural.

The (mis)use of humor by far-right political actors is a well-established research field (e.g., Pérez, 2022). Various authors demonstrated that humor can be used by politicians to assault opponents and enforce racial, gender, and other hierarchies (Bauer, 2023; Svatoňová, 2023). The use of humor provides far-right actors with greater freedom of manoeuvre in the public debate. They can make even the most extreme views more accessible to mainstream audiences under the guise of humor. The excuse that “it is just a joke” can present their critics as humorless and provides a potential path for retreat in case their views come under public or legal scrutiny (Askanius, 2021).

Memes, jokes, and quips allow for “punch down” against vulnerable groups such as minorities, migrants, or transgender people (Pérez, 2016; Pérez, 2022; Saucier, Conor, & Strain, 2016). At the same time, rebellious humor subverting power structures allows the far-right to “punch up” (Billig, 2005) since it can position itself as a minority standing against detached “progressive” elites blinded by their own ideology (Wagner & Schwarzenegger, 2020). With regard to our research topic, it is important to note that gender-based humor is a highly resonant tool in depicting the elites as stereotypically feminine – hysterical, naïve and weak (Pettersson et al., 2023). The sharing of jokes, memes, and other types of humorous content targeting elite actors and their conventions can be a powerful way to increase cohesion and create a space of ontological security (Windisch & Simi, 2023).

Cringe humor can be an effective communication tool for the far-right since it generates strong and uncomfortable feelings, leading to disgust and hostility towards people violating alleged social norms (Spiegel, 2025). These individuals are becoming dehumanized since they are presented as irretrievably abnormal and anti-social. The feeling of vicarious embarrassment prevents their recognition as fellow citizens and delegitimizes their opinions and worldviews.

Cringing as a collective experience can also serve as a way to foster cohesion among supporters of far-right politicians and effectively draw lines between

them and the rest of society. The ability to define social norms and recognize when someone transgresses them creates a sense of social superiority that can reinforce the exclusivity of the group sharing humorous experiences (Spiegel, 2025). The connection is also formed on an emotional level since cringing represents a moment of reaffirmation of shared affective infrastructure that was temporarily disbalanced by confronting an awkward situation (Smilges, 2024). Humor can also serve as a tool of enforcement of hierarchies and disciplining of members (Bellè, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper is inspired by research on the cringe aspects of right-wing political communication, as well as by literature highlighting the rise of anti-gender mobilizations as part of the conservative backlash against liberal values. Our research connects these two spheres by examining the cringe aspects of anti-gender mobilizations in the online political communication of a right-wing political party, Motorists, and their youth faction, Generation Engine. Since the party has become relevant only recently to our knowledge, the article is one of the first scholarly attempts to map out its communication, ideology, and agenda. Furthermore, to fill in the relative gap in research on cringe aspects of anti-gender political mobilizations, our research aims to answer the following main research question:

- RQ1: How does anti-gender discourse intersect with cringe aspects of online political communication of Motorists For Themselves and Generation Engine?

To offer a more nuanced typology of anti-gender discourse, we ask the following subsequent research questions:

- RQ2: How are gender norms constructed and represented in the cringe political communication of Motorists For Themselves and Generation Engine?
- RQ3: Which individuals or groups are presented as violators of the alleged gender norms in the cringe political communication of analyzed actors?
- RQ4: What techniques are used to evoke feelings of cringe related to the supposed violators of norms in Motorists' audiences?

DATA

To fulfill our research goals, we created our sample from posts on official social media profiles of Motorists for Themselves, their two main representatives, Filip Turek (former MEP and current member of the Czech Parliament) and Petr Macinka (chair), Generation Engine (or “Motorgen”) and its leader Matěj Gregor, and Hranatost (Squareness), a profile promoting Turek. We focused on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to ensure diversity of content. We followed online communication of the above subjects published from September 2024 to September 2025, covering a year before the 2025 Parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic. However, the “Motorgen” profiles are more recent, as they follow the history of the youth movement officially established in November 2024. The final sample comprises 88 posts (usually shared on multiple social media/profiles) and only includes content that explicitly thematizes gender issues and, at the same time, can be identified as containing cringe humor.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

We conducted an explorative, inductive qualitative content analysis of social media content produced by Motorists for Themselves and Generation Engine in order to gain an in-depth insight into the complexity of the aspects of both cringe communication and anti-gender discourse produced online by the political party in question.

We employed the first two coding procedures of the Grounded Theory as it is especially suitable for exploring new topics while preventing researchers from influencing the results by their previous expectations (Charmaz, 2006). We started with open coding to identify all possible aspects of cringe communication in public posts related to gender issues, as well as specific anti-gender statements and the targets of anti-gender rhetoric. A specific code was assigned to every relevant aspect of the data. In the second step, we identified relations among the initial open codes and patterns in the data, resulting in the construction of the first level of categories, which were further grouped to identify a final set of categories, including their detailed structure (i.e. subcategories related to main categories etc.). Our analytical focus and sensitivity were framed by our interest in the cringe content ridiculing gender-based identity politics, feminism and, more generally, the agenda of liberal politicians through statements declaring the party’s stance toward the gendered social order and gender relations in general. Specifically, in each post we observed a) what social norms in relation to gender issues are constructed through the content; b) who is presented as a violator of alleged social norms and c) what techniques are used to evoke feelings of cringe in the supposed target audience of Motorists’ political communication.

We had to deal with one major methodological challenge – the polysemic character of cringe humor, meaning that “there can be multiple interpretations of humor” (Pérez, 2016 p. 929), especially because the definitions of “cringe” are open to further interpretation. We thus decided to focus on analyzing the possible intention of the text producer and the inscription of the preferred reading in the text (Fiske, 2010), attempting to identify the values of the communicators and the mechanisms of control over the gender discourse they employ to reduce the polysemy of their cringe humorous production. We consider the content cringe when it is obvious that the producers use it to ridicule their ideological opponents through the “use of various situations to induce vicarious embarrassment, and possibly laughter, in the audience” (Mayer et al., 2021: 9), prioritizing the conceptualizations of cringe connecting it with hostile emotions (Spiegel, 2025).

RESULTS

Our analysis follows two main directions corresponding to our research questions. First and foremost, we offer a detailed analysis of the anti-gender narratives and conceptualization of gender issues by Motorists in their online communication (RQ2). Second, we specifically focus on the description of argumentation strategies (RQ4) and targets of anti-gender discourse in Motorists’ online communication to reveal the main pillars of their construction of an ideological online community (RQ3).

The subchapters below will focus on main categories encompassing various strategies of Motorists a) revealing their broader ideological positions and normative expectations regarding gender issues (ideology, norms), b) related to specific targets of their anti-gender discourse (representations of outgroups) and c) contributing to a construction of the desired ingroup characteristic of the shared “Motorists community” (representations of ingroup) by evoking feelings of cringe. Because all these three analyzed aspects are inseparable in Motorists’ communication, we will present our findings across these areas, following the logic of the most abstract categories resulting from axial coding (these categories also represent broader “narratives” about the gendered social order presented by Motorists).

MAIN FINDINGS

Politicians of the Motorists party employ cringe humor as a dehumanizing communication tactic towards a wider group of opponents – mostly LGBTQ+ activists and identities, journalists, and political opponents. They use cringe humor in two different ways: Firstly, as a rebellious tool, by presenting “gender

ideology” (often only explicitly labelled as “gender”) as an elite project pushed by progressives controlling public discourse; and, secondly, as a disciplinary tool, by representing any identity outside the cis – and hetero-normative frame as a deviation from the expected norms of gender and sexual relations.

The disciplining aspect of cringe humor has an important internal vector, as it targets members of the movement to whom it prescribes not only the right opinions and taboo topics, but also a model of desired, expected masculinity to which they should aspire. This model is extremely personalized in Motorists’ communication – it is represented by Filip Turek and his attributes summarised as “squareness”, reflecting both his physical appearance and the desired (square, sharp) aspects of his personality and values, as in the opposition to the undesired “roundness”. We thus argue that the ambition of Motorists is not only to organize a political party, but also to create a political subculture around specific norms and values, represented also by a nickname „Squares” (“Hranatci”) used by Turek to address his followers on social media. Gender-focused cringe humor then represents one of its key organizing principles and defines the boundaries of the community.

In our case study, as the parliamentary elections of 2025 approached, gender-related themes became less prominent in the communication of Motorists and its representatives. Also, the tone of the social media posts became less humorous and presented the party as competent, serious, and ready to take part in the governing of the country. We understand this change in communication style as a tactic to appeal to moderate right-leaning voters with little interest in identity politics, symbolized by the criticism of “gender ideology”. At the same time, we are convinced that gender topics will remain relevant for maintaining support of the core group of Motorists electorate – young males in particular – and cultivating connections with right-wing politicians abroad, especially among MAGA political circles in the United States (Hagstrom, 2026).

“NON-BINARY DEGENERATION”, “MENTAL DISORDER”, AND POLITICAL “NON-BINS”: TRANSPHOBIA AND CIS-NORMATIVITY AS CENTRAL THEMES OF MOTORISTS CRINGE CONTENT

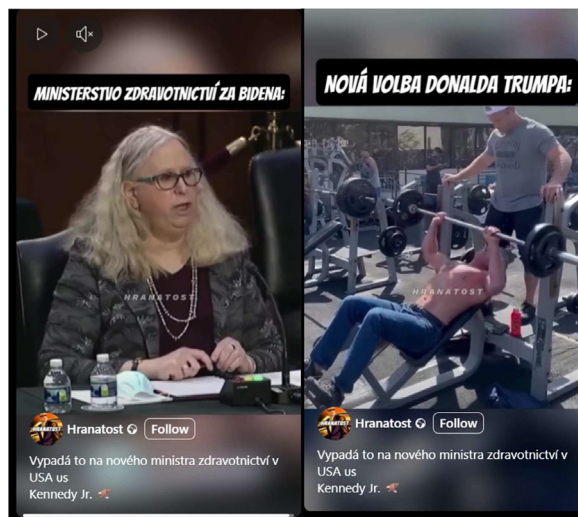
In a reply to RQ1–RQ3, we conclude that in their cringe-inducing content, Motorists express a clear message that being a cisgender, heterosexual person is a norm (*in-group norm characteristic*) and that any other identity is an aberration from that norm (*construction of cringeworthy out-group as out of the norm*). By doing so, they also construct their political party as a sensible norms guard offering an alternative to political parties consisting of “non-bins” (“nebinárky” in Czech), a term used to encompass everyone who is open to the existence of non-binary, non-cisgender/heterosexual identities. They promote the above-defined values

and norms by systematically posting content that employs hostile ridicule towards either specific members of the alleged out-group, most typically politicians and/or LGBTQ+ identities, or the idea of queerness and gender plurality as such.

Motorists associate non-binarity with their political opponents. For example, the Czech Pirate Party has been ridiculed for participation in the Prague Pride manifestation – a social media post on a Facebook profile of Macinka labelled the Pirate Party chairman as *"The leader of all Pirate non-bins"*. The Motorists' norm is then expressed clearly in the related text: *"We want a country full of self-confident, resilient, and capable people – not Pirate bums."*

Similarly, in an international context, Hranatost (Squareness), a Facebook and Instagram profile associated with Turek, expressed the Motorists' political position by juxtaposing the health minister of president Biden's administration (Rachel Levine) and the health minister in president Trump's government, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., in an edited video (Picture 1). Whereas Levine is presented as a proponent of LGBTQ+ rights, mentioning "transgender medicine" or "LGBTQ harassment", Kennedy is portrayed as a physically fit man doing strength training. Levine's video is accompanied by mocking music and laughter, whereas Kennedy is supported with strong, celebratory musical beats and exclamations such as "let's go" and supportive whistling.

Picture 1.



Source: Hranatost, a Facebook and Instagram profile associated with Filip Turek.

Translation: "Ministry of health in the Biden era." (left) "Donald Trump's new choice." (right)

Besides direct mockery of specific people with queer identities or political rivals, Motorists produce a lot of cringe content ridiculing LGBTQ+ in general and, specifically, transgender identities as such. Their rhetoric occasionally featured

disinformation about 72 genders that allegedly exist according to “progressive ideology”. A representative example of ridiculing transgender identities is a signature theme employed by the youth faction of Motorists: on their social media, they repeatedly play with a variation of their initial “joke”, the options listed under “sex” in their membership application, which include “a woman, a man, a mental disorder”. In a series of social media posts, Matěj Gregor, the leader of Generation Engine, and also the Motorists leader Macinka, ridiculed public reactions to what they interpreted as a joke. In an edited video, Gregor quotes in an altered, mocking voice selected media headlines such as: “Sex: A man, a woman, or a mental disorder? Motorists’ provocation resonates on social network sites.” He then offers a follow-up explanation of the “joke”, as well as falsely claims that anything but “a woman” and “a man” is a sexual identity disorder according to the World Health Organization. The cringe feeling is supported by Gregor’s facial expressions reacting to the collage of headlines, as well as by an awkward background noise.

Picture 2.



Source: Hranatost Instagram profile

Transgender identity as a defining theme of progressivism is a strong topic in cringe humor of Motorists who share their impression that transgender and queer identities are artificially constructed and represent totality and restriction, as their rights are promoted at the expense of other people. As an alternative, they propose traditional masculinity associated with cars and strong men driving them. In a video comparing the old and new advertisements for Jaguar cars, the Hranatost profile states: “Non-binary degenerative change of the Jaguar brand? How do you perceive it? 🐼” (Picture 2). The video reveals the alleged

(undesired) societal change by contrasting two videos, the older one in dark tones, featuring a masculine character and Jaguar in detailed shots, and the newer one in bright colors and featuring gender fluid characters.

Non-binarity is also a central theme in a subcategory that would best be described as an exaggerated intersectional hatred of progressivism. Typical for the Motorists leader, Macinka, it usually presents the complex Motorists' ideology in one sentence by concentrating all the out-groups (or anti-identities) in one cringe-like, hypertrophic, linguistically overcomplicated exclamation. A usual expression in this subcategory refuses environmentalism, non-binarity, leftism, liberalism, and the EU in one brief, lexically bizarre sentence:

"If only Comrade Klimatuše¹ Nerudová [Czech liberal MEP] had known that Filip Turek's Mercedes 600 SEL with a six-liter V12 M120 engine – under whose wheels the highway to Munich was recently surprisingly identified as German – usually meets emission limits no higher than EUR 1, so every time the accelerator is pressed, several non-bins in climate distress would be burned, she would have started a protest collection of recyclable plastic Eurobottlecaps." [Source: Petr Macinka's Facebook profile]

A specific type of intersectional hatred is represented in Generation Engine posts, which add obese people to the usual "enemies." Gregor's political communication thematizes child obesity as a significant political and educational issue and strongly promotes the ideal of physical health and an adequate, healthy weight. In his cringe content, he associates obesity with progressivism and queer identities to create another alleged characteristic of progressivism that sharply contrasts with the Motorists' normative construction of mental and physical health. In response to a follower's question about why bike lanes in Prague need to be nearly as broad as car lanes, Gregor replies in an edited video: *"Well, if you saw an average progressive at Prague Pride, they are almost as broad as cars, so I think the width of bike lanes is adequate, as it needs to correspond with progressives' width."* A pure example of intersectionally hateful cringe content would be a curated video in which Generation Engine added a text saying "An average Motorgen [Generation Engine] hater" to a video of a person trying to dance on a makeshift balance board, dressed in a fitted leotard in bright colors. In its original context, the video (Picture 3) shows a person who is overweight and may have an intellectual disability. Generation Engine thus employs fatshaming and ableism to ridicule its ideological opponents and reproduce normative expectations regarding people's appearance and physical performance.

¹ A wordplay combining the Czech word for climate („Klima") and the name of Turek's political competitor, Danuše Nerudová.

Picture 3.



Source: MotorGen Instagram profile

“DANGEROUS GENDER PROPAGANDA” AS “A NEW RELIGION”: MOTORISTS’ ANTI-GENDER DISCOURSE THEMATIZING GENDER ISSUES AS A THREAT

Besides their dominant focus on transgender identities, non-binarity and queer identities in general, “gender” is a frequent theme in Motorists’ cringe humorous content. Critical comments targeting gender theory are of high importance, especially in content featuring Matěj Gregor. His contributions are, however, typical with oversimplification, laughter at anything but a binary, cisgender identity, and trivialization of a complex issue. He simplifies gender issues to biological sex and does not move beyond the physical binarity.

With regard to gender debate and gender-sensitive education, Gregor frequently thematizes school curricula and labels gender as a historically unprecedented “made-up ideology” because “When in history did we determine gender?”. He considers gender “a new construct” that “is not in accordance with science and biology”, and predicts that a school system that teaches about gender issues will harm future generations which will believe anything they are taught about gender – “this new religion”.

Cringe, we argue, is a convenient way for Motorists to present their dispute with the complex gender theory, as it not only allows them to simplify complicated issues, it directly requires simplification. It thus allows them to repeatedly present disinformation regarding gender theory and gender relations and to construct gender theory as the main societal threat. By using the “Triggered Feminist” meme (Picture 4) and stating that, “according to liberals”, “gender is how you feel” and “sex is how you were born”, Gregor trivializes gender identity, emphasizes the biological aspect, misinterprets gender theory, making it look

absurd and irrelevant, and, at the same time, cringes at feminists allegedly unable to see contradictions in their worldviews.

Picture 4.



Source: Matěj Gregor's Instagram profile

Picture 5.



Source: Matěj Gregor's Instagram profile

Similarly, Gregor posted a video in which his exaggerated facial expressions show how he is cringing over "the non-binary bison Fredy" from a children's cartoon

(Picture 5). A similar example is a video with randomly selected gender-focused topics discussed at universities, such as men's menstruation, or women with both a vagina and a penis, also featuring Gregor cringing at the original content. To support his argument about the irrationality of the debates about gender issues, he concluded by asking if he can identify himself as a diesel engine.

Filip Turek uses anti-gender cringe humor to thematize the European Union as a project led by gender ideology, which he ridicules when discussing thematically unrelated topics. In an edited video illustrating this strategy, the Hranatost (Squareness) profile presents Turek commenting on the alleged plan to build an EU army. Turek wildly fantasizes about rainbow electrotanks in which there will be enough space for pregnant women, and then adds: "But I say: 'And how about pregnant men?!'" (for a graphic illustration, see Picture 6 below).

Picture 6.



Source: ?Hranatost Facebook profile

“SQUARE LEGENDS”: HYPERMASCULINITY AND HETERONORMATIVITY

The crucial part of gender-related communication of Motorists is presenting their representatives (and by extension, supporters and voters) as ideals of the masculine norm. From this position, they differentiate themselves from the allegedly flawed or inauthentic masculinity of their political opponents. Cringing moments are created by contrasting the likable (hyper)masculinity of Motorists and the oddity of their opponents, allegedly deviant from heteronormative social norms.

The key component of Filip Turek's presentation on social media is his depiction as the ideal of masculinity. He is presented as charismatic, handsome, and irresistibly attractive to women. To underline this image, Turek

posted his portrayal, wishing women all the best for "Square Valentine's Day" or International Women's Day. Another element of Turek's social media persona is his calmness and reason. His statements are presented as concise and punchy in edited videos from political debates, whereas his opponents look confused or ridiculous, and their voices are altered to sound unnatural. His dominance is reinforced by using terms such as *"the legend"* or *"the king of Czech politics"*, or suggestive songs such as *Holding Out for a Hero*.

Other Motorists' accounts employ their emphasis on masculinity less explicitly in their content, with cringe aspects, mainly to differentiate themselves from political opponents whose manliness is presented as flawed or inauthentic. Such a dynamic is typical for the chairman of the party, Petr Macinka, and his content directed against the leader of the Pirate Party, Zdeněk Hřib. To contrast his masculine performance in a demanding Spartan Race, he published a video comparing himself to Hřib, represented as lazy, weak, and clumsy *"whiner"* and *"Pirate non-bin"* (see Picture 7).

Picture 7.



Source: Petr Macinka's Facebook profile

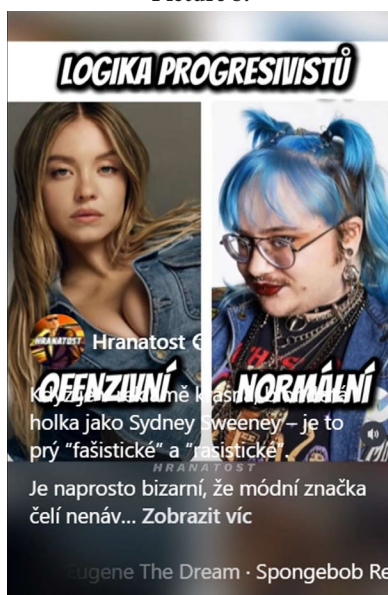
Presenting political opponents as emasculated was not limited to individual political figures in Motorists' communication. It was used to criticize various social groups and institutions. When promoting Generation Motor, Gregor highlighted that instead of being *"progressives"* or *"rainbow generation of snowflakes"*, young people are *"critically thinking"* right-wingers. Turek mocked the European Union for *"holding hard non-binary green [political] lines in one hand and soya latté in the other"* and ridiculed the back then Prime Minister Fiala's team for attempting to *"turn Prime Minister Fiala into Sigma"*: *"You can't make a racehorse*

out of a donkey. A man born as an ox doesn't become a stallion. You can't turn Petr Fiala into Filip Turek."

MISOGYNY RIDICULING LIBERAL WOMEN

Women became targets for the Motorist's cringe humor when they were perceived as transgressors of heteronormative social norms. Hence, female progressive activists represent a typical target, presented as deluded, deranged, and unattractive. In contrast, young and attractive (according to heteronormative standards) women were treated positively as symbols demonstrating Turek's position as a (hyper-)masculine idol. Also, Motorists actively contrasted in their content what they perceived as the heteronormative beauty standard (such as Sydney Sweeney in the controversial American Eagle commercial) with appearances allegedly considered attractive by "progressives". In August 2025, they posted a portrayal of a trans-coded person with blue hair, large glasses, and a mustache as a contrast to Sweeney, with Sweeney labeled sarcastically as allegedly offensive, whereas the other person was labeled as "normal" (see Picture 8).

Picture 8.



Source: Hranatost Facebook profile

In our data, we identified MEP Danuše Nerudová from the liberal party Mayors and Independents as a prominent target of hostile cringe, misogyny-based criticism. Social media accounts associated with Motorists repeatedly attacked her not only for her political agenda, but also criticized her appearance

with a misogynistic subtext or used her as an example of the undesired presence of women in politics. One video showed several moments of Nerudová smiling during a political debate with the inscription "*when you do not have any arguments, at least smile*". Another post presented her as a stereotypical "*try-hard, self-important, and unpopular classmate*". Such content not only ridiculed the rival female politician, but also, employing cringe-inducing edits, constructed her as an impersonation of a political enemy.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Our research focuses on the role of cringe humor in the social media communication of the Motorists party, its main representatives, and its youth organization, Generation Engine. While this party got established only relatively recently, it managed to find a specific spot in the Czech ideological landscape as opponents of liberalism and progressivism, represented by allegiance to the political group Patriots for Europe in the European Parliament and endorsement of U.S. President Donald Trump. Motorists also managed to appeal to a new group of voters – males between 18 and 29 years old – who became their key demographic. Hence, social media communication was crucial for mobilizing this part of the electorate.

In Motorist's communication on social media, the combination of anti-gender discourses and cringe humor appeared consistently from September 2024 until September 2025 and has been an important element of the public image of the new party and its main representatives (RQ1). While such a conclusion is in line with recent research documenting the use of humor by parties and groups on the far-right of the political spectrum, our analysis contributes specifically to a better understanding of how anti-gender cringe humor is used systematically across various social media profiles of Motorists as a symbolic glue (Kováts & Póim, 2015), mobilizing supporters around values of hyper-masculinity and cis-normativity. Motorists used cringe humor to reinforce conservative gender hierarchies and present themselves as their most capable and manly defenders (RQ2). While doing so, they positioned themselves against their alleged violators – caricatured liberals, presented as a group of fanatic activists of the quasi-religious ideology of progressivism trying to impose their values on the whole society. More specifically, we identified the ridicule and refusal of transgender people's rights as a central theme in Motorists' cringe communication, dehumanizing them as a "mental disorder" and the latest craze of progressive ideology (RQ3). We demonstrate the disciplining role of humor (Bellè, 2025; Billig, 2005) specifically on the analysis of anti-gender cringe content and show how, through feelings of vicarious embarrassment about expressions of transgender identity,

it acts as a disciplining strategy, making it difficult for receivers to engage in a meaningful deliberation about the topic or empathise with members of the ridiculed community. In a similar manner, cringe humor in social media posts of Motorists provides a caricatured presentation of women not conforming to heteronormative beauty standards.

Motorist's communication employed multiple approaches to creating cringe inducing content including mocking nicknames, memes or edited clips. A recurring feature of their communication has been the discursive construction of a dichotomy between individuals, groups, or entities represented as transgressing purportedly natural gender hierarchies and Motorists and their supporters, who are positioned as possessing the capacity to identify such transgressions (RQ4). Vague portrayal of the allegedly omnipresent progressive enemy allowed them to attribute progressive values to any critic – political opponents, NGOs, journalists, or activists – and turn them into targets of cringe humor. At the same time, caricaturing of opponents facilitates self-representation of Motorists as (hyper-) masculine archetypes – calm, dominating, rational, and witty. We hypothesize that the experience of cringing reinforces the sense of subculture among supporters of Motorists (nicknamed “Squares” by Turek) and alienates them from the rest of society, presented as cringeworthy, deranged, and blinded by progressive ideology. We thus extend previous research documenting how conversational rituals online socialize discussants into specific discursive communities (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2024) and suggest that the combination of anti-gender, a strong anti-discourse (Martinsson & Ericson, 2022), and cringe humor specifically supports an online collective identity formation built upon intolerance towards other groups (Hogg, 2023; Törnberg, 2022). We argue that, beyond the above stated, the powerful combination of anti-gender discourse and cringe humor shifts norms of expression about gender issues (Saucier et al., 2016) and normalizes their ridicule or even hostility towards them in the public sphere (Spiegel, 2025), while, at the same time, relieving Motorists from liability for what they present as mere innocent joking (Askanius, 2021). Moreover, when the targets of their ridicule (rival politicians, liberals/progressives) react publicly to their cringe content, a broader, culture-war-like debate floods the digital space, which has the potential to overshadow socially and politically more important issues and controversies.

To add a broader context to our study, we need to consider the discrepancy between the prominent role of cringe humor related to gender in the social media communication of Motorists and a strikingly low representation of the topic in the fairly exhaustive party manifesto for parliamentary elections 2025. This document only claims that children at elementary schools should be protected from “*activities of progressive non-profit organizations that try to explain to them that it is normal to be ‘trans’ or that there are genders other than a man and*

a woman" (Manifesto, 2025). Similarly, gender-related topics almost disappeared from Motorists' communication before the elections, and the party abandoned its humorous tone and tried to depict itself as competent and serious. Since the party entered Parliament and now constitutes the current Czech government, it remains to be seen how prominent gender-related topics will be in its future communication and overall political agenda.

FUNDING

This research was supported by the Czech Science Foundation (GACR), Standard Grant Nr 25-16125S – 'Gender aspects of disinformation dissemination and reception from the perspective of the theory of social media performativity and identity theory'.

REFERENCES

- Askanius, T. (2021). On frogs, monkeys, and execution memes: Exploring the humor-hate nexus at the intersection of neo-Nazi and alt-right movements in Sweden. *Television & New Media*, 22(2), 147–165. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420982234>
- Barla, J., & Bjork-James, S. (2021). Introduction: Entanglements of anti-feminism and anti-environmentalism in the far-right. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 36(110), 377–387.
- Bauer, A. J. (2023). Why so serious? Studying humor on the right. *Media, Culture & Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437231154779>
- Botto, M., & Gottzén, L. (2024). Swallowing and spitting out the red pill: Young men, vulnerability, and radicalization pathways in the manosphere. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 33(5). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2023.2260318>
- Bellè, E. (2025). Just a joke? Humour and gender in a far-right party. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 12(1), 34–56. https://doi.org/10.1162/ecps_a_00003
- Billing, M. (2001). Humour and hatred: The racist jokes of the Ku Klux Klan. *Discourse & Society*, 12(3), 267–289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926501012003001>
- Billig, M. (2005). *Laughter and ridicule: Towards a social critique of humor*. SAGE Publications.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory*. Sage.
- Deutsch, A. (2024). Despair makes young US men more conservative ahead of US election, poll shows. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/despair-makes-young-us-men-more-conservative-ahead-us-election-poll-shows-2024-04-12/>
- Dergić, V., Dähnke, I., Nartova, N., Shilova, A., Matos, R., & Carneiro, A. (2022). When visibility becomes political: Visibility and stigmatisation of young people. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 26(3), 351–367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2021.2022109>

- Donskikh, E., & Akopov, S. (2024). Taking Putin's jokes seriously: What does gender-based humor tell us about Russia's ontological insecurity, masculinity, and construction of gendered hierarchies? *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 27(1), 152–174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2024.2400946>
- Fiske, J. (2010). *Understanding popular culture* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203837177>
- Hagstrom, A. (2026, February 15). Hillary Clinton clashes with Czech leader over Trump policies at Munich security conference. *Fox News*. <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/hillary-clinton-clashes-czech-leader-over-trump-policies-munich-security-conference>
- Havlík, V., & Kluknavská, A. (2024). The race of populists: The 2024 EP elections in the Czech Republic. In G. Ivaldi & E. Zankina (Eds.), *2024 EP elections under the shadow of rising populism*. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0066>
- Hye-Knudsen, M. (2018). Painfully Funny: Cringe Comedy, Benign Masochism, and Not-So-Benign Violations. *Leviathan: Interdisciplinary Journal in English* (2), 13–31. <https://doi.org/10.7146/lev.v0i2.104693>.
- iDnes. (2022, May 28). V Praze kandiduje nová strana Motoristé sobě. Chce bojovat proti šikaně řidičů. https://www.idnes.cz/praha/zpravy/volby-do-zastupitelstva-motoriste-sobe-institut-vaclava-klaus-petr-macinka.A220528_103237_praha-zpravy_idvs
- iDnes. (2024, November 11). Mám doma dýku SS, fotili se mladí Motoristé. Jen humor, říká jejich šéf. https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/mladi-motoriste-fotokoutek-napisy-predseda.A241111_104400_domaci_vank
- Klaus, V. (2023, May 4). Budapest dinner speech: Hungary is defending its national interests, traditional values, and normalcy. *Klaus.cz*. <https://www.klaus.cz/clanky/5167>
- Hart, M. (2007). Humour and social protest: An introduction. *International Review of Social History*, 52(S15), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020859007003094>
- Havas, J., & Sulimma, M. (2018). Through the gaps of my fingers: Genre, femininity, and cringe aesthetics in dramedy television. *Television & New Media*, 21(1), 75–94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476418777838>
- Hogg, M. A. (2023). Walls between groups: Self-uncertainty, social identity, and intergroup leadership. *Journal of Social Issues*, 79(2), 825–840. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12584>
- Hye-Knudsen, M. (2018). Painfully funny: Cringe comedy, benign masochism, and not-so-benign violations. *Leviathan: Interdisciplinary Journal in English*, 2(2), 13–31. <https://doi.org/10.7146/lev.v0i2.104693>
- Kováts, E., & Poim, M. (Eds.). (2015). *Gender as symbolic glue: The position and role of conservative and far-right parties in the anti-gender mobilizations in Europe*. FEPS – Foundation for European Progressive Studies.
- Martinsson, L., & Ericson, M. (2022). Fight pandemics with protective masks or gender? Emerging collective identities and anti-gender movements on Twitter during the COVID-19 crisis in Sweden. *Feminist Media Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.2009898>
- Mayer, A. V., Paulus, F. M., & Krach, S. (2021). A psychological perspective on vicarious embarrassment and shame in the context of cringe humor. *Humanities*, 10(4), 110. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h10040110>
- Pettersson, K., Martikainen, J., Hakoköngäs, E., & Sakki, I. (2023). Female politicians as climate fools: Intertextual and multimodal constructions of misogyny disguised as humor in political communication. *Political Psychology*, 44(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12814>

- Pérez, R. (2016). Racist humor: Then and now. *Sociology Compass*, 10(10), 928–938. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12411>
- Pérez, R. (2022). *The souls of white jokes: How racist humor fuels white supremacy*. Stanford University Press.
- Saucier, D. A., O'Dea, C. J., & Strain, M. L. (2016). The bad, the good, the misunderstood: The social effects of racial humor. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, 2(1), 75–85. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tps0000059>
- Smilges, J. L. (2024). Cringe Theory. *Lateral*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.25158/l13.1.2>
- Spiegel, T. J. (2025). Cringe. *Social Epistemology*. 39(3), 229–240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2023.2268588>
- Stein, D. (2024, June 10). Mrzí mě, pokud se někoho můj přiblížený humor dotkl, říká Filip Turek. *Lidové noviny*. https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/filip-turek-prisaha-motoriste-sobe-velky-rozhovor-ln-zahradil-green-deal-nerudova-cnn-prima.A240610_151156_In_domov_rkj
- Svatoňová, E. (2023). The dark side of laughter: Humour as a tool for othering in the memes of Czech far-right organization Angry Mothers. In A. Sevelsted & J. Toubøl (Eds.), *The power of morality in movements, nonprofit and civil society studies* (pp. xx–xx). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-98798-5_11
- Törnberg, P. (2022). How digital media drive affective polarization through partisan sorting. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 119(42). <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2207159119>
- Törnberg P and Törnberg A (2022) Inside a White Power echo chamber: Why fringe digital spaces are polarizing politics. *New Media and Society*. Epub ahead of print February 3 2023. DOI: 10.1177/14614448221122915.
- Volební model (2025). Volební model: sociodemografické rozdíly ve druhém čtvrtletí 2025. STEM. Available at <https://www.stem.cz/volebni-model-sociodemograficke-rozdily-ve-druhem-ctvrtleti-2025/>
- Vowles, K, and Hultman, M (2021) Dead White men vs. Greta Thunberg: Nationalism, Misogyny, and Climate Change Denial in Swedish far-right Digital Media. *Australian Feminist Studies* 36(110): 414–431.
- Wagner, A., & Schwarzenegger, C. (2020). A populism of lulz: The proliferation of humor, satire, and memes as populist communication in digital culture. In B. Krämer & C. Holtz-Bacha (Eds.), *Perspectives on populism and the media* (pp. 313–332). Nomos.
- White, M. (2021). Greta Thunberg is 'giving a face' to climate activism: Confronting anti-feminist, anti-environmentalist, and ableist memes. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 36(110), 396–413.
- Windisch, S., & Simi, P. (2023). More than a joke: White supremacist humor as a daily form of resistance. *Deviant Behavior*, 44(3), 381–397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2022.2048216>
- Wöhrle, P. (2021). Two shades of cringe: Problems in attributing painful laughter. *Humanities*, 10(3), 99. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h10030099>

DOI: 10.51480/1899-5101.19.2(43).1065

The Politics of Golden Fries: Cringe Culture and Its Rise in Czech Political Discourse

Jan Zápotocký 0000-0001-9802-4593

Charles University, Czechia

Abstract: This study examines cringe political communication on Czech TikTok, asking how and why politicians fail to meet the platform's demands for authenticity and cultural literacy. Combining digital ethnography with qualitative interpretive analysis, it applies a two-stage case selection procedure – purposive sampling validated against audience-response markers such as comments, ridicule, and derivative content – to 280 videos from 75 accounts of candidates in the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections. The analysis yields a five-category typology: Platform Tourism, Try-Hard Authenticity, Gen Z Wannabe, Awkward Trend Attempts, and Performative Cringe Spectacle. Cringe is conceptualized not merely as communicative failure but as an analytical lens exposing structural tensions between platform-native cultural codes and institutional political authority, while transgressive performance can also work strategically as a source of visibility and relatability. Grounded in affect theory, the entertaining citizen paradigm, the personalization of politics, and platform studies, the study offers a systematic framework for analyzing political cringe.

Keywords: Cringe culture; Political communication; TikTok; Authenticity; Affective publics

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have become vital spaces for political engagement and public debate through which the digital transformation of political communication reshapes democratic discourse in contemporary societies. TikTok, in particular, functions as a crucial political communication platform because it enables political actors to reach younger users, who constitute its primary audience base. Nevertheless, the platform's distinctive cultural environment with its own visual rules and authenticity requirements makes it difficult for political figures to establish meaningful connections with its users. The study of „cringe” political communication which includes awkward, laughable, or deplorable content (Dahl, 2018; Brody, 2022) represents a vital point where digital culture meets

political discourse although it has not received sufficient academic study despite its increasing occurrence and its potential effects on democratic participation.

The failure of political figures to understand platform-specific cultural codes leads to content that produces negative emotional reactions, which extend beyond visual criticism to evaluate political abilities, cultural understanding, and democratic representation. The research examines how political actors who already exist in the political sphere adapt their communication strategies to match the cultural characteristics of TikTok within Czech political discourse. The Czech political environment offers an excellent research opportunity to study these developments because its political system includes various actors who now use TikTok to connect with young voters ahead of the 2025 parliamentary elections.

Direct evidence that any single platform changes vote choice remains limited. TikTok-specific research, however, is accumulating rapidly. A recent systematic review shows that the platform's algorithms tend to amplify sensational content and may increase youth exposure to political messaging, although data-access barriers still complicate causal inference (Giuranno & Manni, 2026). Algorithmic audit studies of the 2024 U.S. presidential election further demonstrate that TikTok's recommendation system distributed political content in systematically skewed ways that cannot be explained by user engagement alone (Ibrahim et al., 2026), and emerging survey research links young adults' TikTok use to their civic and participatory behavior (Moffett & Rice, 2024). In the European context, studies of the 2024 European Parliament elections show that political actors – particularly, though not exclusively, populist and radical-right parties – have made TikTok a central campaign arena, with engagement rewarding emotionally resonant, platform-native „politainment” formats over traditional broadcast-style messaging (Cervi et al., 2023; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). TikTok now functions as a significant arena of political self-presentation and reputation formation for the young cohorts who dominate its user base, one in which affective and cultural competence increasingly operate as political capital.

Against this background, the research analyzes a range of TikTok accounts from multiple Czech political actors to create a comprehensive typology of cringe political communication, which shows political actors' difficulties in digital spaces where cultural authenticity and platform literacy function as new political resources. To guide this investigation, the study addresses two research questions: RQ1: What typological patterns characterize cringe content in Czech political TikTok communication? RQ2: Which platform-specific and performative factors contribute to the emergence of these patterns?

The contemporary study of digital political discourse cannot be separated from the emotional responses it generates, particularly when examining phenomena like cringe, because cringe operates as a social phenomenon that produces affective discomfort, embarrassment and social judgment. Therefore, understanding

these emotional reactions and their political implications requires a theoretical framework that takes affect seriously as a constitutive element of political communication.

THE AFFECTIVE TURN AND EMOTIONAL DIMENSIONS

The study of affect and emotion remained peripheral to media theory until the 1990s, when it began emerging as part of the dominant paradigm, which challenged basic views about emotional responses as irrational or uncontrollable (Nelson, 2016). The „affective turn” (Massumi, 1995; Clough & Halley, 2007) fundamentally reconceptualized the interconnections between material and emotional dimensions, establishing emotions as legitimate objects of scholarly inquiry within media studies.

Zizi Papacharissi’s theory of affective publics provides a crucial framework for understanding contemporary digital political communication. Papacharissi (2015) defines affective publics as „networked spaces that enable and are driven by expressions of sentiment,” arguing that these spaces „collapse the public and private through storytelling, by employing technologies that form feedback loops of affective expression” (p. 125). This conceptualization proves particularly relevant for understanding platforms like TikTok, where algorithm-driven content distribution creates powerful feedback loops that amplify emotionally resonant content, regardless of whether responses are positive or negative.

The theory of affective publics explains how cringe political content spreads through what Papacharissi (2015) terms „affective contagion” – the rapid dissemination of emotional responses through networked publics. Political actors who fail to meet platform conventions trigger negative emotional responses that lead to viral spread through mockery, parody, and critical commentary. These affective responses create shared emotional orientations that bind networked publics together around common feelings and reactions to political content.

Within this framework, emotions assume crucial roles in political communication contexts, as online social networks function as environments that actively generate and disseminate emotions as fundamental communicative mechanisms (Dean, 2015). While affective charges, particularly on TikTok, may not determine electoral outcomes, they have become integral to constructing politicians’ public images, creating affective publics whose members congregate around platforms that encourage affective attunement (Papacharissi, 2015). Digital platforms consequently create new forms of political engagement that emphasize emotional communication and affective connection rather than traditional rational political discourse.

Contemporary emotion studies in online environments lead to more complex understandings of digital political communication, specifically examining „what is and what is not politically possible on social media” (Carlson & Frazer, 2020: 3). In TikTok’s specific context, political communication success depends primarily on generating appropriate affective responses within the platform’s cultural ecosystem. Contemporary research increasingly examines visual content’s role in political communication, with visual elements possessing enormous significance in politician-voter interactions (Veneti et al., 2019; Farkas & Bene, 2021). Authentic content that creates emotional connections between political actors and audiences leads to strong affective bonds, while content that appears forced or inauthentic – often labeled as cringe – generates negative affective responses that damage political actors’ credibility and effectiveness.

A complementary economic perspective comes from Gerlitz and Helmond’s (2013) analysis of the „like economy,” which argues that social media platforms generate revenue through emotional response monetization by selecting content based on user engagement. Their research reveals how platforms like TikTok create economic systems to encourage content creators to produce emotional responses, which can be either positive or negative. This algorithmic system enables cringe political content to gain widespread visibility even when failing to achieve intended political objectives.

A related contribution comes from Sampson (2012), who examined relationships between affect and viral content, arguing that affective intensity rather than semantic content often determines which messages spread through digital networks. His research suggests that cringe political content may achieve viral spread precisely through its capacity to generate intense negative emotional responses, creating „affective viral vectors” that disseminate content through networks of shared emotional reaction rather than political agreement or support. Hillis, Paasonen, and Petit (2015) expanded these findings by studying „networked affect” on social media platforms which shows how emotional reactions spread across user networks to form collective meanings and impact digital content. Their research shows that individual emotional responses to political content grow stronger through network effects until they produce collective affective responses that can significantly exceed the original content’s impact. In Czech scholarly contexts, the affective dimensions of political communication on social media platforms have been explored by Andrea Průchová Hrůzová and the author of this study (2022), focusing specifically on the extent to which fear-based and hatred-oriented emotional appeals characterize Czech political anti-immigrant discourse.

THE ENTERTAINING CITIZEN PARADIGM AND POLITICAL PERFORMANCE

The study of cringe political communication on TikTok can be traced to Liesbet van Zoonen's groundbreaking work on entertaining citizenship, which challenged traditional academic assumptions about the relationship between entertainment and serious political discourse. According to van Zoonen (2005), the contemporary media landscape has eliminated the traditional distinction between entertainment and politics. Entertainment formats now function as legitimate and often preferred political engagement spaces, particularly among younger audiences who had grown up with interactive entertainment media. Van Zoonen explains that the crowded media environment requires politicians to present themselves as entertaining personalities (2005). This theoretical framework helps explain why political actors use TikTok despite facing major risks from producing content that might be labeled as cringe.

Further theoretical development is offered, for example, by Corner and Pels (2003), who studied the „media culture” of contemporary politics which argued that political communication had become fundamentally performative, requiring political actors to develop sophisticated media literacy and performance skills. Their research highlighted the challenges politicians face when attempting to adapt their communication strategies to new media formats, which often leads to performance failures that TikTok users would identify as cringe content. Such failures to master new media environments are, however, neither new nor unique to TikTok. The televisual turn produced its own canonical embarrassments: from Nixon's visibly uncomfortable appearance in the 1960 televised debate to a long lineage of awkward late-night and morning-television interviews in which politicians misjudged the register of an entertainment format (Corner & Pels, 2003). What TikTok changes is the dynamics of failure – Platform affordances allow a misjudged performance to be duetted, stitched, and memed into circulation within hours, embedding it in networked affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015). Driessens (2013) extended these theoretical concepts by studying how politics adopted celebrity-style communication methods. His research demonstrates political actors adopting celebrity communication methods while he identifies three essential elements for political communication success which include authenticity, relatability, and cultural competence. The absence of these factors, Driessens argues, can result in political communication that appears forced or inauthentic.

One of the key forms of this entertainment-oriented, performative politics is humour – and it is precisely here that the line between successful performance and cringe becomes most visible. Humour has long been theorised as a double-edged instrument of political communication, able to create a connection with audiences and puncture opponents, but also to trivialise the speaker (Tsakona

& Popa, 2011). Research on political satire shows measurable effects on candidate evaluation and attention (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006), suggesting the entertainment–politics convergence charted by van Zoonen (2005) is consequential rather than merely stylistic. The figure of the clown is especially instructive. Drawing on Bakhtin’s (1984) account of the carnivalesque and the grotesque body, the political clown converts breaches of dignity into a source of licence and visibility. Boris Johnson stuck on a zip-line, or knocking a child over during a PR rugby game, and Donald Trump’s norm-violating performances illustrate how ostensibly cringe-worthy moments can increase name recognition and media salience while appearing to leave — or even enhance — the politician’s standing with core supporters.

THE ALGORITHM OF AUTHENTICITY

The personalization of political communication also provides a fundamental theoretical framework to study cringe political content that appears on TikTok and other social media platforms. According to Bennett (2012) contemporary political communication has shifted its focus from institutional positions and policy platforms to political actors as personalities. The transformation toward personalization reflects broader social developments regarding human interactions with political institutions and authority since traditional institutional loyalties have evolved into individualized political identification and engagement. A related strand of research examines the „presidentialization” of political communication (McAllister, 2007), demonstrating how political systems now focus most attention on individual political leaders instead of political parties or institutions. His research identifies multiple factors that drive this personalization trend, including changes in media consumption patterns, declining party identification among voters, and the rise of social media platforms that facilitate direct communication between political actors and citizens.

The personalization of political communication on TikTok and other social media platforms develops distinctive characteristics because the platform focuses on individual creators and personal storytelling. Political actors must present themselves as authentic individuals rather than institutional representatives by sharing personal stories, behind-the-scenes content, and informal communication which would have been considered inappropriate in traditional political communication contexts. Through personalization the political content becomes more relatable and accessible to younger audiences who prefer authentic and personal communication over institutional authority. However, the requirement for social media personalization presents major risks to political actors. Enli (2015) explains that social media platforms generate „authenticity paradoxes”

which require political actors to display authentic spontaneous behavior while they need to preserve strategic message control and communication objectives. The conflict between genuine self-expression and image management becomes most challenging on TikTok because its platform culture requires unfiltered authenticity which opposes traditional political communication's requirement for strategic control.

Van Aelst et al. (2012) contributed to this theoretical framework by studying how political personalization affects polarization through its ability to boost emotional support for political actors at the expense of reducing focus on substantive policy issues. The study indicates that personalization leads to increased political engagement, yet it may also contribute to political fragmentation because citizens can form strong emotional connections with individual political figures. Kruikemeier (2014) studied personalization specifically in social media contexts, demonstrating how these platforms enable new forms of personalized political communication that boost voter engagement and political participation. Her research revealed that personalized political communication succeeds when political figures maintain consistent personal branding while presenting themselves authentically and actively engaging with audience feedback. The research indicates that personalized political communication appears forced or inauthentic when these essential factors are absent.

Jerslev (2016) extends this theoretical framework by examining „celebrification” processes on social media platforms, which demonstrate how regular users can become celebrities through platform-specific performances while risking public embarrassment through performance failures. Her research provides valuable insights into political actors on TikTok who need to balance their existing public profiles and platform-specific requirements of creating authentic content.

WHEN POLITICS GETS CRINGE

As discussed above, understanding cringe political communication on TikTok requires studying how platform culture affects user expectations about authentic content. For the purposes of this study, cringe is defined as a communicative category that emphasizes the disconnect between platform-native cultural codes and political authority, producing affective discomfort in audiences. For systematic analysis, this study conceptualizes cringe through three interconnected dimensions: (1) the trigger, encompassing performative breaches including inappropriate slang usage, violations of platform conventions, or cultural missteps; (2) the mechanism, wherein perceived inauthenticity generates embarrassment and social judgment; and (3) the outcome, manifesting as ridicule, memeification, and competence erosion. The proposed typology is structured according

to these analytical dimensions. It must be acknowledged that cringe remains inherently subjective and context-dependent; interpretations may vary across generations, political affiliations, and cultural contexts. To mitigate this subjectivity, the case selection procedure described in the method section validates the researcher's initial reading against audience-response markers. Furthermore, cringe should be distinguished from adjacent concepts: unlike satire or parody, cringe is unintentional; unlike gaffes, cringe involves sustained performance failure rather than momentary slips; and unlike general awkwardness, cringe specifically violates platform-specific cultural expectations.

Abidin (2021) provides one of the most comprehensive studies of cringe content on social media platforms through her definition of cringe as material that causes „vicarious embarrassment” because it shows inauthenticity, cultural insensitivity, or failure to platform-specific communication norms. The research by Abidin identifies several key characteristics that contribute to content being labeled as cringe, including obvious attempts to appeal to younger audiences through superficial adoption of youth culture aesthetics, misuse of platform-specific features or formats, and demonstration of cultural incompetence within platform-specific contexts. The research of Abidin expands Goffman's (1956) work on social embarrassment and face-work by applying these concepts to digital environments where social interactions occur through platform algorithms and cultural conventions. Her research shows that cringe content violates implicit social rules of platform-specific communities, which leads to social penalties that range from mockery to social ostracism and online negative publicity.

The concept of cringe is closely related to Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital, which helps explain how cringe content maintains and reproduces cultural hierarchies. TikTok users demonstrate their cultural capital and platform literacy through their ability to understand platform rules, creative skills, and authentic engagement with platform culture. Political actors who lack this cultural capital tend to produce content that is perceived as cringe, reinforcing their position as outsiders to cultural trends despite their formal political authority. Banet-Weiser (2012) studied how digital platforms generate new forms of authenticity and cultural capital, arguing that social media platforms create new forms of „authenticity labor” where users must continuously perform genuineness to maintain their cultural credibility. According to her research, authenticity becomes a form of cultural capital that can be accumulated, displayed, and contested within platform-specific contexts.

At the same time, locating cringe within political communication requires distinguishing cringe as communicative failure from cringe as communicative strategy. In the failure reading, which the dimensions outlined above primarily capture, cringe weakens voters' trust in a politician's competence, so that a poorly executed TikTok signals broader unfitness for office. Yet cringe can also function

strategically within an attention economy where visibility is itself a resource (Marwick, 2013). Transgressive, „bad-mannered” performance is a recognised feature of populist political style (Moffitt, 2016), where breaking the rules of political decorum is not accidental but serves as a deliberate way to signal authenticity and outsider status. What platform-literate publics code as cringe may, for a candidate’s own base, register as relatability or defiance of elite norms — an ambivalence that further underscores the subjective and context-dependent nature of cringe attributions noted above.

This theoretical foundation provides essential context for understanding how emotional dynamics shape political engagement in digital spaces, particularly in the emergence of cringe political communication as a distinct phenomenon.

METHOD

The methodological approach employs a mixed-methods design centered on the development and application of a comprehensive typology for analyzing cringe content in political communication. The methodology combines digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2019) with qualitative interpretive analysis to create a systematic framework for identifying, categorizing, and analyzing cringe political content across different contexts and platforms. Building upon established qualitative research traditions (Bailey, 1994; Kluge, 2000), the digital ethnographic analysis enabled the construction of a theoretically informed content typology designed to systematically identify and categorize materials manifesting cringe-related features in political digital communication contexts.

Specifically, the research is based on long-term observation of TikTok activities of prominent Czech politicians (e.g., Petr Fiala, Alena Schillerová, Marian Jurečka, Zdeněk Hřib, and others). The analytical sample comprised 75 TikTok accounts belonging to political candidates representing the following political entities: ANO, ODS, KDU-ČSL, TOP 09, Pirate Party, Starostové, SPD, Motoristé, Stačilo Movement, and Pro Movement. This study excluded institutional TikTok accounts of political parties and movements, concentrating solely on individual political actors seeking election to the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament in 2025. The analysis considered videos published over the past 12 months.

To avoid grounding the analysis solely in the researcher’s own reading of what constitutes cringe, case selection proceeded in two stages. In the first stage, candidate videos were identified through purposive sampling, a methodological approach particularly suited for examining specific phenomena within defined populations (Patton, 2015). As Krippendorff (2018) notes, purposive sampling allows researchers to select cases that are „information-rich” and relevant to the

research questions. This sampling strategy enabled the identification of content that best exemplified the characteristics of cringe political communication, rather than attempting to analyze all available content indiscriminately.

In the second stage, each candidate was validated against audience-response markers to ensure that the cringe attribution was intersubjectively shared rather than based solely on the researcher's individual judgment. A video was retained only where audience reactions displayed at least one of the following markers:

1. Explicit use of cringe-related vocabulary in the comments (e.g. *cringe*) and expressions of vicarious embarrassment;
2. Ridicule, mockery, or ironic praise directed at the performance rather than the policy;
3. Derivative content — duets, stitches, reaction videos, memes, or cross-platform parodies that recontextualise the original as an object of embarrassment;
4. Cross-media uptake in which journalistic or entertainment media framed the content as awkward or embarrassing.

For each political actor, approximately 3–5 videos demonstrating potential cringe characteristics and meeting at least one of the markers listed above were selected, yielding a final analytical corpus of 280 videos. Selection criteria prioritized content exhibiting visible platform norm violations, audience engagement patterns indicating negative reception, and videos that had generated secondary content or media attention. This approach aligns with established qualitative sampling principles emphasizing information richness over statistical representativeness (Patton, 2015), while ensuring that the resulting typology reflects patterns observable across the Czech political spectrum rather than isolated cases. Contemporary campaigning is professionalised and staff-mediated (Kreiss, 2016), so a cringe video may originate with the candidate, a communications team, or an under-resourced external agency. The question of authorship and intentionality is nonetheless analytically secondary, because cringe is constituted at the point of reception rather than production. In this context, several limitations of the research design should be acknowledged. TikTok does not publicly display a dislike count, and comment sections on political accounts are frequently moderated or disabled, which constrains the completeness of comment-based markers. Measuring cringe effects in an audience remains methodologically challenging, as cringe is a relational attribution rather than a fixed property of a text. Future work could operationalise cringe effects through systematic analysis of comment sentiment and emoji use, duet and stitch analysis, or experimental reception designs measuring self-reported vicarious embarrassment.

The typological development incorporates multiple analytical dimensions designed to capture the multifaceted complexity of cringe political communication phenomena:

- Technical Cringe: Improper use of platform features, poor editing, technological incompetence
- Visual Cringe: Poor production quality, inappropriate visual choices, awkward physical performance
- Linguistic Cringe: Inappropriate slang usage, forced adoption of youth language patterns, cultural tone-deafness
- Temporal Cringe: Outdated memes, expired trends, old sounds, dated emoji
- Conceptual Cringe: Fundamental misunderstanding of platform-specific cultural norms or inappropriate contextualization of political messaging

Table 1 provides a summary of the typology developed through this analysis, mapping each cringe type to its characteristic norm violation, norm awareness, cringe dimension, and prototypical manifestation:

Table 1. Typology of Cringe Political Communication on TikTok

Cringe Type	Norm Violated	Norm Awareness	Cringe dimension	Prototypical Manifestation
Platform Tourism	Platform-specific format and technical production standards	Unaware of norm existence	Technical cringe, Visual cringe	Static electoral visuals, horizontal video, poor audio, improper subtitles, excessive text density
Try-Hard Authenticity	Authenticity expectations	Aware but misapplies	Visual cringe, Conceptual cringe	Staged spontaneity, forced relatability
Gen Z Wannabe	Cultural fluency norms	Aware but lacks competence	Linguistic cringe, Conceptual cringe	Misused slang, forced linguistic adoptions
Awkward Trend Attempts	Timing and execution standards	Partially aware, delayed recognition	Temporal cringe, Conceptual cringe	Outdated memes, inappropriate trends
Performative Cringe Spectacle	Political dignity expectations	Aware but deliberately transgresses	Conceptual cringe	Costumes, props, theatrical elements

Source: Own elaboration

TYPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Based on the dimensional analysis, the typology consists of five fundamental categories of cringe political communication present within social media discourse, including: Platform tourism, Try-hard authenticity, Gen Z Wannabe, Awkward trend attempts, and Performative cringe spectacle. The constructed framework constitutes a content-based typology rather than a user classification system.

Political actors demonstrate variability in their communicative approaches, precluding categorization according to singular content strategies. Individual posts may manifest cringe characteristics while others within the same politician's content portfolio do not, indicating that cringe assessment operates at the post level rather than the user level. Overall content strategy and communicative continuity serve as significant contextual factors in this analytical framework. The same trend may constitute cringe content for one politician while not for another.

PLATFORM TOURISM

Platform tourism cringe emerges when political actors use social media platforms to distribute traditional content without understanding the unique cultural elements and communication norms of each platform. Platform tourists deploy their established communication methods directly into new platforms leading to immediate detection of their outsider status in platform-specific communities.

The fundamental misunderstanding becomes most evident through the selection of content formats. Political actors upload formal podium speeches to TikTok without considering the platform's requirement for short visually engaging content. They treat the platform as a television broadcast medium rather than an interactive, culturally specific environment with its own aesthetic and communicative expectations. These static presentations that exceed typical platform durations break fundamental rules of the platform by neglecting the core requirements for entertainment-focused content and fast-paced visual storytelling. The cultural ignorance runs deeper than platform format choices, including fundamental misunderstanding of platform etiquette and user expectations. Political actors often fail to comprehend that effective platform engagement requires taking part in active cultural dialogues rather than simply broadcasting information. The content displays no spontaneous or creative elements that match genuine platform culture so it appears unnatural when traditional political messages are forced into spaces meant for different communicative purposes.

Misuse of platform features involves inappropriately using hashtags as keywords rather than cultural participation tools, or failing to understand the difference between platform-specific content formats. Platform tourists frequently publish on TikTok static electoral visuals originally designed for traditional media without understanding the platform requires dynamic video content. They might create carousel posts with dense text blocks, or post LinkedIn-style professional updates on TikTok, which shows their complete ignorance of platform communication norms. They maintain their content style from Facebook and Instagram and billboard advertising while neglecting to transform their materials for TikTok's distinctive

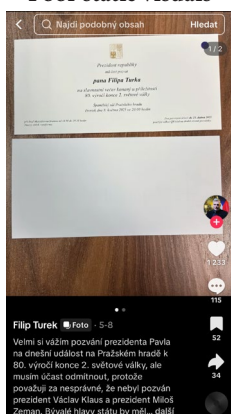
visual standards, as Prime Minister Petr Fiala (ODS) demonstrated in his TikTok post featuring a carousel format with electoral visuals and the campaign slogan „Teď je čas na silnou armádu“ (Now is the time for a strong army). This approach treats TikTok as merely another distribution channel for existing campaign materials rather than recognizing its requirement for native, platform-specific content creation. Additional examples include Member of European Parliament Filip Turek (Motoristé), who published photos of an invitation to a ceremonial evening commemorating the 80th anniversary of World War II's end, and Member of Parliament Lucie Šafránková (SPD), who uploaded an audio recording of her radio interview accompanied solely by static visuals. The examples show a basic misunderstanding of TikTok's main focus on making interactive video content that uses the platform's unique audiovisual features. Moreover, the cringe of platform tourism is in many cases deepened by technical incompetencies, which reveal deeper cultural illiteracy regarding how different platforms facilitate distinct types of social interaction and community formation.

Figure 1. Static electoral visuals



Source: www.tiktok.com/@p_fiala

Figure 2. Poor static visuals



Source: www.tiktok.com/@filipturekpresident

Figure 3. Static visuals combined with audio



Source: <https://www.tiktok.com/@politickalucie>

Closely related to platform tourism is the phenomenon of technical production failures. This type of cringe occurs when political actors demonstrate basic technical incompetence, resulting in poor audiovisual execution that undermines their intended messaging. Technical production failures encompass various shortcomings characteristic of amateur content production, including inadequate video resolution, poor audio quality, and improper formatting. This phenomenon represents a particularly damaging form of cringe political communication on TikTok because it hinders audience comprehension while simultaneously raising broader questions about the communicator's competence.

Audiences will tolerate visual imperfections more readily than incomprehensible sound but political figures commonly focus on visual aspects at the expense of audio fundamentals. Political figures regularly upload content without subtitles which makes it difficult for viewers who watch in sound-sensitive areas or with their volume off. Conversely, when subtitles are included, they often appear inappropriately positioned which blocks essential visual elements such as facial expressions and lip movements from speakers. This technical incompetence of politicians extends to subtitle timing errors which display text before or after speech thus causing confusion instead of clarity.

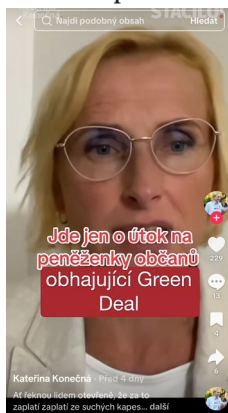
Additional technical failures include overwhelming text density that exceeds platform readability standards, with politicians cramming excessive information into single frames without considering mobile device viewing limitations. The poor lighting in content makes it hard to see political actors' faces while creating unflattering shadows and overexposed backgrounds that divert attention from the message. The problems become more severe when using old mobile devices with poor cameras because they generate pixelated unstable footage that appears unprofessional compared to standard social media content quality. Politicians often demonstrate fundamental misunderstanding of platform-specific technical requirements, most notably recording horizontal videos for vertical-oriented platforms like TikTok. Similarly, they may use inappropriate video lengths and uploading content that exceeds platform optimal durations.

Figure 4. Excessive text density



Source: www.tiktok.com/@balamarga67

Figure 5. Improper subtitle positions



Source: www.tiktok.com/@katkakonecna

Figure 6. Excessive text density



Source: www.tiktok.com/@zdenekkettnerspd

Illustrative examples include TikTok posts by Member of Parliament Margita Balašítková (ANO), who predominantly publishes clips from television discussions or news broadcasts accompanied by excessively large text that frequently

exceeds screen boundaries and becomes obscured by platform interface elements. Similarly amateur text handling is evident in content from Member of European Parliament Kateřina Konečná (Stačilo) and Member of Parliament Zdeněk Kettner (SPD), whose videos additionally suffer from unprofessional filming techniques, underexposure, and poor audio quality. These examples demonstrate multiple layers of platform incompetence, where politicians not only fail to understand TikTok's visual design principles but also neglect basic technical production standards.

TRY-HARD AUTHENTICITY

The previous categories encompassed cringe content that was based primarily on technical incompetence and inappropriately chosen formats. However, when political actors work appropriately with TikTok through high-quality vertical video formats, these cases often result in a different type of cringe: 'try-hard authenticity.' This category represents a particularly sophisticated form of political communication characterized by strategic yet inauthentic attempts to appear accessible, or genuinely spontaneous. This phenomenon emerges from the contemporary expectation that political actors need to demonstrate authentic and relatable qualities because social media users choose authentic appearances over formal professional presentation.

The main cringe element of this behavior involves politicians orchestrating seemingly spontaneous moments or personal revelations that appear obviously staged upon closer examination. The staged content reveals itself as artificial because politicians use overly produced „behind-the-scenes“ materials that demonstrate their artificial attempts to seem unscripted. The staging becomes so apparent that it undermines the intended effect of creating authentic connection with audiences.

Try-hard authenticity intensifies during electoral campaigns when politicians produce TikTok videos presenting visits to music festivals, folkloric celebrations, and local pubs, attempting to demonstrate close connections with the electorate. However, the obvious staging becomes immediately apparent through professional filming equipment, strategic camera angles, and politicians' uncomfortable body language. The authenticity performance fails because politicians maintain their formal behavioral patterns while attempting to engage casually which creates jarring contrasts between their natural institutional personas and forced relatability attempts. The TikTok productions show politicians having unnatural interactions with real festival-goers and pub patrons which makes these encounters appear artificial and deepens the distance between political elites and ordinary citizens.

A typical example of try-hard authenticity is former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš (ANO), who traditionally tours various festivals, celebrations, and similar events during his campaigns, attempting to appear natural and spontaneous. Also, politicians commonly employ various authentic serials featuring consumption of beloved beverages, such as „Coffee with Ivan Bartoš“ (Piráti) or „Cocoa with Marian Jurečka,“ (KDU-ČSL) designed to create intimate, relatable personas through seemingly casual interactions. The pinnacle of try-hard authenticity is exemplified by Member of Parliament Tomio Okamura (SPD), who appears in a market invitation video scraping potatoes, juggling onions, and biting into carrots, all while wearing a formal suit and maintaining highly formal diction.

Figure 7. Forced relatability



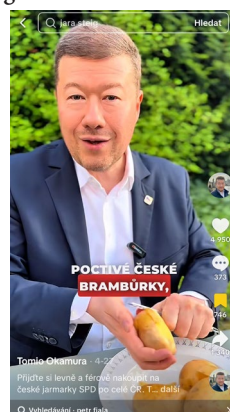
Source: www.tiktok.com/@andrejbabis

Figure 8. Staged spontaneity



Source: www.tiktok.com/@marian.jurecka

Figure 9. Forced relatability



Source: www.tiktok.com/@tomiospd

These examples demonstrate how try-hard authenticity fails when politicians maintain their formal behavioral patterns while attempting to engage in casual activities. The obvious staging and incongruent presentation styles immediately signal the artificial nature of these encounters, ultimately reinforcing rather than bridging the gap between political elites and ordinary citizens. In many cases, politicians also artificially employ the informal language of younger generations to appear more authentic, or try to awkwardly merge formal political content with current TikTok trends.

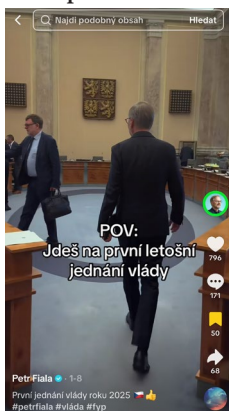
GEN Z WANNABE

This category of cringe content occurs when political figures from older generations attempt to connect with younger audiences through superficial youth culture adoption without actual understanding or participation. The political actor's established persona directly opposes their youth-oriented behaviors which creates immediate inauthenticity that typically results in ridicule instead of connection. The forced adoption of contemporary slang represents the most prevalent form of this cringe category. Politicians who use gen-z terms or youth language in their speeches often display their lack of understanding about how language naturally develops in digital youth spaces through their awkward and inappropriate usage.

Politicians frequently attempt to incorporate Generation Z vernacular into their TikTok content, awkwardly employing terms like „POV (point of view),“ „vibe,“ „slay,“ „low key“, „sigma“, or „ten pocit když... (The feeling when...)“ and making these forced linguistic adoptions often appear stilted and inauthentic. Political actors fail to grasp the subtle cultural elements and timing required for natural slang usage which forces them to display obvious youth culture instead of achieving authentic platform-specific communication engagement.

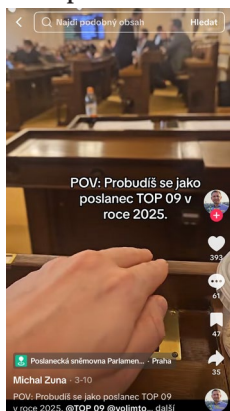
This phenomenon is strongly exemplified through the appropriation of the „POV“ trend by prominent Czech political figures including Prime Minister Petr Fiala (ODS), Member of Parliament Michal Zuna (TOP 09), and Minister of Agriculture Marian Jurečka (KDU-ČSL). All these politicians employed it as a tool for boasting, whether about government meetings, the fact that one became a member of parliament, or campaign launches. The misappropriation shows a basic failure to comprehend the cultural origins of POV format and its proper application in TikTok's environment. The POV trend typically functions as a self-deprecating or ironic commentary mechanism which enables users to present scenarios through humorous or critical perspectives that acknowledge inherent absurdity or contradiction. The use of POV format by politicians to celebrate institutional achievements or political events stands out as particularly jarring because these occasions usually require formal and respectful presentation instead of internet cultural irony. This misuse reveals an evident contradiction between youth-oriented digital language and the documentation of institutional political events, including cabinet meetings and electoral campaign inaugurations.

Figure 10. Forced linguistic adoptions of POV



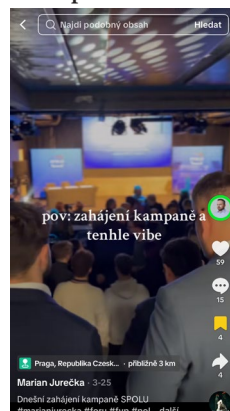
Source: www.tiktok.com/@p_fiala

Figure 11. Forced linguistic adoptions of POV



Source: www.tiktok.com/@michal.zuna

Figure 12. Forced linguistic adoptions of POV



Source: www.tiktok.com/@marian.jurecka

AWKWARD TREND ATTEMPTS

Awkward trend attempts represent a distinct form of cringe political communication where older political figures endeavor to participate in trending challenges, dances, outdated memes or viral content formats without adequately understanding the cultural context or execution standards that make such content authentic within youth-oriented platforms.

TikTok's platform behavior provides a key indicator of this cringe type as these attempts usually lack the spontaneity, creativity, or cultural understanding which makes successful trend participation possible within platform communities. The attempts at using outdated memes and cultural references stand as the most significant indicator of this misunderstanding because they show a fundamental failure to comprehend youth digital culture's fast evolution and the essential role of cultural timing in authentic youth engagement.

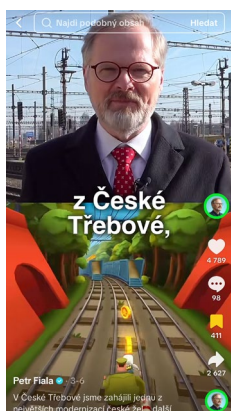
Politicians frequently employ outdated memes, often months or years past their cultural relevance, while inappropriately forcing political messaging onto viral formats. The adoption of memes from specific demographics or subcultures by politicians leads to cultural appropriation because they fail to grasp their internal meaning. Furthermore, political use of memes becomes ineffective when they overexplain them through captions and repeat them excessively which destroys the spontaneous nature and cultural authenticity of meme communication thus creating content that users identify as artificial. Similarly, the appropriation of trending sounds, songs, or dance trends demonstrates

comparable cultural incompetence, as evidenced by recent examples such as the „bombardino crocodilo“ trend or the „anxiety dance.“

Illustrative examples include Prime Minister Petr Fiala's utilization of a meme format based on the mobile game Subway Surfers when announcing railway infrastructure developments, demonstrating inappropriate contextual application of gaming-related content for serious policy communication. Although the meme thematically corresponds with railways, the combination of informal youth digital content and the formal video of the prime minister, who appears in a suit with a perfectly tied tie produces a cringe effect.

Similarly, Tomio Okamura's unsuccessful lip-sync performance to a Kendrick Lamar track exemplifies multiple layers of cringe content creation. Okamura's attempt to paraphrase the original music video through action shots featuring his automobile Škoda creates particularly pronounced cringe effects, given the song's thematic focus on critiquing superficiality and materialistic boasting. The incongruity between the track's critical commentary on ostentatious display and Okamura's showcase of his mass-produced vehicle generates cognitive dissonance that platform users may immediately recognize as cringe. Another example is a TikTok video by Member of Parliament Pavla Pivoňka Vaňková (Starostové), which utilizes the ASMR trend (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response—content designed to trigger relaxing sensory responses through specific sounds). However, the video demonstrates an awkward trend attempt, as participants record mundane sounds during petition signing, including paper rustling, pen clicking, or the act of signing itself.

Figure 13. Subway Surfers trend



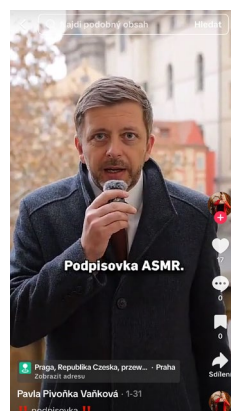
Source: www.tiktok.com/@p_fiala

Figure 14. Lip-sync performance



Source: www.tiktok.com/@tomiospd

Figure 15. ASMR trend

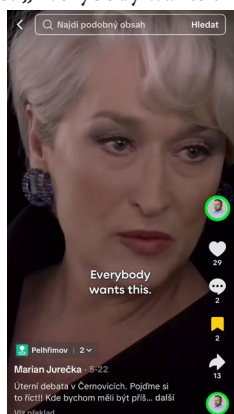


Source: www.tiktok.com/@pivonkavankova

A further illustration involves Minister Jurečka's (KDU-ČSL) awkward appropriation of the Meryl Streep „Everybody wants this“ meme, demonstrating performative spectacle through the juxtaposition of viral internet culture with his traditional political presentation. The professionally produced video contradicts meme authenticity requirements, creating obvious disconnect between formal governmental aesthetics and forced digital culture participation.

The examples demonstrate how politicians approach TikTok trends as mere aesthetic tools to be instrumentalized for political messaging, rather than understanding their embedded cultural meanings and contextual requirements. The content shows politicians view young audiences as unengaged consumers who can be reached through basic viral content adoption instead of understanding the complex cultural abilities needed for meaningful platform interaction. Moreover, the failed trend attempts highlight the limitations of treating digital cultural phenomena as marketing tools rather than authentic communicative practices.

Figure 16. „Everybody wants this“ meme



Source: www.tiktok.com/@marian.jurecka

Figure 17. „Everybody wants this“ meme



Source: www.tiktok.com/@marian.jurecka

PERFORMATIVE CRINGE SPECTACLE

If cringe operates on a spectrum of intensity, then its most extreme manifestation appears in the category of Performative cringe spectacle. This cringe type is characterized by politicians adopting props, costumes, or personas that transform substantive policy discussions into entertainment spectacles. Political actors incorrectly assume theatrical elements enhance message accessibility, failing to recognize how such approaches undermine their authority and credibility.

This phenomenon represents a particularly problematic form of political communication because it trivializes serious policy issues while attempting

to make complex topics more accessible or memorable through inappropriate theatrical means. Unlike platform-specific cringe types, performative cringe spectacle creates content that appears undignified regardless of distribution channel. It reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of appropriate political communication standards, while also frequently extending into traditional media formats such as television broadcasting. When politicians use character performances and mascot costumes for serious policy communication they suggest that political information requires childish entertainment formats for citizens to understand. Key indicators include politicians dressed as objects, characters, or in themed costumes that directly relate to their policy announcements.

Figure 18. French fries spectacle



Source: www.tiktok.com/@aschillerka

Figure 19. French fries spectacle



Source: www.tiktok.com/@aschillerka

Figure 20. French fries spectacle



Source: www.tiktok.com/@aschillerka

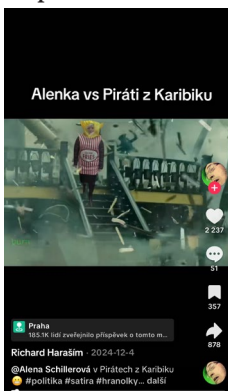
An illustrative example involves Zdeněk Hřib, chairman of the Pirate Party, and other Pirate Party candidates, who appeared in a TikTok video addressing food price reduction and VAT decreases. The entire video is situated within a grocery store setting, where Zdeněk Hřib performs the role of a cashier wearing an apron emblazoned with the Pirate Party logo. A further prominent example, representing the extensively mediated instance in the Czech context, involves former Finance Minister Alena Schillerová's (ANO) cosplay performance in a French fries costume to critique governmental policies regarding temporary employment and taxation of student jobs. This TikTok video exemplifies performative cringe spectacle through its transformation of serious fiscal policy debate into theatrical absurdity, with Schillerová conducting a dialogue with herself while alternating between her costumed persona and her parliamentary role. This initial video spawned multiple sequels maintaining the costume motif, including instances where Schillerová explained the costume's absence

due to dry cleaning while holding a McDonald's French fries container, and celebratory content featuring high-five exchanges with costumed figurants following governmental policy reversals.

This case demonstrates how performative cringe spectacle can achieve viral spread through its capacity to generate meme-worthy content, though the resulting attention typically overshadows substantive policy discourse. In this instance, the performative cringe spectacle generated extensive secondary content across multiple levels and platforms. The French fries costume became a catalyst for various meme formats, including traditional pop-cultural references connecting Schillerová's performance to „Pirates of the Caribbean“ themes.

Additionally, Generation Z users created derivative content employing contemporary meme formats, such as „Me when my crush says they like French fries,“ and a prominent Czech television presenter donned a hot dog costume during a broadcast program, directly referencing and parodying Schillerová's original performance. The secondary content development reveals how cringe political communication can achieve cultural saturation through its capacity to inspire parody, imitation, and critique across diverse media platforms, while simultaneously diminishing democratic discourse dignity and demonstrating disrespect toward public intelligence and civic engagement abilities.

Figure 21. French Fries Spectacle Remixes



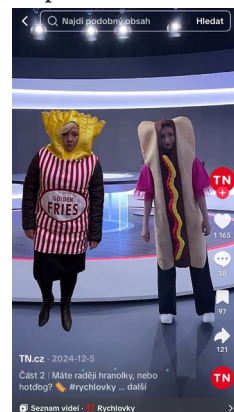
Source: www.tiktok.com/@purn_memes

Figure 22. French Fries Spectacle Remixes



Source: www.tiktok.com/@flopking69

Figure 23. French Fries Spectacle Remixes



Source: www.tiktok.com/@televizninovinoy

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive analysis of cringe political communication in Czech TikTok discourse demonstrates fundamental tensions between traditional political communication practices and the cultural expectations of digital platforms. The five-category typology shows that cringe originates from more than technical mistakes or aesthetic problems because it stems from fundamental misinterpretations of authenticity, cultural participation and political authority in digital spaces.

The research shows that Czech political actors across the political spectrum struggle with similar challenges when attempting to engage with TikTok's cultural environment. The repeated misinterpretation of platform-specific cultural codes and audience expectations is evident in Prime Minister Petr Fiala (ODS) through his inappropriate use of gaming memes in combination with formal stand-up presentation style, Alena Schillerová (ANO) through her viral French fries costume performance, and Tomio Okamura (SPD) through his misguided lip-sync attempts. The communication failures documented in individual politicians' TikTok content may signal broader challenges. When political figures repeatedly misinterpret platform conventions, it suggests that the organizations supporting their digital communication—including party communications teams and professional consultants—may lack adequate understanding of youth-oriented platform cultures. This pattern of individual failures, when systematic across the political spectrum, points to potential gaps in how political institutions approach digital communication training and strategy.

The research findings have broader implications beyond the Czech Republic for answering essential questions about political representation, democratic participation and cultural competencies in digital communities. The growing political engagement of younger people on TikTok requires political actors to participate authentically in these spaces for sustaining democratic legitimacy and effective governance. This study conceptualizes cringe as both a descriptive category of communicative misfires and an analytical lens revealing structural tensions between platform culture and political authority. The typology developed here captures cringe at the descriptive level through its five categories, while the underlying framework provides analytical purchase on why such misfires occur systematically when traditional political communication encounters platform-native expectations. The dynamics observed in Czech political TikTok are likely not unique to this national context. Politicians across Europe and beyond face similar challenges when adapting to youth-dominated platforms, as the fundamental tension between institutional political communication and platform-native authenticity expectations transcends national boundaries. Future comparative research could examine whether the typology developed here applies to other national contexts or requires modification based on local

political cultures. Moreover, the development of cringe as a particular political communication category requires innovative political literacy frameworks which integrate digital competencies with cultural awareness.

Future research should examine how political actors can modify their communication approaches over time and what the extended electoral and institutional effects of cringe political communication are, while the evolution of digital platforms requires scholars and practitioners of political communication to understand cultural mechanisms which determine political communication success or failure in shaping political discourse.

REFERENCES

- Abidin, C. (2021). *Mapping internet celebrity on TikTok: Exploring attention economies and visibility labours*. *Cultural Science Journal*, 12(1), 77–103. <https://doi.org/10.5334/csci.140>
- Bailey, K. D. (1994). *Typologies and Taxonomies: An Introduction to Classification Techniques*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412986397>
- Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Rabelais and his world*. Indiana University Press.
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Authentic: The politics of ambivalence in a brand culture*. New York University Press.
- Baumgartner, J., & Morris, J. S. (2006). The Daily Show effect: Candidate evaluations, efficacy, and American youth. *American Politics Research*, 34(3), 341–367. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X05280074>
- Bennett, W. L. (2012). The personalization of politics: Political identity, social media, and changing patterns of participation. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 644(1), 20–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716212451428>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
- Brody, C. (2022). ‘Cringe’ content in a society of control. *Pitt Sociology Review, Spring*, 24–32.
- Carlson, B., & Frazer, R. (2020). „They got filters“: Indigenous social media, the settler gaze, and a politics of hope. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120925261>
- Cervi, L., Tejedor, S., & Blesa, F. G. (2023). TikTok and political communication: The latest frontier of politainment? A case study. *Media and Communication*, 11(2), 203–217. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i2.6390>
- Clough, P. T., & Halley, J. (Eds.). (2007). *The affective turn: Theorizing the social*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822389606>
- Corner, J., & Pels, D. (Eds.). (2003). *Media and the restyling of politics: Consumerism, celebrity and cynicism*. SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446216804>
- Dahl, M. (2018). *Cringeworthy: A theory of awkwardness*. Penguin.
- Dean, J. (2015). Affect and drive. In K. Hillis, S. Paasonen, & M. Petit (Eds.), *Networked affect* (pp. 89–100). MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9715.001.0001>
- Driessens, O. (2013). Celebrity capital: Redefining celebrity using field theory. *Theory and Society*, 42(5), 543–560. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-013-9202-3>

- Enli, G. (2015). Mediated authenticity: How the media constructs reality. Peter Lang. <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-1-4539-1458-8>
- Farkas, X., & Bene, M. (2021). Images, politicians, and social media: Patterns and effects of politicians' image-based political communication strategies on social media. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 26(1), 119–142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220959553>
- Gerlitz, C., & Helmond, A. (2013). The like economy: Social buttons and the data-intensive web. *New Media & Society*, 15(8), 1348–1365. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812472322>
- Giuranno, M. G., & Manni, M. S. (2026). The impact of TikTok on elections: (Mis)information and regulatory challenges. *Kyklos*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/kykl.70054>
- Goffman, E. (1956). Embarrassment and social organization. *American Journal of Sociology*, 62(3), 264–271. <https://doi.org/10.1086/222003>
- Hillis, K., Paasonen, S., & Petit, M. (Eds.). (2015). *Networked affect*. MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9715.001.0001>
- Ibrahim, H., Jang, H. D., Aldahoul, N., Kaufman, A. R., Rahwan, T., & Zaki, Y. (2026). Systematic partisan content skews in TikTok during the 2024 US elections. *Nature*, 654(8120), 1004–1011. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-026-10447-1>
- Jerslev, A. (2016). In the time of the microcelebrity: Celebification and the YouTuber Zoella. *International Journal of Communication*, 10, 5233–5251.
- Kluge, S. (2000). Empirically grounded construction of types and typologies in qualitative social research. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(1), Article 14. <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-1.1.1124>
- Kreiss, D. (2016). *Prototype politics: Technology-intensive campaigning and the data of democracy*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199350247.001.0001>
- Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. SAGE Publications.
- Kruikemeier, S. (2014). How political candidates use Twitter and the impact on votes. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 34, 131–139. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.01.025>
- Marwick, A. E. (2013). *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. Yale University Press.
- Massumi, B. (1995). The autonomy of affect. *Cultural Critique*, 31, 83–109. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354446>
- McAllister, I. (2007). The personalization of politics. In R. J. Dalton & H. D. Klingemann (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior* (pp. 571–588). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199270125.003.0030>
- Moffett, K. W., & Rice, L. L. (2024). TikTok and civic activity among young adults. *Social Science Computer Review*, 42(2), 535–553. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08944393231188470>
- Moffitt, B. (2016). *The global rise of populism: Performance, political style, and representation*. Stanford University Press.
- Nelson, J. (2016). An unnecessary divorce: Integrating the study of affect and emotion in new media. *Composition Forum*, 34, 1–14.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199999736.001.0001>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods*. SAGE Publications.

- Pink, S., Horst, H., Postill, J., Hjorth, L., Lewis, T., & Tacchi, J. (2019). *Digital ethnography: Principles and practice*. SAGE Publications.
- Průchová Hružová, A., & Zápotocký, J. (2022). Seemingly innocent pictures. Visual representations of migrants and refugees circulating through the Czech Facebook nationalistic universe. *Visual Studies*, 37(4), 348–362. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2021.1953397>
- Sampson, T. D. (2012). *Virality: Contagion theory in the age of networks*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Tsakona, V., & Popa, D. E. (Eds.). (2011). *Studies in political humour: In between political critique and public entertainment*. John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/dapsac.46>
- Van Aelst, P., Sheafer, T., & Stanyer, J. (2012). The personalization of mediated political communication: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings. *Journalism*, 13(2), 203–220. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884911427802>
- van Zoonen, L. (2005). *Entertaining the citizen: When politics and popular culture converge*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Veneti, A., Jackson, D., & Lilleker, D. G. (Eds.). (2019). *Visual political communication*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18729-3>
- Zamora-Medina, R., Suminas, A., & Fahmy, S. S. (2023). Securing the youth vote: A comparative analysis of digital persuasion on TikTok among political actors. *Media and Communication*, 11(2), 218–231. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i2.6348>

DOI: 10.51480/1899-5101.19.2(43).1048

Cringe Communication in Hungarian Politics: Insult Humor as a Campaign Tool in 2024

Gabriella Szabó 0000-0002-5336-0179

ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest, Hungary

István Benedek 0000-0003-4977-5774ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest, Hungary,
Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

Abstract: This article examines cringe communication as an emerging form of affective political communication that combines mockery, moral judgement, and partisan mobilization. Drawing on a qualitative multimodal analysis of seven videos produced by the pro-government YouTube channel *Patrióta–Trombi Roast* during Hungary's 2024 European Parliament and municipal election campaigns, the study investigates how verbal, visual, and performative cues construct political opponents as cringeworthy. The analysis conceptualizes cringe as a composite emotional configuration blending vicarious embarrassment, contempt, and amusement, and develops a coding framework linking expressive cues, emotional responses, rhetorical devices, and political functions. The findings reveal that cringe communication systematically transforms political opponents into morally inferior, socially embarrassing, and politically illegitimate figures through insult comedy, exaggerated identity markers, and multimodal ridicule. Beyond entertainment, these videos reinforce in-group solidarity, align with governing-party narratives, and contribute to symbolic exclusion.

Keywords: Cringe communication; Election campaigning; Hungary; Insult humor; Moral emotions

INTRODUCTION

Cringe is emerging as a distinct mode of affective political communication that blends mockery, moral judgment, and political mobilization. In digitally networked environments, platforms have fundamentally reshaped communication by creating new venues for persuasion, mobilization, and community building (Yılmaz & Topsümer, 2023; Klinger et al., 2023; Papathanassopoulos

& Giannouli, 2025). Within this ecosystem, influencers increasingly operate as hybrid actors who combine entertainment with political messaging, shaping public opinion through relatable, personalized, and emotionally charged content (Fischer et al., 2022; Gibson et al., 2023; Naderer, 2023; Brassett & Browning, 2025; Pandey, 2025). In Hungary, a context characterized by extreme political polarization, pervasive politicization, and a highly centralized media landscape (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013; Stępińska et al., 2024), political communication unfolds within a hybrid political–media system where state-aligned legacy outlets, party-organized infrastructures, and platform-based digital content mutually reinforce one another (Benedek, 2024). This configuration enables the coordinated amplification of partisan narratives and creates space for influencer-style political communicators who combine irony, meme-based aesthetics, and confrontational humor with partisan mobilization.

Within this environment, Trombi—the social media persona of Kristóf Trombitás and host of the Patrióta–Trombi Roast YouTube channel—represents a salient case. Operating within the pro-government Megafon network, the channel deploys cringe-based insult comedy as a political tool, drawing on stylistic elements associated with Hungary’s domestically adapted alt-right online communication milieu (Mikecz & Szabó, 2019). This study examines how Trombi’s content mobilizes cringe humor to ridicule opposition figures, reinforce in-group superiority, and promote pro-government narratives. Beyond entertainment, these videos combine insult, humor, and campaign messaging to leverage emotions such as contempt and vicarious embarrassment, framing political opponents as incompetent, morally unworthy, and culturally out of touch. In so doing, cringe communication functions as an instrument of emotional distancing and symbolic delegitimation. The analysis draws on superiority theory (Beck & Spencer, 2025; Carroll, 2014; Lintott, 2016), which conceptualizes humor as an expression of hierarchical dominance used to belittle those perceived as inferior. This framework helps explain how cringe-based ridicule intersects with emotionalized populist communication and contributes to the moralization of political discourse, while also blurring the boundaries between entertainment and politics.

The following core research question guides this inquiry: How are multimodal verbal, visual, and performative cues used to express cringing and construct political opponents as cringeworthy, thereby enabling cringe communication to function as a tool of political legitimation in support of the Fidesz government during the 2024 campaign? To address this question, the analysis focuses on three interrelated dimensions: (1) the targets of ridicule and their political or identity markers, (2) the thematic frames through which adversaries are portrayed, and (3) the emotional repertoire structuring the affective dynamics of cringe communication.

This exploratory study makes a threefold contribution: it conceptualizes cringe communication as a composite emotional strategy that fuses abjection, vicarious embarrassment, and amusement; it develops a qualitative coding framework to capture its rhetorical and affective structure; and it empirically illustrates these dynamics through the 2024 Hungarian campaign, where insult-based humor functions as a mode of political legitimization.

CONCEPTUALIZING CRINGE COMMUNICATION

Cringe gained prominence with the rise of “cringe comedy,” from early 2000s shows to contemporary formats, which elicits both laughter and discomfort by staging social mishaps (Spiegel, 2025). Conceptually, cringe can be distinguished from “awkwardness” (Plakias, 2024). While awkwardness refers to a breakdown of shared social scripts, cringe adds a spectatorial and evaluative dimension: observers respond to others’ missteps with discomfort infused with moral or aesthetic judgment. Rather than exposing the fragility of social coordination, cringe reinforces norms by positioning the observer as superior. It thus combines second-hand embarrassment with amusement, creating the distinctive experience of pleasurable discomfort: a painful yet almost irresistible desire to keep watching, typically triggered by overconfidence, failed self-presentation, or a lack of social self-awareness (Hye-Knudsen, 2018).

In digital media environments, cringe has become a dominant aesthetic across memes, roasts, and short-form video content that mock behavior and self-presentation (Verma, 2021). Far from marginal, it operates as a form of judgmental commentary that produces a “moral shiver” rather than purely cathartic laughter (Douglas, 1975; Morreall, 2009; Scheff & Scheele, 1982). Simultaneously, cringe is paradoxical: it is both celebrated and problematized as a marker of authenticity, vulnerability, and ironic detachment. Content creators may deliberately produce cringe to signal self-awareness or resist polished influencer norms (Edelmann, 1981; Crozier, 1998; Harris, 2006; Wegner, 2021). Despite its playful framing, cringe can easily slide into digital humiliation, transforming awkward moments into viral spectacles that police authenticity and competence (Schwanebeck, 2021; Spiegel, 2025). Unlike conventional humor, it foregrounds failed performances and asymmetrical interactions, positioning the “cringer” as a judge who asserts superiority over the “cringee.” In this sense, cringe operates as a cultural mechanism of boundary enforcement, aligning audiences against perceived norm violators.

Political cringe emerges when attempts at persuasion or relatability backfire, producing embarrassment rather than credibility (Wöhrle, 2021; Middleton, 2014). In digital campaigning, poorly executed memes, influencer collaborations,

or exaggerated performances amplify such reactions (Escoe et al., 2025). More broadly, cringe reflects a perceived mismatch between intended political messaging and its reception. Cringeworthiness is also highly shareable, making it a powerful communicative resource in social media environments (Escoe et al., 2025). When mobilized strategically, cringe becomes a performative device that not only entertains but also generates moral judgment and partisan alignment. It typically involves mocking public figures for violating cultural or behavioral norms, reframing opponents as ridiculous or morally deficient. Unlike satire, cringe communication lies in the affective experience it manifests and possibly seeks to generate. Whereas satire primarily invites critical reflection through humor, cringe communication encourages audiences to experience vicarious embarrassment, bodily discomfort, and pleasurable pain (Iché & Schneebeli, 2026) while positioning the target as morally and socially inferior via humor (Lintott, 2016; Szabó, 2024).

Humor has long been understood as a mechanism of social hierarchy. From Aristotle's early observations that laughter often arises from the perceived inferiority of others (Gottlieb, 2013) to Bitterly's (2022) account of ridicule as a form of power exercise, superiority theories emphasize that humor reinforces social norms through downward comparison and symbolic domination. Cringe communication operates as an inherently evaluative form of humor: by attributing cringeworthiness to political opponents, it legitimizes their public ridicule, reinforces in-group superiority, and signals shared normative standards (Smilges, 2024). In so doing, it functions as a mechanism of distinction and boundary-making, rendering its targets morally and culturally inferior while blurring the boundary between entertainment and character assassination.

More broadly, cringe communication occupies a hybrid space between popular culture and moral politics. By transforming political conflict into consumable entertainment, it enables actors to perform simultaneously as entertainers, commentators, and advocates. However, by framing hostility as humor, it also provides a shield of irony ("it's just a joke"), allowing communicators to evade moral and political accountability.

EMOTIONAL DYNAMICS OF CRINGE

Wöhrle (2021) argues that cringe is primarily fueled by embarrassment, an emotion triggered by perceived violations of implicit social or moral display norms (Fussi & Rodogno, 2023). While embarrassment has often been linked to laughter at awkwardness (Hacker, 2017; Zahavi, 2020; Mayer et al., 2021), such accounts tend to overlook the hostile dimension of cringing. As Spiegel (2025, p. 230) emphasizes, cringe is an "essentially hostile emotion" whose function is to produce

social distinction. This is particularly salient in political communication, where cringe is strategically mobilized to devalue opponents. Building on this insight, we conceptualize cringe not as a single emotion but as a dynamic interplay between embarrassment and contempt, jointly reinforcing moral hierarchies and socio-political distancing.

Cringe involves vicarious embarrassment: a discomfort experienced in response to others' social failures (Krach et al., 2011; Stocks et al., 2011). Such vicarious emotions are politically relevant, as they allow individuals to share in collective successes and humiliations, strengthening group cohesion (McIlwain et al., 2012). Simultaneously, they enable distancing: audiences affirm their own competence while deriving in-group amusement from the cringe. In digital contexts, this response is amplified through visual and verbal cues that transform individual discomfort into collective moral judgment. Although often conflated with shame, cringe is more complex. Shame is a deeply social, self-conscious emotion tied to norm violation and exposure (Gilbert, 1998; Fussi & Rodogno, 2023; Deonna et al., 2012), whereas embarrassment is more situational and can serve appeasement functions (Keltner & Buswell, 1997). Cringe, by contrast, is hetero-induced: it arises not from empathy but from witnessing others' awkward or norm-violating behavior (Plakias, 2024). This discomfort, often accompanied by laughter, reinforces a sense of superiority and opens the way for social distancing emotions.

Although cringe shares features with embarrassment, its core is better understood through rejection and symbolic disgust. Contempt signals superiority and exclusion (Fischer & Roseman, 2007), reflecting stable judgments of inferiority expressed through sarcasm, ridicule, and belittlement (Bell, 2013). Cringe also entails a bodily sense of recoil, a reaction to perceived aesthetic or moral deficiency (Smilges, 2024). This aversion is symbolic rather than sensory and aligns with contempt as a judgment of taste, decorum, or competence (Kolnai, 2003).

Drawing on Bourdieu, Spiegel (2025) frames cringe as boundary-making through contempt, where distinction operates via rejection as much as preference (Swartz, 2024). Cringe thus enacts moral and aesthetic exclusion, positioning the observer as culturally superior. In political communication, this is expressed through insults, sarcasm, condescension, and belittling comparisons, which transform discomfort into symbolic domination and reinforce in-group cohesion.

Cringe is not purely aversive, as it also involves amusement, creating a "guilty pleasure" dynamic (Hye-Knudsen, 2018; Roost, 2025). Audiences willingly engage with cringeworthy content, oscillating between discomfort and enjoyment. This laughter is rarely neutral: it carries moral judgment and often reinforces aggression. In political contexts, this pleasurable dimension enhances persuasive power. Shared ridicule becomes an entertaining ritual of exclusion and belonging, turning opponents' failures into affective spectacle. Amusement thus sustains engagement, allowing contempt and embarrassment to circulate

in socially acceptable forms while reinforcing partisan alignment. The ambivalence of cringe—simultaneous discomfort and fascination—explains its appeal and its role in reaffirming hierarchies (Seebold, 2025).

Cringe combines self-directed discomfort with other-directed hostility. By reacting to perceived social missteps, the cringer signals norm awareness and claims moral or cultural superiority. When shared collectively, cringe fosters in-group formation and boundary-making. Joy functions as a release mechanism, making ridicule more engaging and accessible.

In sum, cringe is best understood as a complex, hetero-induced emotional configuration that blends discomfort, laughter, and moral judgment. It operates as a mechanism of socio-political differentiation and collective bonding, distinguishing itself from both shame and embarrassment while serving as a powerful affective tool in contemporary political communication.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

To translate the conceptual insights into analytical practice, we model cringe communication as a sequential process linking expressive cues, emotional responses, rhetorical devices, and political functions. A cringe cue, such as overconfidence, failed humor, or an awkward display, elicits distinct but interconnected emotions: vicarious embarrassment, contempt, and joy. These emotions are expressed through rhetorical devices including verbal insult, sarcasm, visual exaggeration, and auditory distortion that direct the audience's interpretation and affective alignment. Together, they perform identifiable political functions: (1) delegitimation of opponents through humiliation, (2) in-group bonding via shared amusement and moral differentiation, and (3) alignment with government frames that recast partisan narratives as entertainment. This operational chain guides the coding framework and the qualitative content analysis to explore patterns of meaning, framing, and emotional expression (Schreier, 2012).

CASE SELECTION AND DATA COLLECTION

The dataset consists of all seven videos produced by Trombi's Patrióta-Trombi Roast YouTube channel between April and June 2024, coinciding with the European Parliamentary and municipal election campaigns (summary table is in Appendix A). The case was selected because Trombi explicitly presents his channel as an exercise in exposing government-critical cultural figures and opposition politicians as "cringe." In the opening video, he states that his aim

is to take these public figures “off their pedestal” and reveal how “cringeworthy” they are by manifesting his feeling of cringe. Rather than merely ridiculing political opponents, the videos invite audiences to adopt cringing as a shared affective stance toward the targets.

Each video is 15–16 min long and directly engages with political figures and events relevant to the campaign. This small-N corpus is treated as a critical case of governing-party-aligned cringe communication in a high-stakes political period.

CODING FRAMEWORK

The content was analyzed through three analytical dimensions, each corresponding to the study’s sub-questions:

1. Target: Identifying the individuals or groups subjected to ridicule and coding their associated political, ideological, and identity markers (e.g., party affiliation, gender, profession).
2. Object: Examining the thematic content of the mockery, including recurring frames (e.g., incompetence, corruption, moral decay).
3. Emotionality: Capturing the use of emotions—particularly contempt and vicarious embarrassment—as rhetorical devices.

The unit of analysis is the whole video.

OPERATIONALIZATION

To systematically analyze Trombi’s 2024 campaign videos, a structured coding scheme was developed to capture the rhetorical, emotional, and thematic features of the content. The scheme served as a practical guide for coders to produce comprehensive and comparable notes, enabling a detailed qualitative content analysis.

The coding process was performed by the authors of the paper. To ensure analytic rigor and minimize individual bias, we conducted the coding independently by watching and analyzing each of the seven videos separately in their entirety. This procedure allowed both explicit and nuanced elements of the content to be identified, including verbal, visual, and emotional features.

We followed an iterative, multi-step process typical of qualitative content analysis. First, we familiarized ourselves with the material through immersive viewing, making preliminary notes and identifying emergent patterns. In the second phase, we applied the predefined coding framework derived from the study’s conceptual and analytical dimensions, while remaining open to inductive codes that emerged from the data.

Coding included categorical tagging (e.g., labeling specific rhetorical strategies or emotional expressions), narrative descriptions, contextual insights, and

supporting evidence in the form of verbatim quotations and timestamps based on the following instructions:

1. Identify the targets of insult or mockery (e.g., opposition politicians, activists, journalists, public intellectuals, social media influencers, foreign actors, or citizens). Coders also noted salient identity markers, such as political affiliation, gender, profession, appearance, age, lifestyle, and moral character.
2. Describe recurring themes in the portrayal of these targets, including whether they were depicted as unprofessional, foolish, deceptive, dangerous, or out of touch.
3. Document emotional expressions present in the videos, particularly those associated with cringe communication, such as contempt, vicarious embarrassment, and ridicule. Coders identified verbal strategies (e.g., sarcasm, mockery, name-calling, belittling comparisons) and visual/auditory techniques (e.g., facial expressions, gestures, editing styles, sound effects, use of emojis).
4. Capture the emotional strategies embedded in the videos, focusing on how emotions were expressed, oriented toward targets, and framed for the audiences.
5. Evaluate the use of cringe-based discomfort, noting instances of overconfidence, lack of self-awareness, failed attempts at humor or authority, sexualized portrayals, or exaggerated efforts to appear relatable.
6. Identify the political functions of the videos, focusing on whether the content aimed to reinforce in-group identity, delegitimize political opponents, distract from substantive political issues through personal mockery, or discourage dissent and norm transgressions.
7. Discover any informed connections between the content and government-affiliated campaign messages or ideological positions, such as alignment with Fidesz narratives about opposition incompetence, corruption, or moral deficiency.

Except for one question, multiple answers were permitted, allowing for the coding of overlapping categories and multi-layered emotional expressions.

After completing the independent coding, a consensus-building process followed. All coded segments were reviewed collaboratively, and discrepancies were discussed in detail to reach an agreement on the final coding. This negotiated coding approach ensured that the evaluation reflected a shared interpretation of the material, increasing the reliability of the findings. Importantly, no coding decision was finalized unless both coders explicitly agreed on its validity. If necessary, the coding segment was revisited using the original data context to reach agreement.

This combination of independent coding, detailed documentation, and consensus-oriented discussion aligns with established best practices in qualitative content analysis to ensure that the study's findings are methodologically transparent.

FINDINGS

The analysis identified two main clusters of videos within the corpus, which can be interpreted as delineations of the *cultural* and *political opposition*. The first group centres on cultural figures and media personalities associated with government-critical positions: publicist and social critic *Róbert Puzsér*, renowned singer-songwriter *János Bródy*, media personality *Sándor Friderikusz*, and a cluster of younger artists and opinion leaders whom Trombi frames as “*influencers*,” including Zsolt Osváth, Whisper Ton, Azahriah, Carson Coma, and Márton Gulyás. The second group consists of active political targets: left-leaning and liberal *Members of the European Parliament* (MEPs), Budapest Mayor *Gergely Karácsony*, and the then-rising opposition figure *Péter Magyar*. Across these cases, Trombi does not move from one isolated target to another. Instead, the roasts assemble heterogeneous figures into a single oppositional field and make that field appear cringeworthy, morally compromised, and politically unfit.

In these videos, Trombi blends insult comedy, cringe aesthetics, and partisan framing to construct a moralized hierarchy between “real” and “inauthentic” Hungarians. His targets are portrayed not simply as mistaken in their views but as personally ridiculous, socially detached from ordinary citizens, and morally unworthy of political trust. Through exaggerated mockery and humiliation, the videos recast criticism as elitism and turn symbolic exclusion into shared amusement and partisan belonging. The findings therefore focus less on an inventory of targets than on a recurring mechanism: personal ridicule makes political opposition embarrassing, enabling its delegitimation. Cringing works as boundary enforcement, converting failed performances into pleasurable discomfort and downward comparison while embedding pro-government narratives in contemptuous laughter.

TARGETS, POLITICAL AND HIERARCHICAL POSITIONING

Among government-critical *cultural figures*, *Puzsér* is presented as a political opportunist and “pseudo-intellectual” whose public persona is empty and self-serving. Although he has positioned himself as a critic of both the government and the opposition, the video situates him among the so-called “fake independents” who ultimately amplify the newest “opposition messiah,” in this case, *Péter Magyar*. *Bródy*’s singer-songwriter legacy is recast as evidence of long-term

affiliation with the post-communist “Nagykörút elite,” a pejorative reference to Budapest’s inner-boulevard liberal intelligentsia. *Friderikusz* is personalized through biography and elite networks: a “Gyurcsány-loving Kádár-fan” whose media authority rests on left-liberal patronage rooted in the communist regime and later continued under socialist Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány. The *influencer* cluster is similarly linked to opposition politics through support for Magyar, criticism of the Orbán government, and endorsement of liberal cultural causes. They are described as a “sect,” a “close-knit urban clique,” and “dollar media” mouthpieces: agents, whether conscious or unwitting, of American soft power, able to carry political messages to social groups otherwise distant from politics.

The common move across these cultural cases is to turn public visibility into hidden partisanship. Cultural authority becomes political contamination: figures who might lend credibility to opposition politics are redefined as compromised actors. Artistic prestige, media visibility, and influencer reach are thus recoded as signs of anti-government alignment rather than autonomous public speech.

The videos apply a more directly electoral version of the same logic to *opposition politicians*. Progressive *MEPs* are portrayed as incompetent, hypocritical, and ideologically dangerous “libtards” aligned with Brussels, the “gender lobby,” and globalist agendas, posing a moral and cultural threat to “ordinary” Hungarians. *Karácsony* is framed as the personification of liberal and “Gyurcsányist” municipal politics: an academic-turned-politician lost in theory, unable to manage a city, and dependent on former left-liberal networks. *Magyar*’s portrayal focuses on his rapid, and therefore suspicious, rise as the “newcomer messiah” of the opposition. Secondary ridicule extends to sympathetic media, celebrities, and former opposition leaders such as Péter Jakab and Péter Márki-Zay, all folded into a recurring “left-wing circus.” Trombi says that “Magyar is a bit like one half of a teenage relationship ... you can almost believe that it’s something exceptional, something special” (video timestamp: 12:03). At stake here is electoral viability: the roasts socially ridicule emerging or established opposition figures before they can secure political credibility, enacting an emotional repositioning of these actors as ridiculous, morally compromised, and politically unserious.

In every roast, the target is placed low on the competence–morality scale and gradually turned into a cringe: unprofessional, foolish, deceptive, culturally alien, or unable to read basic social and political situations. However, the targets are not harmless. They are portrayed as figures who shape public opinion and lend symbolic legitimacy to opposition causes: *Puzsér* as irrelevant yet harmful for promoting Magyar’s campaign, *Bródy* as a hypocrite whose moral authority could mislead, *Friderikusz* as a cultural gatekeeper of “deceptive” liberal values, influencers as manipulable or complicit agents of foreign propaganda, *MEPs* as producers of harmful “cringe trends” on migration, war, and gender politics,

and *Karácsony* and *Magyar* as inferior but politically consequential figures whose visibility must be neutralized.

This double positioning is central to the hierarchy. The cringee must be ridiculous enough to enable downward comparison but dangerous enough to justify exposure. If the target were only presented negatively, the roast would remain ordinary hostile communication. If it were only threatening, the comic register would lose its function. Political cringe communication holds the two together: the opponent becomes laughable yet harmful, socially embarrassing yet capable of misleading others.

The recurring “clown” label condenses this logic: it marks the target as unserious, incompetent, and morally deficient while also signaling that this figure should be publicly unmasked. Similar unmasking appears when Trombi describes *Bródy* as a “turncoat who betrayed his younger colleagues in order to advance himself and remain in the spotlight” (12:36), and dismisses his criticism of “today’s suffocating atmosphere, unbearable conditions, and other nonsense” (13:04). *Friderikusz* is likewise framed as “not a legend, but an ungrateful, histrionic commie loser” who “from the top of his entire trash heap shouts about how pathetic Hungary is” (14:10). Danger is tied to deception: claiming independence while serving partisan ends, appearing apolitical while advancing ideological agendas, or cloaking propaganda in entertainment. This “wolf in sheep’s clothing” framing turns embarrassment into symbolic domination: the audience laughs from above, and the target becomes a cringee whose political claims can be dismissed because the person has already been made ridiculous.

IDENTITY MARKERS AND PERSONAL RIDICULE

Each roast relies on exaggerated identity markers to render the target ridiculous. *Political affiliation* is usually foregrounded through the “exposure” of alleged partisan ties: *Puzsér* is linked to failed opposition formations, *Bródy*—the “red beat musician”—to the socialist cultural apparatus, *Friderikusz* to the left-liberal cultural elite, and the *influencers* to Pride activism, urban celebrity aesthetics, and foreign-backed opposition networks. Independence is treated as a mask, and the videos claim to reveal the partisan loyalty behind cultural autonomy.

Professional identity is also devalued. The pattern is consistent: *Puzsér* becomes a “fake intellectual” and shallow celebrity, *Bródy* an irrelevant “worn-out rock-daddy,” *Friderikusz* an undeserving showman dependent on political patrons, and *influencers* derivative performers or reality-TV figures symbolizing mass-cultural decline. *Karácsony*’s infrastructure projects are ridiculed as “low-budget concrete patches,” whereas *Magyar*’s technical mistakes, such as “failing to launch a Facebook Live stream” or “confusing a police radio with an internet blocker,” are treated as proof of amateurism. The point is not only to mock competence

but to strip the targets of the symbolic authority that could make their criticism politically meaningful.

Moral character is attacked through accusations of hypocrisy, deceit, opportunism, betrayal, vanity, and manipulation. *Puzsér* is mocked for “becoming what he once criticized,” *Bródy* for allegedly submitting to the Kádár regime while posturing as a dissident, influencers for “selling out” to foreign interests, and *MEPs* for deceit, arrogance, provocation, fund misuse, and an elitist lifestyle framed as morally contagious. *Karácsony* is portrayed as feigning concern for Budapest while enabling its “robbery by Gyurcsány’s allies” (15:09), whereas *Magyar* is depicted as deceitful, emotionally unstable, and willing to harm his own family for political gain. Moral ridicule turns disagreement into a question of trustworthiness: the target’s political claim is discredited through an alleged defect of character.

Gendered and sexualized framings intensify humiliation. *Puzsér* is mocked through sentimental emojis beside clips of his admiration for male politicians, *Friderikusz* through romantic iconography referencing Gyurcsány, and *influencers* through insinuations about appearance, fashion, lifestyle, and political patronage. Masculinity is questioned through gendered slurs such as “bitch” and portrayals of male figures as submissive or vain. *MEPs* are described as “progressive, world-saving feminists” or “men completely past their prime” (02:41). *Karácsony* is likened to “a rescue dog obediently serving its master” (15:07), whereas *Magyar*’s gendered portrayal features allegations of domestic violence and insinuations that question his manhood.

Appearance and expression are also ridiculed. Trombi mocks the *MEPs*’ “sad faces while carrying a mock coffin” (07:09) and dismisses their professional legitimacy through phrases such as “they shirk work” and “intellectual swamp” (01:10; 01:20). *Magyar* is mocked for “virtual Botox,” a “baby-faced rebel” persona, and being a “city boy” unfamiliar with rural Hungary. Ageist tropes are prominent as well: *Bródy* is labelled “rickety,” a “codger pensioner,” and a “leftist mummy,” whereas *Friderikusz*’s attempts to appear youthful are framed as pathetic. These bodily and aesthetic cues turn political difference into a visible norm violation: the cringe becomes not only politically wrong but embarrassing to watch.

EMOTIONAL STRATEGIES

Cringe operates as the affective mechanism that connects targeting, identity marking, and hierarchical positioning. It emerges from portrayals of overconfidence, lack of self-awareness, failed attempts at humor or authority, sexualized mockery, and exaggerated attempts to appear relatable. However, these elements do not become cringeworthy automatically. They become cringe cues only when Trombi frames them through contempt, abjection, vicarious embarrassment,

or bodily recoil, thereby placing viewers in the position of the cringer and instructing them on how to feel about the target.

The video on *Bródy* illustrates this mechanism. The cringee's overconfidence is framed through comments about his continued self-importance: he is described as "bursting with confidence" and as believing that people do not merely applaud but celebrate him (04:46). Trombi makes this presentation cringeworthy by explicitly framing it as discomfort-inducing. Trombi labels him "totally cringe," calls him "Bródy, the cringefather" (03:06), and frames his late-career performances as a fall into a "cringe swamp" (03:43). The crucial point is not Bródy's age or confidence alone: the effect appears when overconfidence is paired with visible and verbalized second-hand embarrassment, as Trombi says "I also feel a little ashamed" (03:22), lowers his head during the failed duet scene (04:30), and marks the moment as one of those "awkward situations" (04:40).

Friderikusz is constructed through a similar but more sexualized and abject pattern. His alleged overconfidence appears in the claim that he sees everyone else as "stupid proles" (03:20), whereas his lack of self-critique is marked by the sarcastic line, "It's a good thing he actually has some self-criticism—oh wait, never mind" (06:19). Trombi frames his public performance as a complete loss of dignity: "He even sings in public, which is the absolute rock bottom—there are no limits" (06:39). Failed authority becomes cringe because it is joined to contempt, abjection, and explicit second-hand embarrassment: references to "second-hand shame" (05:14), the refusal to show more because the scene is "so embarrassing" (08:20), and the description of the performance as "fucking embarrassing grovelling" (09:15).

The *Karácsony* roast follows the same logic in a municipal-political register. His claim that no one could develop Budapest better than him is undercut by absurd analogies, including "Snoop Dogg leading an anti-drug campaign" and "Madonna lecturing on natural facial skin" (00:23). Failed authority is made visible through ridicule of small urban projects, dog toilets, and mini parks. Karácsony's overconfidence becomes cringeworthy in Trombi's presentation as the video turns it into a public spectacle of incompetence and failed self-awareness: he "voluntarily exposes his own incompetence to the public" (15:13). The roast then translates political subservience into bodily humiliation, mocking his loyalty through the crude double-entendre that his only real skill is "getting a hard-on for Gyurcsány—I mean, always standing up for Gyurcsány" (15:01).

In *Magyar's* case, ridicule is formalized into a "cringe tier list" that turns perceived blunders into a ranked spectacle of failed seriousness. The clown frame appears from the opening, "the new season's new clown" (00:03), and is intensified through "red-nosed psycho clown" (01:49). Trombi also reads comments claiming that Magyar has "made a fool of himself" (05:04) and that even his own side is laughing at him (07:50). The tier-list culminates in the explicit

conclusion: “when I look through my list, this is a clown” (12:29). Cringe does not rest on awkwardness alone: the format converts mistakes into evidence of political unfitness, whereas the clown motif links embarrassment to danger, deception, and failed opposition hope.

The MEPs video makes failed trendiness cringeworthy through an unusually dense chain of discomfort markers. Trombi introduces the clips as “truly embarrassing,” “awful,” and “horrific” (00:14), calls the montage a “freak fest” (00:24), and describes Brussels as the peak of “cringe content production” (10:55). Failed humor and failed authority are fused with ideological contamination when progressive messages become “globalist nonsense poured into cringe trends” (13:11). The cringing response is also performed bodily: Trombi buries his face in his hands, scratches his head with a pained expression, and says the clips are almost impossible to watch, returning to them only for the audience’s sake (11:22). The result is a guided experience of second-hand embarrassment and contempt, not simply disagreement with the MEPs’ positions.

Verbal contempt strategies, including explicit disdain (“extremely ridiculous”), sarcasm, and dismissive name-calling, reduce targets to caricatures while allowing Trombi and his viewers to ridicule and moralize at the same time. The videos are saturated with insults and mocking nicknames (“commie,” “Uncle Janó,” “cutie-faces,” “clown”), and with belittling comparisons such as *Bródy* as the “Hungarian Bob Dylan” or *Magyar* as “as much of a legend as Pablo Escobar is an honest man” (02:11).

Visual and auditory design amplifies these verbal cues by turning awkward or hostile moments into shareable scenes of discomfort. Freeze-frames, zoom-ins, jump cuts, sarcastic captions, emojis, ideological symbols (rainbow flags, red stars, hearts), mismatched background music, canned laughter, cymbal crashes, and ironic reuse of the targets’ own clips add layers of derision. Trombi’s physical performance serves as visual commentary: through facepalming, grimacing, sighing, and bodily recoil, he performs *vicarious embarrassment* and guides the viewer’s emotional response. These gestures turn viewing into moralized mockery, where discomfort becomes pleasurable, and contempt circulates as entertainment rather than argument.

POLITICAL FUNCTIONS AND ALIGNMENT WITH GOVERNMENT-AFFILIATED MESSAGING

Although Trombi’s roasts vary in their targets, their political functions converge. Entertainment-driven ridicule delegitimizes political rivals, reinforces in-group identity, and aligns with government campaign narratives. First, the roasts weaken cultural figures who lend symbolic or explicit support to opposition forces, especially *Péter Magyar*. By ridiculing and morally discrediting endorsers,

they reduce the credibility of cultural opposition. Targeting high-profile figures may also serve self-promotion, as provoking reactions from the addressee can support the virality of cringe content.

Second, the roasts undermine opposition politicians by framing them as incompetent, corrupt, and unfit for office. By linking European progressive parties with domestic actors, this discourse constructs a single, transnational “globalist” network. In the *MEPs* video, this framing discredits the ideological opposition ahead of the European elections by mirroring Fidesz themes on Brussels, gender, migration, and war, culminating in a direct appeal to reject “cringe TikTok videos” in favor of government-backed “reality.” Similarly, *Karácsony* and *Magyar* are folded into familiar narratives: the former as a Gyurcsány-linked municipal puppet, the latter as a manufactured messiah of the left-liberal media elite.

Third, the videos reinforce in-group solidarity among pro-government audiences. Informal and often vulgar language creates a shared space for “ordinary people” to laugh at urban elites, celebrities, intellectuals, and opposition politicians. In the *influencer* episode, viewers are invited to see through manipulation by “dollar media,” “useful idiots,” or “clean-faced” public figures who allegedly smuggle American ideological influence into apolitical spaces. Laughter becomes boundary-making: it lets viewers perform social norm savviness by showing that they see through manipulation while others remain trapped in the cringe performance.

Finally, the roasts carry a plausible deterrent signal. By showing that public endorsement of opposition causes can provoke aggressive, highly visible ridicule, they signal the social costs of dissent for cultural or media figures. This normalization of personal attacks encourages self-censorship, deflects attention from substantive policy debate, and replaces political disagreement with an emotional response built around contempt, vicarious embarrassment, and shared amusement.

The timing and structure of the videos indicate that the roasts were not detached comic commentary. In early 2024, the presidential pardon scandal forced the resignation of President Katalin Novák and former justice minister Judit Varga, Péter Magyar’s ex-wife and Fidesz’s intended lead candidate for the European elections (Baranyai et al., 2025). As cracks appeared in the Orbán regime’s agenda-setting monopoly, the government faced mass demonstrations, cultural figures endorsing Magyar, and the rapid rise of his new movement, which soon eclipsed the traditional opposition and destabilized government communication (Benedek, 2026).

Trombi’s roast videos reflect this turbulent moment. Their most explicit political messaging and electoral cues usually appear in the final minute, marked by a serious voice, altered background music, and direct appeals. These closings move beyond satire and answer “what we want and what we reject.” In the *MEPs*

video, Orbán is presented as the sole representative of peace, while voters are urged to reject migration, war, gender politics, and a federal Europe.

The target-specific attacks map onto broader pro-government narratives. Because many within the cultural opposition had participated in the post-pardon scandal “influencer protest” or supported Magyar, targeting them undermined their gatekeeping role for politically disengaged citizens and warned others against open criticism. These depictions closely mirror official Fidesz campaigns: *Karácsony*’s municipal-puppet framing echoes Alexandra Szentkirályi’s mayoral rhetoric, whereas *Magyar*’s portrayal as an abuser parallels statements by Judit Varga. The timing also suggests direct political coordination: *Karácsony*’s roast appeared the day before the municipal election and *Magyar*’s at the peak of his early May polling surge, just as he was overtaking the traditional left-wing opposition.

Furthermore, thematic overlaps with earlier Fidesz campaign materials place these roasts within a wider, state-aligned communication ecosystem. Recent analyses suggest that Megafon functions as an outsourced yet centrally coordinated influencer network that responds to political events within 24–48 h, repackaging identical narratives through standardized visuals, ad hominem framing, and fear-based “us-versus-them” cues into short, sponsored videos. Users often do not recognize these as paid political advertising, allowing campaign messages to circulate as viral infotainment (Horváth et al., 2025, pp. 7–8; Juhász, 2025). The campaign period also exposed direct party linkages: Megafon influencers appeared at Fidesz rallies, and 68 Fidesz municipal candidates were trained by them. The same frames dominated pro-government content: anti-EU and “decline of the West” tropes, stigmatizing opponents as “pro-war,” “pro-migration,” or “pro-LGBTQ,” and personalized discrediting of Péter Magyar (Political Capital, 2025a, 2025b).

In sum, Trombi’s roast videos operate as a hybrid genre combining online comedy with targeted political propaganda. Rather than seeking programmatic persuasion or outright conversion, they deploy identity-based ridicule, hierarchical humiliation, and cringe performance to foster doubt, reinforcing political cynicism and disengagement. Aggressive, state-aligned attacks can therefore circulate under the guise of satire while maintaining plausible deniability. By converting political disagreement into personal ridicule and second-hand embarrassment, the roasts shift political discourse from substantive argument to affective boundary-making. Whether targeting media personalities, cultural icons, or influencer-activists, this strategy renders association with the opposition socially untenable, effectively eroding the cultural infrastructure that sustains alternative visibility. Through the multimodal orchestration of moral emotions, audiences are guided beyond mere disagreement to reject the cringe, affirm shared moral superiority, and bond through normalized ridicule at a critical electoral moment.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how cringe communication operates as a political tool in Hungary's 2024 campaign environment. The findings show a consistent emotional choreography: exaggerated displays of discomfort may guide audiences toward shared embarrassment, whereas verbal and visual mockery turns discomfort into laughter and moral judgement. Targets are systematically positioned as incompetent, hypocritical, and culturally alien to voters. The videos' structure consistently culminates in explicit campaign messaging, transforming entertainment into political experience (see comprehensive summary table in Appendix B).

Cringe is therefore not simply entertainment. In Trombi's roast videos, it turns awkwardness and failed self-presentation into a hierarchy of worth that moralizes difference: the audience is invited to judge the target as ridiculous, morally inferior, and politically untrustworthy. In hybrid media politics, cringe thus functions less as comic relief and more as an emotional mechanism of persuasion and polarization.

The study is limited by its small-N corpus of seven videos, single-country and single-campaign focus, and the absence of audience-level data on how audiences actually receive, interpret, or internalize these messages. Its aim is, therefore, not generalization, but concept-building. The article develops an empirically grounded framework for identifying the emotional mechanisms of cringe communication, which future research can expand through cross-national comparison and audience studies.

By exposing how ridicule and humor organize emotion, hierarchy, and legitimacy, the analysis also points to deeper questions of democratic discourse, including the tension between the liberal commitment to free expression and the democratic need for civility and fair competition.

On one hand, humor can *democratize communication*: by lowering entry barriers, it energizes participation and draws attention to otherwise neglected issues. Shared laughter builds community and offers emotional relief, signaling common norms and easing social tension (Coronel et al., 2021; Fraley & Aron, 2004). Research on marginalized groups likewise highlights humor's defensive and identity-rebuilding potential, which includes Venezuelan migrants using satire to resist stigmatization (Pérez & Freier, 2022). From this perspective, ridicule can empower and provide coping strategies for those excluded by social hierarchies. Likewise, humor's resistant capacity appears in diverse contexts. Iranian cartoonists use dissonant imagery to turn discomfort into subtle defiance (Göpfert, 2024), whereas Hungary's Two-Tailed Dog Party (MKKP) employs absurdist satire to expose populist fear-mongering and rehumanize political debate within a hybrid regime (Hyttinen, 2024).

On the other hand, insult-based laughter can serve as a disguised *instrument of repression*. Ridicule legitimizes the public devaluation of opponents and narrows the space for dissent, especially when wielded by actors close to power (Beck & Spencer, 2025, p. 9). Studies of meme cultures have demonstrated how “hatred wrapped in humor” desensitizes audiences and stigmatizes critics as humorless, thereby normalizing exclusionary cues (Kuipers, 2011). Cringe humor thus acts as a form of soft control: it grants creators authority to define what counts as absurd or deviant, shaping opinion through affective conditioning rather than reasoned argument. In this setting, carnivalesque inversion does not necessarily challenge power: it can also serve those already close to it. Moreover, cringe communication raises *dilemmas around freedom of expression and hate speech*. As Zinigrad (2025) argues, humorous speech has an amplification effect: its entertainment value facilitates the diffusion of messages and disarms critical resistance, thereby normalizing the attitudes it conveys. What courts often treat as “just a joke” or “cavalier humor beliefs” can, in fact, shape social norms and shift the boundaries of acceptable speech (Hodson & MacInnis, 2016). Disparaging humor provides a “social license” for prejudice (Ferguson & Ford, 2008; Hodson et al., 2010), allowing dehumanizing content to circulate without moral cost. Cognitively, humor simplifies complexity and suspends empathy, granting moral exemption from compassion (Hodson & MacInnis, 2016). The logic of hybrid media systems, driven by virality and emotion, rewards the most humiliating expressions and undermines deliberation. Regulators thus face a persistent dilemma: unrestrained ridicule upholds free expression and pluralism, yet—as Zinigrad (2025) notes—it can corrode the mutual respect that sustains democratic contestation, whereas oversight risks chilling satire. Similarly, cringe humor also raises challenges for *fair competition*. In populist and electoral-authoritarian regimes (Benedek, 2025), partisan satire can act as an “organic” third-party campaign, bypassing spending limits and disclosure rules. With new restrictions on paid political advertising in the EU, such tactics may gain greater influence.

Accountability further complicates the picture. Cringe communicators rely on plausible deniability. This “clown-nose on/clown-nose off” strategy allows them to shift between joking and serious registers, repackaging political hostility as popular entertainment. Across Europe and the Americas, far-right actors increasingly weaponize irony and *edgeling* to push boundaries, normalize exclusion, and deflect accountability (Göpfert & N’Guessan, 2025). The result is a communicative gray zone where serious smears masquerade as jokes, eroding truth norms while shielding perpetrators behind irony.

In sum, the central democratic tension lies between humor’s protected space for transgression and the need for responsible speech. Attempts to regulate or “call out” cringe content collide with liberal commitments to free expression, whereas

neglecting its harmful effects undermines deliberative integrity. As Pérez and Freier (2022) argue, scholars and practitioners should better monitor humor as a real-time delegitimization strategy while exploring how its integrative and critical potential can be reclaimed for democratic ends. Future research should examine how different audiences interpret political humor, whether routinized ridicule fosters cynicism or can coexist with institutional trust, and which safeguards can mitigate harms without chilling satire. Possible countermeasures, such as satire literacy or greater transparency about coordination and funding, remain under-studied but essential. However, recognizing the ambivalent nature of cringe communication is crucial: humor is not peripheral to politics but constitutive of how belonging, legitimacy, and hierarchy are negotiated in the hybrid media age, where “jokes” carry serious weight. The practical task is not to banish humor from politics but to understand its complexity and how it governs.

FUNDING

This paper was funded by MORES (Moral Emotions in Politics. How they Divide, how they Unite) which received funding from the European Union under grant agreement No 101132601. However, views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them. István Benedek’s work is supported by the EKÖP-25 and EKÖP-26 University Excellence Scholarship Program (ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary) of the Ministry for Culture and Innovation from the Source of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund.

This article is based upon work from COST Action OPINION CA21129, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

REFERENCES

- Bajomi-Lázár, P. (2013). The party colonisation of the media: The case of Hungary. *East European Politics and Societies*, 27(1), 69–89.
- Baranyai, A., Gyulai, A., & Papp, Z. (2025). Hungary: Political developments and data in 2024. *European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbook*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/2047-8852.70011>
- Beck, D., & Spencer, A. (2025). (Un)funny against all odds: The changing landscape of humor in politics. *Alternatives*, 50(1), 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03043754241290911>
- Bell, M. (2013). *Hard feelings: The moral psychology of contempt*. Oxford University Press.

- Benedek, I. (2024). Transforming the political public sphere: the media system of the Orbán regime in Hungary. *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 17(2), 469–489.
- Benedek, I. (2025). Populist autocratization and populist electoral autocracies: Towards a unified conceptual framework. *Comparative European Politics*, 23, 331–352. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-024-00401-8>
- Benedek, I. (2026). Polarizing transition? Opposition strategies and the rise of Péter Magyar and the Respect and Freedom Party (TISZA) in Hungary. *Comparative European Politics*, 24, Article 24. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-026-00460-z>
- Bitterly, T. B. (2022). Humor and power. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43, 125–128.
- Brassett, J., & Browning, C. S. (2025). Lettuce Rejoice in the Downfall of Liz Truss? Humor, Ontological (In) Security and the Politics of Ridicule. *Alternatives*, 50(1), 129–150. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03043754241293619>
- Carroll, N. (2014). *Humor: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Coronel, J. C., O'Donnell, M. B., Pandey, P., Delli Carpini, M. X., & Falk, E. B. (2021). Political Humor, Sharing, and Remembering: Insights from Neuroimaging. *Journal of Communication*, 71(1), 129–161. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqaa041>
- Crozier, W. R. (1998). The psychology of embarrassment. *Cognition & Emotion*, 12(5), 715–721.
- Deonna, J. A., Rodogno, R., & Teroni, F. (2012). *In defense of shame: The faces of an emotion*. Oxford University Press.
- Douglas, M. (1975). Jokes. In *Implicit meanings: Essays in anthropology* (pp. 90–115). Routledge.
- Edelmann, R. J. (1981). Embarrassment: The state of research. *Current Psychological Reviews*, 1(2), 125–137.
- Escoe, B., Martin, N. S., & Salerno, A. (2025). That's So Cringeworthy! Understanding What Cringe Is and Why We Want to Share It. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 62(4), 664–683. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00222437241305104>
- Ferguson, M. A., & Ford, T. E. (2008). *Disparagement humor: A theoretical and empirical review of psychoanalytic, superiority, and social identity theories*. *HUMOR*, 21(3), 283–312. <https://doi.org/10.1515/HUMOR.2008.014>
- Fischer, A. H., & Roseman, I. J. (2007). Beat them or ban them: The characteristics and social functions of anger and contempt. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 93(1), 103–115. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.93.1.103>
- Fischer, T. S., Kolo, C., & Mothes, C. (2022). Political influencers on YouTube: Business strategies and content characteristics. *Media and Communication*, 10(1), 259–271. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i1.4767>
- Fraley, B., & Aron, A. (2004). The effect of a shared humorous experience on closeness in initial encounters. *Personal Relationships*, 11(1), 61–78. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2004.00071.x>
- Fussi, A., & Rodogno, R. (Eds.). (2023). *The moral psychology of shame*. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.
- Gibson, R., Bon, E., Darius, P., & Smyth, P. (2023). Are Online Political Influencers Accelerating Democratic Deconsolidation? *Media and Communication*, 11(3), 175–186.
- Gilbert, P. (1998). What is shame? Some core issues and controversies. In P. Gilbert & B. Andrews (Eds.), *Shame: Interpersonal behavior, psychopathology, and culture* (pp. 3–38). Oxford University Press.
- Gottlieb, P. (2013). Aristotle's ethics. In R. Crisp (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the history of ethics* (pp. 44–72). Oxford University Press.

- Göpfert, M. (2024). Dissonance: Cartooning in Iran, Humor, and the Study of Things That Don't Match. *Cultural Anthropology*, 39(4), 645–666. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca39.4.07>
- Göpfert, M., & N'Guessan, K. (2025, April 29). How the far right uses humor and meme culture to its advantage. *Development and Cooperation*. <https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/when-hatred-wrapped-satire-xenophobia-irony-and-fascism-jokes-it-leaves-mainstream-society>
- Hacker, P. (2017). Shame, embarrassment, and guilt. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 41(1), 202–224. <https://doi.org/10.1111/misp.12073>
- Harris, C. R. (2006). Embarrassment: A form of social pain: This enigmatic emotion likely evolved to smooth social interactions, but it can have less desirable consequences in the modern world. *American scientist*, 94(6), 524–533.
- Hodson, G., & MacInnis, C. C. (2016). Derogating humor as a delegitimization strategy in intergroup contexts. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, 2(1), 63–74. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tps0000052>
- Hodson, G., Rush, J., & MacInnis, C. C. (2010). A joke is just a joke (except when it isn't): Cavalier humor beliefs facilitate the expression of group dominance motives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 99(4), 660–682. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019627>
- Horváth, K., Polyák, G., & Urbán, Á. (2025). Outsourced Political Campaign: Role of Pro-Government Political Influencers in Spreading Hostile Narratives in Hungary. *Media and Communication*, 13, Article 10671, <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10671>
- Hye-Knudsen, M. (2018). Painfully funny: Cringe comedy, benign masochism, and not-so-benign violations. *Leviathan: Interdisciplinary Journal in English*, 2, 13–31.
- Hyttinen, A. (2024). Possibilities and limits of political humor in a hybrid regime: A visual ethnographic study of the Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party. *The European Journal of Humor Research*, 12(1), 171–193. <https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR.2024.12.1.849>
- Iché, V., & Schneebeil, C. (2026). Introduction: Charting the territory of twenty-first-century cringe humor. In V. Iché, C. Schneebeil, & L. Blin (Eds.), *Cringe humor on screen and in digital media: Pragmatic perspectives* (pp. 1–31). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-93002-7_1
- Juhász, V. (2025). Influenster politikuskok és politikai influenszererek: A Megafon negatív kampányának argumentatív vizsgálata a közösségi médiában [Influencer Politicians and Political Influencers: An Argumentative Analysis of Megafon's Negative Campaigning on Social Media]. *Politikatudományi szemle*, 34(1), 7–30. <https://doi.org/10.30718/POLTUD.HU.2025.1.7>
- Keltner, D., & Buswell, B. N. (1997). Embarrassment: its distinct form and appeasement functions. *Psychological bulletin*, 122(3), 250.
- Klinger, U., Kreiss, D., & Mutsvairo, B. (2023). *Platforms, power, and politics: An introduction to political communication in the digital age*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Kolnai, A. (2003). *On disgust*. Open Court Publishing.
- Krach, S., Cohrs, J. C., de Echeverría Loebell, N. C., Kircher, T., Sommer, J., Jansen, A., & Paulus, F. M. (2011). Your flaws are my pain: Linking empathy to vicarious embarrassment. *PLoS ONE*, 6(4), e18675. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0018675>
- Kuipers, G. (2011). The politics of humor in the public sphere: Cartoons, power and modernity in the first transnational humor scandal. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 14(1), 63–80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549410370072>

- Lintott, S. (2016). Superiority in humor theory. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 74(4), 347–358. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12321>
- Mayer, A., Paulus, F., & Krach, S. (2021). A psychological perspective on vicarious embarrassment and shame in the context of cringe humor. *Humanities*, 10(4), 110. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h10040110>
- McIlwain, D., Evans, J., Caldis, E., Cicchini, F., Aronstan, A., Wright, A., & Taylor, A. (2012). Strange moralities: Vicarious emotion and moral emotions in Machiavellian and psychopathic personality styles. In R. Langdon & C. Mackenzie (Eds.), *Emotions, imagination, and moral reasoning* (pp. 119–148). Psychology Press.
- Middleton, J. (2014). Documentary's awkward turn: Cringe comedy and media spectatorship. Routledge.
- Mikecz, D., & Szabó, A. (2019). Politikai mozgalmak [Political Movements]. In M. Sebők, B. Böcskei (Eds.), *Itt van Amerika. Az amerikai politika hatása Magyarországon [This Is America: The Influence of American Politics in Hungary]*. Budapest: Atheneum. pp. 268–285.
- Morreall, J. (2009). Philosophy and religion. In V. Raskin (Ed.), *The primer of humor research* (pp. 221–243). Mouton de Gruyter.
- Naderer, B. (2023). Influencers as political agents? The potential of an unlikely source to motivate political action. *Communications*, 48(1), 93–111. <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2021-0006>
- Pandey, S. K. (2025). *Media in the Digital Age: Trends, Tools, and Cultural Impact*. Academic Guru Publishing House.
- Papathanassopoulos, S., & Giannouli, I. (2025). Political Communication in the Age of Platforms. *Encyclopedia*, 5(2), 77.
- Pérez, L. M., & Freier, L. F. (2022). My Brother the “Other”: Use of Satire and Boundary-Making by Venezuelan Migrants in Peru. *Social Inclusion*, 10(1), 72–83.
- Plakias, A. (2024). *Awkwardness: A Theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Political Capital (2025a): Pro-government political advertisements are in record heights in Hungary, promoting hostile narratives against the West. *PoliticalCapital.hu* (25 April 2025) https://politicalcapital.hu/news.php?article_read=1&article_id=3364
- Political Capital (2025b): Uncovering, analyzing, debunking and researching sponsored disinfo – project summary. *PoliticalCapital.hu* (28 June 2025) https://politicalcapital.hu/news.php?article_read=1&article_id=3405
- Roost, K. (2025). Cringe, Mockery, and Belonging: Generational Humor Between Gen Z and Millennials on TikTok. Bachelor's thesis, Tilburg University. <https://arno.uvt.nl/show.cgi?fid=186939>.
- Scheff, T. J., & Scheele, S. C. (1982). *Humor and catharsis: The effect of comedy on audiences*. In P. H. Tannenbaum (Ed.), *The entertainment functions of television* (pp. 165–182). Psychology Press.
- Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative content analysis in practice*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529682571>
- Schwanebeck, W. (2021). Introduction to painful laughter: Media and politics in the age of cringe. *Humanities*, 10(4), 123. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h10040123>
- Seebold, M. (2025). From Embarrassment to Prejudice: Online “Cringe Culture” as an Affective and Social Phenomenon. *Sociology Summer Fellows*, 7. https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/soc_sum/7/.
- Smilges, J. L. (2024). Cringe theory. *Lateral*, 13(1).

- Spiegel, T. J. (2025). Cringe. *Social Epistemology*, 39(3), 229–240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2023.2268588>
- Stepińska, A., Szabó, G., & Adamczewska, K. (2024). Changes in journalism in politicized media systems: A study on newspapers in Poland and Hungary. *Journalism Practice*, 18(9), 2433–2453.
- Stocks, E. L., Lishner, D. A., Waits, B. L., & Downum, E. M. (2011). I'm embarrassed for you: The effect of valuing and perspective-taking on empathic embarrassment and empathic concern. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 41(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2010.00699.x>
- Swartz, D. (2024). *Culture & power: the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. University of Chicago Press.
- Szabó, G. (2024). *Managing Moral Emotions in Divided Politics: Lessons from Hungary's 2022 General Election Campaigns*. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.
- Verma, T. (2021). Cultural cringe: how caste and class affect the idea of culture in social media. *Feminist Media Studies*, 21(1), 159–161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1864879>
- Wegner, G. (2021). “Kill the puppies!”: Cringe comedy and disability humor in the live performances of Laurence Clark. *Humanities*, 10(3), 105. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h10030105>
- Wöhrle, P. (2021). Two shades of cringe: Problems in attributing painful laughter. *Humanities*, 10(3), 99.
- Yılmaz, B. A., & Topsümer, F. (2023). Political communication in the new media environment: The impact of digital transformation on political processes. In: F. Topsümer, Y. Durmuş, & B. A. Yılmaz (Eds.), *Media and communication in the digital age: Changes and dynamics* (pp. 1–14). Özgür Publications. <https://doi.org/10.58830/ozgur.pub234>
- Zahavi, D. (2020). Shame. In T. Szanto & H. Landweer (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of phenomenology of emotion* (pp. 349–357). Routledge.
- Zinigrad, R. (2025). Laughing Matters in Courts: Humor's Role in Normalizing Hate Speech. *Alternatives*, 50(1), 33–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03043754241244891>

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Summary of sources

Date	ID	Views	Title	Source
2024-04-13	1	64137	<i>Why is Róbert Puzsér the most irritating leftist CELEB?</i>	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wXHZQV_GYic
2024-04-19	2	99208	<i>Why is János Bródy LYING?</i>	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpTKo45-iBI
2024-05-10	3	51303	<i>Is this man NORMAL?</i>	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sd6wHz-Ks08
2024-05-12	4	42737	<i>Are these influencers getting money from America?</i>	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnLGk81rkpo
2024-05-14	5	222933	<i>You asked for it, I'll show you who Friderikusz sleeps with!</i>	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HQdF2iMvzro
2024-06-03	6	42825	<i>Let's watch the craziest liberal TikToks together! WHO VOTES for these people?</i>	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2e-4hiMMugc
2024-06-08	7	22978	<i>This is what Karácsony has done to Budapest!</i>	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsVDf-_bBKw

Appendix B. Summary of the Analysis of Trombi Roast Videos

ID	Target / Cluster	Positioning Labels	Hierarchical Positioning (Competence–Morality)	Identity Markers & Personal Ridicule	Emotional Strategies (Devices & Cues)	Political Functions
1	Róbert Puzsér, public intellectual	Pseudo-intellectual, opportunistic, fake	Low–Low: irrelevant yet harmful amplifier	Linked to every left-wing party; shallow celebrity; fake independence	Vicarious embarrassment (host grimaces), contempt, sarcasm, overconfidence mockery; exposure of fake independence	Discredit cultural critics; sever symbolic ties to opposition politics
2	János Bródy, musician	Part of communist elite; legacy re-read as partisan	Low competence / suspect morality; outdated yet influential; misleading moral authority	“Red beat musician,” “worn-out rock-daddy”; ageist tropes (“codger pensioner,” “mummy”)	Contempt via belittling comparisons, amusement via age mockery, VE through awkward dips; explicit second-hand embarrassment	Undermine cultural icons backing opposition; convert legacy into moral disqualification
3	Péter Magyar, leader of an opposition party	“Newcomer messiah”; clown frame; theatrical “left-wing circus”	Clownish yet threatening; deceit and volatility emphasized	Vanity/filters (“virtual Botox”); masculinity questioned; DV allegations	Formalized cringe tier list; VE (“can’t watch this”); clown frame; contempt (epithets), amusement (repetition)	Neutralize surge; sow doubt; polarize audiences via paradox insults
4	Hungarian influencer cluster	“Belpest sect,” “dollar media” mouthpieces; foreign-backed opposition milieu	Low–Low; culturally alien; metaphors of contagion	Pride activism, make- up, celebrity lifestyle; derivative performers	Contempt (slurs), VE (performative activism), amusement (trend mockery), visual irony; foreign-influence cues	Tie youth culture to foreign manipulation; deter influencer activism
5	Sándor Friderikusz, journalist	Elite networker; “Gyurcsány-loving Kádár-fan”	Low–Low; cultural gatekeeper promoting deceptive values	“Ham actor,” undeserving legend; dependency on political patrons and sexualized Gyurcsány framing	Contempt and vicarious embarrassment; emojis and laughter cues; sexualized framing	Delegitimize liberal media; discredit elite networks
6	Progressive MEPs	“Libtards” aligned with Brussels / gender lobby / globalism	Low competence; morally dangerous (migration/gender/war)	“Sad faces,” “intellectual swamp”; cultural alienation	Contempt (labels), amusement (absurd analogies), VE (awkward stunts), editing cues; bodily recoil	Pre-EP election delegitimation; link EU progressives to domestic opposition
7	Gergely Karácsony, Mayor of Budapest	Personification of “Gyurcsányism”; elitist, out of touch	Low competence; suspect morality; elitist detachment	“Sociologist lost in theory”; submissive metaphors (“rescue dog”); sexualized subordination to Gyurcsány	Vicarious embarrassment, sarcasm, analogies (Snoop/ Madonna), contempt indicators; sexualized framing	Undercut mayoral credibility; reinforce Fidesz campaign frames

Note: VE = vicarious embarrassment; DV = domestic violence

Cringe as a Public Evaluative Affect: Negotiating Authority–Public Relationships in the Platform Society

Snežana Bajčeta

 0009-0006-6876-0825

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Science

Aleksandra Krstić

 0000-0003-0090-9911

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Science

Abstract: This article examines how cringe operates as a low-intensity public evaluative affect through which political authority is publicly negotiated within the platform society. Drawing on affect theory, platform society theory, and a topological understanding of political power, it conceptualises cringe as a collectively organised affect through which authority–public relationships become publicly recognised and evaluated. Empirically, the article analyses platform communication surrounding the Serbian student protest movement between December 2024 and December 2025 through an interpretive qualitative analysis of content on Instagram and X. The analysis focuses on three performative episodes – Ćacilend, Barricades, and Blockades – that reveal a dominant authority–public relationship, its public contestation, and an alternative configuration grounded in collective participation. The findings show that cringe registers moments of topological misalignment in which dominant authority–public relationships lose cultural credibility while alternative configurations of authority–public relationships become publicly recognisable.

Keywords: cringe; public affect; platform society; authority–public relationships; Serbian student protests

INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2024, Serbia was shaken by the collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad railway station, which resulted in the deaths of sixteen people (Vasović, 2024; BBC, 2025). Rather than addressing citizens' demands for a transparent investigation and political accountability, the government responded repressively

(Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade, 2024). This triggered a large wave of student-led protests, including faculty blockades across all public and most private universities, the suspension of classes, and the cancellation of exam periods (Radovanović, 2025). As the mobilisation expanded, it increasingly extended beyond universities through local initiatives, citizens' assemblies (zborovi), and other forms of collective self-organisation (Cvejić, 2025). Alongside street protests and confrontations, political contestation also intensified on platforms, where students and citizens continuously documented, interpreted, circulated, evaluated, and challenged political authority (Janković, 2025). In this context, the protests unfolded within the platform society, where platforms are no longer merely communication technologies but part of the social infrastructure through which political life is organized (Van Dijck et al., 2018).

At the same time, the protests unfolded within a broader context of competitive authoritarianism, characterized by the systematic weakening of public accountability mechanisms in Serbia over the past decade (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Bieber, 2018; Lončar & Spasojević, 2024). The weakening of opposition parties, independent media, civil society, and academia has been accompanied by the parallel construction of regime-aligned substitutes, including tabloid media, government-organised NGOs and low-quality private universities, producing a simulation of political pluralism without meaningful contestation (Freedom House, 2024). In such an environment, politics is experienced less as a space of deliberation and more as a field of public performances to be watched, evaluated, and circulated. As Krstić (2022) observes, Vučić's Instagram profile is „an intimate self-portrait of a powerful statesman and a compassionate leader loved by the people” (p. 27).

The student protest framed itself as non-ideological and anti-partisan, yet in practice articulated an ambivalent value position, revealing a hybrid political orientation shaped more by pragmatic coalition-building than by ideological coherence (Jerkov et al., 2025).

The overall political constellation in Serbia has been described as „anti-political”, marked by deep distrust in institutions, the interplay between populism and technocratic depoliticization, and the erosion of political reasoning (Spasojević, 2024). In a setting where politics has been emptied of meaning, whether in the name of „anti-elitism” or „expertise”, emotions are no longer politically peripheral. They become constitutive of how politics is experienced, publicly evaluated, and ultimately negotiated, functioning as central drivers of political judgment and action in a sharply divided society (Cvetkovich, 2012; Ahmed, 2004, 2014; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Jović, 2019; Marcus et al., 2020).

This growing importance of affect in contemporary politics has attracted significant scholarly attention over the past two decades, particularly in the context of rising populism, democratic backsliding, and new digital technologies

(Demertzis, 2006; Ahmed, 2004, 2010, 2014; Serrano-Puche, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019; Chen et al., 2025). The affective turn has reconceptualized emotions and affects as constitutive of social and political life (Clough & Halley, 2007; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Cvetkovich, 2012; Demertzis, 2013; Nussbaum, 2013; Ahmed, 2014). Within this broader discussion, growing attention has also been devoted to low-intensity affects and, more recently, to cringe across popular culture, digital communication, and everyday mediated practices (Ngai, 2005; Duncan, 2017; Schwanebeck, 2021). Despite this growing body of scholarship, the analytical potential of affects and cringe for understanding how political authority is publicly evaluated and negotiated remains largely unexplored.

To address this gap, the article develops an integrated conceptual framework organized around three interconnected dimensions. First, it conceptualizes cringe as a low-intensity public affect, establishing its political relevance beyond individual psychological experience. Second, it examines how cringe becomes collective within the platform society by explaining how platform infrastructures, networked publics, and platform affordances transform individual affective responses into shared forms of public evaluation that contribute to the negotiation of political authority. Third, it examines what cringe registers by conceptualizing the performative and spatial organization of the relationship between authority and publics through a topological understanding of political space. Together, these three dimensions provide the theoretical foundation for the empirical analysis that follows.

Building on this framework, the article examines how cringe operates in the public negotiation of political authority within the empirical setting of the Serbian student protest movement. The central research question is: How does cringe operate in the public negotiation of political authority in the platform society? The article positions cringe as an analytical lens for examining how authority–public relationships are publicly evaluated under conditions of platform communication and how the circulation of these evaluations contributes to the public negotiation of political authority.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Placing affective evaluation at the center of the analysis of cringe, this article conceptualizes cringe as a public evaluative affect, explains how it becomes collectively organized through circulation in the platform society, and conceptualizes authority–public relationships as the object of those evaluations.

CRINGE AS A PUBLIC AFFECT

The affective turn has fundamentally reshaped understandings of political life by challenging the traditional liberal assumption that emotions are irrational, private, and therefore politically irrelevant. Instead, it foregrounds affects as constitutive of political identities, collective life, and political boundaries, positioning them as fundamental to political life (Clough & Halley, 2007; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Cvetkovich, 2012; Demertzis, 2013; Nussbaum, 2013; Ahmed, 2014).

According to Ahmed (2014), affects do not reside within subjects or objects but circulate between them, shaping social and political relationships. They „stick” to bodies, signs, and words, creating „affective economies” that organize belonging and exclusion and, politically, alignments and divisions. As performative forces, „emotions are not ‚in’ either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 10). Affects do not simply express existing political divisions, but actively participate in their production by aligning subjects, delineating communities, strengthening distinctions between „us” and „them”, and shaping relationships between political authority and publics.

Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen (2000) argue that emotions are central motivators of political decision-making and action rather than merely secondary to rational choice. While political psychology has traditionally focused on high-intensity emotions such as fear, anger, or hope because of their mobilizing effects, critical affect theory has drawn attention to a different affective register. Ngai’s (2005) concept of „ugly feelings” captures low-intensity, non-cathartic affects, such as envy, anxiety, or „stuplimity”, that do not culminate in decisive action but instead sustain ambivalence, tension, and unresolved engagement. These low-intensity affects illuminate how political relations, legitimacy, and authority become publicly experienced and evaluated in everyday life.

In everyday usage, cringe refers to a feeling of awkwardness or second-hand embarrassment experienced either directly or through identification with others. As Dahl (2018) explains, cringe typically arises from a perceived misalignment between self-presentation and shared social norms, often when an individual appears to overestimate their credibility, authenticity, or authority. It is experienced as an acute moment of awkward self-recognition. Cringe is characterized less by emotional intensity than by sustained discomfort and the perception that a person, performance, or claim to authority has failed to meet culturally shared expectations.

Psychologically, cringe has primarily been explained through mechanisms of embarrassment or empathy. It has been linked to the „spotlight effect”, or the tendency to overestimate how much others notice one’s behavior (Gilovich et al., 2000), as well as to „vicarious embarrassment”, an empathic response elicited by witnessing another person’s socially inappropriate behavior (Krach et al.,

2011). These perspectives explain how cringe is experienced as an individual affective response, but offer a more limited account of how it becomes publicly shared, collectively sustained, and politically meaningful.

Building on Ahmed's relational understanding of affect, this article approaches cringe not simply as something that is felt, but as a circulating public evaluative affect. Psychological accounts explain the individual experience of cringe, while critical affect theory situates it within the broader spectrum of low-intensity affects. From this perspective, individual affective evaluations become collectively organized through circulation. In this article, cringe is conceptualized as a low-intensity public evaluative affect through which individual affective evaluations become collectively organized and politically meaningful.

PLATFORM SOCIETY AND THE CIRCULATION OF CRINGE

If cringe is conceptualized as a circulating public evaluative affect, the next question concerns the conditions under which such evaluations become collective. Rather than treating digital communication as a separate sphere, this article situates the circulation of cringe within the broader framework of the platform society (Van Dijck et al., 2018). In the platform society, platforms no longer merely facilitate communication but have become part of the social infrastructure through which political, cultural, and everyday life are organized. Social and political relations increasingly unfold through platforms, while platform logics simultaneously shape how they are produced, circulated, and publicly recognized. Consequently, political performances do not simply acquire digital representations after they occur. They are increasingly constituted through the continuous circulation between offline political action and platform mechanisms.

Within this environment, networked publics actively produce, circulate, and evaluate political meanings through continuous interaction (Ito, 2008; Varnelis, 2008). Yet these interactions are not organized independently of platform infrastructures. Platform affordances – including persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability – allow political performances to be archived, reproduced, amplified, and repeatedly reinserted into new communicative contexts (boyd, 2010). Platforms further privilege short, visual, and easily reproducible formats such as memes, screenshots, edited clips, and looping fragments, thereby facilitating the extraction of particular moments from broader political performances and their recombination into highly shareable communicative units (Highfield, 2016; Milner, 2016; Gillespie, 2014; Bucher, 2018).

As political performances circulate in platform society, they become detached from their immediate contexts and stabilized as recognizable objects of public evaluation. Individual gestures, images, encounters, and performances are repeatedly encountered, reinterpreted, parodied, visually compressed, and

recontextualized, allowing evaluative patterns to emerge across different communicative situations. In Ahmed's (2014) terms, cringe becomes collective not because individuals experience identical emotions simultaneously, but because repeated circulation enables affective evaluations to accumulate, resonate, and become publicly recognizable. Circulation across platforms does not simply amplify individual emotional responses but constitutes the process through which affective evaluations become collectively organized.

This dynamic is particularly pronounced among digitally socialized actors, whose political perception is shaped less by stable ideological attachments than by culturally embedded evaluative repertoires developed through everyday platform practices (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011; Papacharissi, 2015; boyd, 2014; Loader et al., 2014). Political authority is increasingly encountered through communicative performances, visual styles, and symbolic self-presentation, making evaluations of authenticity, appropriateness, and cultural adequacy especially salient (Ngai, 2005; Milner, 2016).

Finally, the circulation of cringe is reinforced by broader anti-political conditions in which political language increasingly appears hollow or performative, while formal channels of deliberation lose credibility (Rosanvallon, 2008; Spasojević, 2024). Political judgment shifts from ideological programs towards questions of authenticity, legitimacy, and cultural adequacy (Moffitt, 2016; Cossarini & Vallespín, 2019). This tendency is further intensified by the interplay between populist performativity and technocratic depoliticization, which saturate the public sphere with visibility while simultaneously eroding deliberative political discussion (Bickerton & Accetti, 2021). Under these conditions, platform circulation organizes not only the visibility of political performances but also their collective affective evaluation, directing public attention towards the ways political authority appears, positions itself, and relates to publics.

Taken together, these conditions explain how cringe moves beyond an individual emotional response to become a collectively organized public evaluative affect. The platform society provides the social and infrastructural conditions through which political performances circulate. Platform affordances shape the forms through which they are fragmented, repeated, and recontextualized. Repeated circulation enables individual affective evaluations to become collectively recognizable. Anti-political conditions orient those evaluations towards the authenticity and legitimacy of authority–public relationships rather than ideological disagreement. These dynamics provide the conditions under which political authority becomes publicly negotiated through circulating affective evaluations.

AUTHORITY–PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS AS THE OBJECT OF CRINGE

As a low-intensity public evaluative affect, cringe relates to the way political authority appears in public. In addition to its institutional position, political authority is encountered through its public performances that shape how it appears, claims legitimacy, and relates to publics. Although cringe is elicited by these performances, understanding what it evaluates requires moving beyond the performances themselves to the relational and spatial organization they enact.

The performance of political authority is never independent of space (Wihstutz, 2015). Political space is more than physical territory or merely the setting for political performances. It refers to the organization of political relations: how authority is positioned in relation to publics, how proximity and distance are established, and how patterns of belonging and exclusion become publicly visible. Space constitutes one of the conditions through which authority–public relationships become publicly organized by defining where authority appears to be „in place” or „out of place”.

With regard to space, authority–public relationships are primarily organized through political boundaries. Instead of fixed territorial divisions, boundaries are conceptualized as processes that actively produce social and political forms (Abbott, 1995). They determine how authority and publics are positioned in relation to one another, how their relationship becomes publicly legible, and under what conditions it becomes open to collective evaluation. Political boundaries are simultaneously relational and normative. While Abbott’s relational perspective focuses on how these relationships are organized, symbolic boundaries explain why particular forms of organization appear legitimate, appropriate, or culturally convincing. Lamont and Molnár (2002) show that symbolic boundaries organize moral evaluations and distinctions of legitimacy, belonging, and appropriateness by relying on culturally available criteria rather than formal institutional rules. As they note, boundaries draw upon existing cultural resources and social contexts that shape who encounters whom and under what conditions. In addition to their organization, authority–public relationships are evaluated according to whether they correspond to culturally shared expectations of legitimacy and appropriateness.

In contemporary politics, performative, spatial, relational, and normative dimensions rarely operate independently. Together, they configure particular authority–public relationships. A topological perspective brings these dimensions together by conceptualizing them as a single configuration of these relations. Originally developed in mathematics, topology has been adopted in the social sciences to move beyond territorial understandings of political space by conceptualizing power through configurations of relations, circulations, and forms of presence operating simultaneously across multiple sites (Lury, Parisi, & Terranova, 2012; Massey, 2005; Jessop, Brenner & Jones, 2008; Allen, 2016).

Allen (2016) emphasizes that political power frequently operates through carefully staged relations of presence and reach rather than direct territorial control, while Massey (2005) understands space as relational and processual, continuously produced through interactions.

Within this perspective, cringe is conceptualized as an affective indicator of topological misalignment. It does not evaluate political content as such, but whether a particular configuration holds culturally. Political performances become the immediate occasions for affective evaluation because they render configurations of authority–public relationships publicly visible. Cringe emerges when these configurations are perceived as excessive, artificial, outdated, or discordant with shared expectations of legitimacy and appropriateness. Political authority may remain institutionally intact while the configuration through which it relates to publics no longer appears culturally convincing or politically intelligible. Cringe registers moments in which relationships between authority and public no longer appear to be „in place”.

Finally, cringe neither produces nor redraws political boundaries. However, it signals moments when those boundaries become publicly visible because they no longer hold smoothly. As a low-intensity public affect, it neither determines political mobilization. Instead, it collectively evaluates configurations of authority–public relationships through the performances in which they become public. Through circulation across platforms, these evaluations become collectively recognized and contribute to the public negotiation of political authority. The following analysis applies this perspective to three performative episodes through which different configurations became objects of collective affective evaluation.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative research design to examine how cringe operates in the public negotiation of political authority within platform society. The theoretical framework is operationalized through an integrated analytical framework linking public affect, platform circulation, and topological configurations of authority–public relationships. These three dimensions perform different methodological functions: the first two guided the selection of empirical material, while the third informed its interpretation.

The empirical material is drawn from platform communication surrounding the Serbian student protest movement following the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy in November 2024. The analysis covers Instagram and X between December 2024 and December 2025, which served as the principal public communication platforms of the protest movement. Throughout this period, communication surrounding the protests was continuously monitored. Given the

dynamic character of protest communication, the monitoring remained responsive to the evolving communication environment, including newly emerging accounts, informal initiatives, and other digitally native forms of mobilization. At any given time, around 100 student and local plenum accounts per platform were active and prominent within the monitored communication, although the composition of this group changed over the research period.

Continuous monitoring was not intended to produce an exhaustive corpus of all published content. The broader monitored material cannot be expressed as a fixed number of posts. It constituted a dynamic field of observation from which the analytical material was purposively selected. Selection was guided by the first two dimensions of the conceptual framework: public affect provided the substantive criterion, while platform circulation provided the criterion of sustained relevance.

The first selection criterion concerned moments in which political performances became the object of intensified public evaluation associated with cringe. The analysis identified recurrent evaluative repertoires through which performances were publicly interpreted as awkward, embarrassing, artificial, inauthentic, culturally inappropriate, or “out of place”. These evaluations were treated as affective indicators of perceived misalignment, signaling moments in which the configurations of authority–public relationships rendered visible through political performances no longer appeared to hold culturally. The second selection criterion concerned the sustained circulation of these evaluations through repetition, visual reinterpretation, parody, memes, recontextualization, and other forms of platform engagement. Applying these complementary criteria resulted in the selection of three performative episodes for analysis: *Ćacilend*, *Barricades*, and *Blockades*.

The individual social media post constituted the primary unit of observation. Posts were understood as content pieces through which political authority was publicly represented and evaluated. They were examined as components of performative episodes, which constituted the analytical units of the study. For each episode, the corpus was assembled through the purposive selection of posts documenting, circulating, interpreting, and publicly evaluating the respective political performances. Sporadic or isolated evaluations without sustained circulation, as well as posts unrelated to the selected episodes, were excluded from the analytical corpus.

The analysis proceeded in two stages. The first consisted of the analytical description of each performative episode. Description focused on four inter-related dimensions of authority–public relationships: the performative, examining how political authority was publicly enacted through communicative repertoires and symbolic practices; the spatial, examining the organisation of space, boundaries, and visibility; the relational, examining how relationships

between authority and publics were organised through patterns of positioning, proximity, and distance; and the normative, examining claims to legitimacy and appropriateness.

The second stage interpreted the interaction of these dimensions as specific topological configurations of authority–public relationships. Their combined interpretation made it possible to identify how political authority was publicly organized within each episode. These configurations were then interpreted in relation to the collective affective evaluations through which they became publicly legible, allowing the analysis to explain how cringe registered moments of topological misalignment.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: THREE PERFORMATIVE EPISODES

The empirical findings are structured around three performative episodes identified through the analytical corpus: Ćacilend, Barricades, and Blockades. They illustrate different ways in which authority–public relationships became publicly enacted, collectively evaluated, and circulated across platforms during the Serbian student protests.

ĆACILEND

Ćacilend emerged following the outbreak of student protests and university blockades across Serbia, when a state-supported counter-movement, „Students 2.0”, began advocating a „return to classes”. It quickly became associated with the ironic nickname Ćaci, derived from the misspelled Cyrillic slogan „Ђаци у школе” instead of „Ђаци у школе” („Students back to school”), which rapidly circulated online as a symbol of regime loyalism. When members of the movement established a tent camp opposite the Presidency building in Belgrade, officially presented as a gathering of the „students who want to learn”, the site itself became widely known as Ćacilend (hereafter referred to as Ćaciland in English). It remained in place for several months and was later reproduced around the ruling party’s premises in several Serbian cities, becoming one of the defining performative episodes of the protest period.

The episode was organized around the public construction of the identity of the „students who want to learn,” reinforced through repeated displays of loyalty, national symbols, appearances by political leaders, and continuous media coverage. Spatially, the encampment combined tents, fencing, controlled access, police protection, national flags, and the occupation of a highly symbolic public location. Relationally, it enacted proximity between governing authorities and „the people” while simultaneously maintaining separation from protesters and

broadier publics through security and regulated access. Normatively, it presented loyalty, stability, patriotism, and support for institutional continuity as appropriate expressions of political legitimacy.

BARRICADES

Barricades refer to a performative episode organized around recurring interventions that temporarily interrupted the ordinary circulation of urban life. Initially taking the form of sixteen-minute human barricades commemorating the victims of the Novi Sad railway station collapse, they later evolved into materially obstructive barricades constructed from waste containers. Although differing in material form, both practices transformed streets and intersections into recurring sites of political confrontation, establishing interruption as a recognizable repertoire of collective mobilization.

The episode revolved around the repeated interruption of everyday urban life. The performance of human barricades relied on the collective presence of bodies standing in commemorative silence, while container barricades translated the same logic into a more durable material form by relocating ordinary objects of urban infrastructure into the center of political life. Through these interventions, streets and intersections ceased to function solely as infrastructures of mobility and became temporary spaces of political contestation. In response, governing authorities were repeatedly drawn into direct public encounters through police interventions, municipal responses, and the continual reopening and re-blocking of streets. These recurring interactions displaced relatively stable patterns of authority—public relations with a dynamic structured around interruption and response.

At the same time, the episode challenged the claim that political and urban order could legitimately be restored while responsibility for the Novi Sad tragedy remained unresolved. Accountability was presented as the necessary condition for the resumption of ordinary public life, making the restoration of order itself a publicly contested political question.

BLOCKADES

University blockades emerged in response to violence against students and demands for accountability following the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy. What initially began as the suspension of teaching rapidly developed into a broader practice of collective self-organization. Universities gradually ceased to function solely as educational institutions and became spaces in which political life was organized through plenums, collective decision-making, mutual care,

and the everyday coordination of common activities. As the movement expanded, blockades became one of the defining features of the Serbian student protests.

The episode revolved around practices of collective participation through which political authority was enacted beyond formal state institutions. Plenums structured collective decision-making, everyday routines were distributed through horizontal coordination, and the continuous organization of common life became a central feature of the protests. Universities were simultaneously transformed from educational institutions into politically organized spaces. Classrooms, entrances, and common areas acquired new political significance as sites of deliberation, collective organization, and everyday political practice.

These practices also reshaped the relationship between political authority and publics. Students simultaneously participated in deliberation, implementation, and public representation, reducing the distinction between political authority and publics through continuous collective participation. Participation, accountability, institutional autonomy, and collective responsibility were advanced as the normative foundations of legitimate political authority, challenging the assumption that political organization could emerge only through formal state institutions.

PLATFORMS AND COLLECTIVE EVALUATION

The three performative episodes generated distinct evaluative repertoires. Čacilend-related evaluation centered on artificiality, staged proximity, and performative excess. Barricades became associated with accountability, public order, and legitimacy, while Blockades foregrounded participation, horizontal organization, and collective responsibility. Although these evaluative repertoires differed, they emerged through the same platform infrastructures and communicative mechanisms.

Across all three episodes, political performances appeared in various forms, including memes, edited clips, photographs, short videos, protest announcements, maps, and other highly reproducible visual formats. These recurring representations consistently foregrounded space and political boundaries: fences, controlled access, and tents in Čacilend; human chains, containers, and police cordons during Barricades; red lines and banners announcing blocked buildings, protest marches across the country, and protests identified through their locations, such as Slavija and Autokomanda, during the Blockades. Although the political content differed, the spatial organization of the performances was the significant focus of collective attention.

The findings further demonstrate that platform affordances shaped how these relationships became collectively evaluated. Fragmentation, repetition, and visual

compression, supported by continual circulation, enabled particular authority–public relationships to be repeatedly encountered across different communicative contexts, allowing evaluations to accumulate and stabilize over time. At the same time, offline political performances increasingly displayed features that aligned with platform affordance, through visually recognizable spatial arrangements, symbolic locations, recurring boundary practices, and communicative formats that facilitated repeated recording, circulation, and reinterpretation.

This process unfolded through networked publics. Continuous circulation transformed individual affective responses into shared evaluative repertoires surrounding each authority–public relationship. What became collectively shared was not merely a meme or a viral image but a relatively stable way of interpreting the position of formal political authority: the organizer and protector of Ćacilend, the repeated remover of barricades, and failing to acknowledge university autonomy.

Finally, the evaluative repertoires identified across the three episodes reflected broader anti-political conditions. Collective evaluations consistently focused less on ideological disagreement than on moral values such as authenticity, accountability, participation, proximity, and public order. These evaluative criteria circulated recursively between platforms and political life, shaping subsequent performances and counter-performances while simultaneously informing their public evaluation. Under these conditions, cringe emerged as the low-intensity public evaluative affect through which changing relationships between authority and public became collectively recognized.

TOPOLOGICAL (RE)CONFIGURATIONS OF AUTHORITY–PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS

The three performative episodes reveal distinct configurations of authority–public relationships. In addition to different political content, they differed in the principles through which political authority was organized, legitimized, and related to the publics. A topological perspective makes it possible to interpret these differences as competing configurations of political power rather than as isolated political events.

Ćacilend reproduced the dominant configuration of authority by organizing legitimacy through staged proximity, symbolic identification, and controlled visibility. Although it claimed closeness to „the people”, this relationship depended upon carefully managed boundaries separating governing authorities, supporters, protesters, and broader publics. Collective evaluation increasingly exposed the discrepancy between the claim to popular embeddedness and the

organizational practices through which that claim was sustained, rendering the dominant configuration progressively less culturally convincing.

Barricades destabilized this dominant configuration by transforming political boundaries into objects of contestation. Repeated interruptions made the authority to restore public order itself contingent upon accountability for the Novi Sad tragedy. Political authority no longer appeared as a stable institutional position but as a relationship continuously negotiated through recurring encounters between governing authorities and publics. Collective evaluation shifted from the disruption itself towards the legitimacy of the authority responding to it.

Blockades articulated an alternative configuration in which new political authority emerged through collective participation rather than institutional office. Universities became spaces where deliberation, coordination, and shared responsibility organized political life, while authority was enacted through continuous collective practice. In this configuration, legitimacy is derived from participation itself, demonstrating that authority–public relationships could be organized according to fundamentally different relational principles.

Taken together, the findings suggest that authority–public relationships are not fixed institutional arrangements but relational and spatial configurations continuously enacted through political practice. The dominant configuration organized legitimacy through representation and managed proximity; the contested configuration challenged its capacity to maintain political and urban order; and the alternative configuration demonstrated that political authority could also be organized through collective participation. What changed across the three episodes was not simply the content of political claims but the relational principles through which political authority sought legitimacy.

Within this process, cringe functioned as an indicator of topological misalignment. It did not attach to three isolated political performances but to changing configurations of authority–public relationships. As platform circulation repeatedly rendered these configurations publicly visible, networked publics collectively recognized when dominant configurations no longer appeared culturally convincing and when alternative configurations became increasingly intelligible. Cringe, therefore, emerged as the affective register through which topological configurations of authority–public relationships became publicly negotiated.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article examined how cringe operates in the public negotiation of political authority within the platform society. Moving beyond conceptualizing cringe as an individual emotional response or a marginal form of internet humor, it approached cringe as a low-intensity public evaluative affect through which

authority–public relationships become collectively recognized and negotiated. The analysis demonstrated that collective evaluation addressed neither political performances nor ideological positions as such, but competing ways in which political authority related to publics.

Existing scholarship has shown that affects organize political identities, boundaries, and social relations. The analysis extends this perspective by identifying authority–public relationships as the object of collective affective evaluation. Political performances provided the occasions through which these relationships became publicly visible, while cringe registered moments when dominant configurations no longer appeared culturally convincing, politically intelligible, or publicly „in place”. Rather than signaling the collapse of institutional authority, it functioned as an affective indicator of topological misalignment.

The findings further show that platforms did not merely disseminate political performances but organized their collective evaluation. Across the three performative episodes, the same platform infrastructure and communicative mechanisms repeatedly transformed political performances into reproducible visual forms that foregrounded space, boundaries, and authority–public relationships. Platform affordances enabled these configurations to be fragmented, repeated, and recontextualized, while networked publics stabilized distinct evaluative repertoires around them. In turn, these evaluations informed subsequent performances and counter-performances, demonstrating that political authority was negotiated through the recursive interaction of political performances, platform circulation, and collective affective evaluation.

Finally, the analysis demonstrates the value of a topological perspective for understanding political authority. Rather than locating power primarily in institutional office or territorial space, it shows how authority was publicly negotiated through competing relational configurations. *Ćacilend* reproduced a dominant configuration organized around staged proximity and managed representation. Barricades destabilized this configuration by making the legitimacy of restoring political and urban order contingent upon accountability. Blockades articulated an alternative configuration in which authority emerged through collective participation, deliberation, and shared responsibility. Together, these findings show that political authority is continuously enacted, contested, and reconfigured through changing authority–public relationships rather than institutional position alone.

Cringe neither produces political change nor generates new authority–public relationships. Instead, it contributes to their public recognition by signaling moments in which dominant configurations lose cultural credibility while alternative configurations become increasingly intelligible. As an interpretive study, the article does not claim that these dynamics operate identically across political contexts. It proposes a conceptual framework that can be applied comparatively

to examine how different affective registers participate in the public negotiation of political authority across platforms and diverse political environments.

REFERENCES

- Abbott, A. (1995). Things of boundaries. *Social Research*, 62(4), 857–882.
- Ahmed, S. (2004). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2014). *The cultural politics of emotion* (2nd ed.). Edinburgh University Press.
- Allen, J. (2016). *Topologies of power: Beyond territory and networks*. Routledge.
- BBC News na srpskom. (2025, March 21). *Šesnaesta žrtva pada nadstrešnice u Novom Sadu: Preminuo tinejdžer*.
- Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2011). Digital media and the personalization of collective action. *Information, Communication & Society*, 14(6), 770–799.
- Bickerton, C., & Accetti, C. I. (2021). *Technopopulism: The new logic of democratic politics*. Oxford University Press.
- boyd, d. (2010). Social network sites as networked publics. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *A networked self: Identity, community, and culture on social network sites* (pp. 39–58). Routledge.
- boyd, d. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. Yale University Press.
- Bucher, T. (2018). *If... then: Algorithmic power and politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Chen, Y., Fu, R., Zhou, X., & Lu, J. (2025). Not relying on emotions: Organizations using algorithms are considered less warm. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 47(4), 217–230.
- Clough, P. T., & Halley, J. (Eds.). (2007). *The affective turn: Theorizing the social*. Duke University Press.
- Cossarini, P., & Vallespín, F. (2019). *Populism and passions: Democratic legitimacy after austerity*. Routledge.
- Cvejić, B. (2025, March 10). *What are the citizens' assemblies to which students are invited and how do they function?*. Vreme.
- Cvetkovich, A. (2012). *Depression: A public feeling*. Duke University Press.
- Dahl, M. (2018). *Cringeworthy: A theory of awkwardness*. Penguin.
- Demertzis, N. (2006). *Emotions and politics: The affect dimension in political tension*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Demertzis, N. (2013). *Emotions in politics: The affect dimension in political tension*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Duncan, P. (2017). Joke work: Comic labor and the aesthetics of the awkward. *Comedy Studies*, 8(1), 36–56
- Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade. (2024, November 23). *Saopštenje Fakulteta dramskih umetnosti*.
- Freedom House. (2024). *Nations in Transit 2024: Serbia*. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2024>
- Gillespie, T. (2014). The relevance of algorithms. In T. Gillespie, P. J. Boczkowski, & K. A. Foot (Eds.), *Media technologies: Essays on communication, materiality, and society* (pp. 167–194). MIT Press.
- Gilovich, T., Medvec, V. H., & Savitsky, K. (2000). The spotlight effect in social judgment: An egocentric bias in estimates of the salience of one's own actions and appearance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78(2), 211–222.
- Gregg, M., & Seigworth, G. J. (Eds.). (2010). *The affect theory reader*. Duke University Press.

- Highfield, T. (2016). *Social media and everyday politics*. Polity Press.
- Ito, M. (2008). Introduction. In K. Varnelis (Ed.), *Networked publics* (pp. 1–14). MIT Press.
- Janković, J. (2025, September 19). *Mreže u rukama Gen Z: Objave studenata u Srbiji daleko posećenije od naloga zvaničnika i partija*. Radio Slobodna Evropa.
- Jerkov, A., Bešlin, M., & Radeljić, B. (2025). The depoliticization of protest: Understanding the 2024/2025 Serbian students' uprising. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 11(1), 1–26.
- Jessop, B., Brenner, N., & Jones, M. (2008). Theorizing sociospatial relations. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 26(3), 389–401.
- Jović, D. (2019). Racionalnost, emocije i afektivna revolucija: Zašto su emocije zanemarene u politikološkim istraživanjima u Srbiji? *Srpska politička misao*, (1), 133–154.
- Krach, S., Cohrs, J. C., de Echeverría Loebell, N. C., Kircher, T., Sommer, J., Jansen, A., & Paulus, F. M. (2011). Your flaws are my pain: Linking empathy to vicarious embarrassment. *PLoS ONE*, 6(4), e18675.
- Krstić, A. (2022). Pogled odozgo: vizuelno predstavljanje građana Srbije na Instagram profilu predsednika Aleksandra Vučića. *Političke perspektive*, 12(1), 7–33.
- Lamont, M., & Molnár, V. (2002). The study of boundaries in the social sciences. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28, 167–195.
- Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2010). *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press.
- Loader, B. D., Vromen, A., & Xenos, M. A. (2014). The networked young citizen: Social media, political participation, and civic engagement. *Information, Communication & Society*, 17(2), 143–150.
- Lončar, J., & Spasojević, D. (2024). Izborni proces u Srbiji: Između starog i novog kompetitivnog autoritarizma. *Politički život*, 26, 9–22.
- Lury, C., Parisi, L., & Terranova, T. (2012). Introduction: The becoming topological of culture. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29(4–5), 3–35.
- Marcus, G. E., Neuman, W. R., & MacKuen, M. (2000). *Affective intelligence and political judgment*. University of Chicago Press.
- Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. Sage.
- Milner, R. M. (2016). *The world made meme: Public conversations and participatory media*. MIT Press.
- Moffitt, B. (2016). *The global rise of populism: Performance, political style, and representation*. Stanford University Press.
- Ngai, S. (2005). *Ugly feelings*. Harvard University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2013). *Political emotions: Why love matters for justice*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Radovanović, S. (2025, November 22). *Sve o protestu studenata FDU-a u Beogradu: Na današnji dan smo pretučeni i poniženi, ali složniji i jači protiv nepravde*. Nova.rs.
- Rosanvallon, P. (2008). *Counter-democracy: Politics in an age of distrust*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schwanebeck, W. (2021). Introduction to painful laughter: Media and politics in the age of cringe. *Humanities*, 10(4), 123.

- Serrano-Puche, J. (2015). *Emotions and digital technologies: Mapping the field of research in media studies* (Media@LSE Working Paper No. 33). London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Shugars, S., & Ha, L. (2025). Platform affordances and political affect. *Social Media + Society*, 11(2).
- Spasojević, D. (2024). *Antipolitika*. Akademska knjiga.
- Van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & de Waal, M. (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford University Press.
- Varnelis, K. (Ed.). (2008). *Networked publics*. MIT Press.
- Vasović, M. (2024, November 1). *Serbian railway station roof collapse in Novi Sad leaves 14 dead*. Reuters.
- Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2019). *Emotions, media and politics*. Polity Press.

Cringe as a Form of Emotional Manipulation in Albanian Digital Campaigns (2025)

Edlira Gugu

 0000-0002-3702-7560

Aleksandër Xhuvani University, Elbasan, Albania

Abstract: Digital political campaigns increasingly use discomfort to hold the audience's attention. Albania's 2025 parliamentary elections illustrate this pattern. Cringe functions here as a form of emotional manipulation, drawing on theories of awkwardness, emotional governance, and political spectacle (Dahl, 2018; Deleuze, 1992; Debord, 1994). The Cringe Intensity Index (CII) measures this strategic awkwardness. The index was applied to campaign content from five political figures ($N = 5$) and 127,000 public comments collected during the official campaign period. Higher cringe intensity was associated with higher engagement ($r = 0.79$) and stronger electoral outcomes ($\rho = 0.90$). Campaign content built on false intimacy, symbolic dehumanization, exaggerated emotionality, and cultural misalignment was repeatedly amplified by platform algorithms. The method offers a replicable way to measure emotional manipulation in political communication. It also documents the growing role of emotional discomfort in platform-mediated politics.

Keywords: Political awkwardness; Emotional manipulation; Digital political communication; Albanian elections; Platform politics.

INTRODUCTION

Moral-emotional language measurably increases the diffusion of political messages online (Brady et al., 2017). The platforms that carry those messages are not neutral conduits. Design choices made by technology firms actively structure how election campaigns reach and mobilize audiences (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018). Anger and moral outrage have received attention as drivers of this diffusion (Brady et al., 2017). Populist communication styles have been linked to personality-driven digital messaging across multiple national contexts (Yilmaz et al., 2026). This focus on anger and populism has overshadowed another feeling that shapes political communication just as much: awkwardness. Existing accounts of political embarrassment treat it mainly as a consequence of unintentional scandal and its public reception (Forestal, 2024; Paulus et al., 2019). Its deliberate

use as a communicative strategy remains largely undocumented, along with the algorithmic conditions that determine whether such content reinforces a message or triggers narrative failure (Milli et al., 2025).

The central aim here is to operationalize strategic awkwardness as a measurable, comparable construct across political communication cases, providing an empirical foundation for understanding cringe as a form of emotional governance. The Cringe Intensity Index (CII), developed for this purpose, forms the central contribution developed below. The index was applied to social media communication from five Albanian political figures during the 2025 parliamentary campaign. Computational analysis of 127,000 public comments was combined with qualitative case analysis of the campaign's most viral content. Hypotheses formulated in the theoretical framework below concern the relationship between strategic awkwardness, audience engagement, and electoral performance. Cringe itself operates on related but analytically distinct levels. It is an emotion experienced by the audience, a communicative strategy deployed by political actors, a rhetorical style observable in delivery and framing, and the empirical construct operationalized through the CII.

By design, the sample of five political figures does not permit inferential generalization, and user identities within the comment corpus are anonymized. The scope is limited to communication patterns observable within digital platforms. Dahl's (2018) psychology of awkwardness, Deleuze's (1992) account of control societies, and Debord's (1967/1994) theory of spectacle are developed in full in the following section. Together, they frame cringe-based communication as a form of emotional governance. Psychological vulnerability is exploited through digital control to produce emotional manipulation.

Albania's 2025 parliamentary campaign offers a relevant setting. The political system has operated as a multiparty democracy for roughly three decades. Its digital communication norms continue to develop alongside those of other post-communist states in the region. This trajectory is documented in comparative research on post-communist electoral communication (Vučićević & Atlagić, 2023). These conditions position the Albanian case as one instance among several comparable post-communist settings. The dynamics examined here can be observed directly in this case. This does not imply that the identified mechanisms are unique to it. The sections that follow develop the theoretical framework, detail the index's calibration methodology, present the empirical findings across the five cases, and revisit the hypotheses in the concluding section.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Melissa Dahl's (2018) account of awkwardness supplies the psychological foundation for treating cringe as a communicative phenomenon. Awkwardness, in her framing, emerges from a persistent gap between self-presentation and public perception. Political actors either fall victim to this gap or learn to exploit it. Dahl's (2018) related concept of the illusion of transparency, the belief that one's inner states are more visible to others than they actually are, explains why opponents can trigger cascades of vicarious embarrassment. They do this simply by amplifying moments where self-presentation fails to align with audience perception. The resulting awkwardness spiral, in which nervousness and self-consciousness reinforce each other, accelerates through viral amplification. It builds into sustained campaigns of credibility erosion. The Albanian case illustrates this: politicians have learned to trigger these spirals in opponents while limiting their own exposure to them. The mechanism is not purely cognitive. Electrophysiological research indicates that observing social norm violations elicits measurable neural responses associated with affective discomfort. This supports the view that cringe reactions are embodied and partly automatic, extending beyond conscious interpretation (Cao et al., 2020). Evolutionary accounts of embarrassment add a further layer. Sensitivity to social awkwardness serves a group-regulatory function, helping maintain social hierarchies through emotional correction (Keltner & Buswell, 1997). In political communication, this sensitivity becomes a resource available for strategic exploitation.

A second body of work extends Deleuze's (1992) theory of control societies to the platforms on which this sensitivity now plays out. This work has been updated for algorithmic platforms and predictive analytics (Brusseau, 2020). Digital regulation research treats cringe culture as a form of social discipline operating through distributed surveillance. It produces ambient self-regulation out of fear of collective ridicule. Platform design itself shapes when and how public shaming disciplines political figures (Forestal, 2024). Observers experience vicarious embarrassment on their behalf, regardless of firsthand involvement (Paulus et al., 2019). Algorithmic prioritization of emotionally charged content compounds this. It gives cringe-inducing material disproportionate visibility. Recent large-scale audits confirm this outside Albania as well. Engagement-based ranking amplifies emotionally charged, out-group hostile material relative to chronological baselines (Milli et al., 2025). Feed-composition experiments show that antagonistic content causally increases affective polarization (Piccardi et al., 2025). Specifically on short-form video, negative-emotion content outperforms positive or unifying messaging, with ideologically extreme actors benefiting most (Solovev et al., 2026). Young users have been shown to deploy partisan content strategically to reinforce in-group solidarity (Akter & Fichman,

2025). In the Albanian data, coordinated activity across 58 anonymous pages produced engagement ratios of 396 to 1, well above the roughly 50-to-1 baseline. This turned isolated moments into extended campaigns of reputational erosion.

Ridicule itself has a documented political function. It operates as moralistic aggression disguised as humor. It exposes the gap between projected competence and actual performance, while preserving plausible deniability for its authors (Gray et al., 2009). Sustained mockery, unlike casual humor, accumulates over time into durable shifts in public perception. Albanian memes built on politicians' awkward moments became shorthand for incompetence. This is consistent with evidence that political memes condense complex judgments into easily shared, emotionally charged units (AlAfnan, 2025). Their creators increasingly function as informal political actors in their own right (Mihăilescu, 2024). Debord's (1967/1994) account of the society of the spectacle anticipated much of this. Cringe-based politics extends it further. Where Debord (1967/1994) described authentic relations substituted by images, digital cringe politics weaponizes the collapse of those images. It generates anti-spectacular spectacles, in which a politician's loss of control attracts more attention than a polished performance. Audiences in Albania reshaped political narratives by sharing and remixing cringe content. This echoes research on connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Recent work on digital populism confirms that platform affordances increasingly structure this performative register (Yilmaz et al., 2026). Hybrid platform-native political staging itself is becoming a spectacle in Debord's (1967/1994) sense well beyond Albania (Molpeceres et al., 2026).

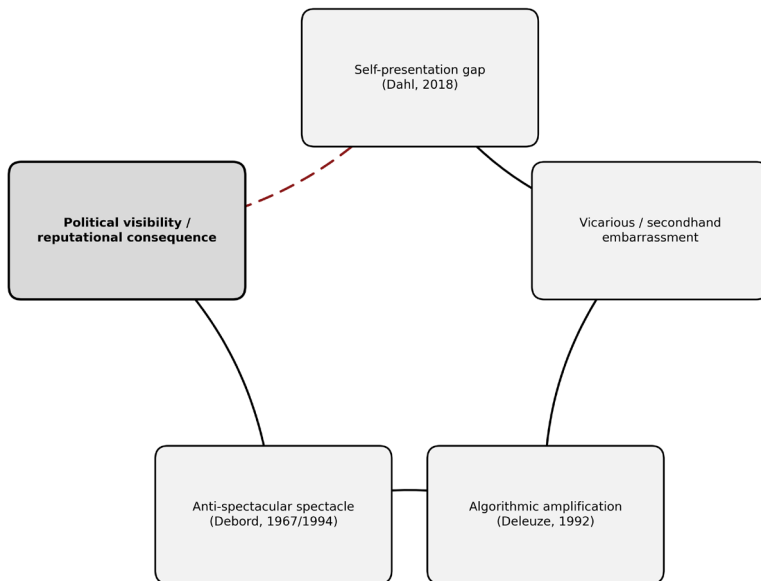
The emotional stakes of this dynamic are high. Emotional responses to opponents frequently outweigh policy disagreement in shaping political behavior (Iyengar et al., 2019). Cringe intensifies this by targeting perceived competence over ideology. It provokes stronger negative responses than policy disputes (Huddy et al., 2013). This pattern is echoed in other 2024 elections, where affectively charged content outperformed policy-focused messaging (Chang & Fang, 2024). Comedic framing is known to shape perceptions of competence and trustworthiness (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). Cringe extends this logic by substituting humiliation for laughter. The Albanian data show that exposure to opponents' awkwardness produced lasting reductions in perceived competence.

EMOTIONAL GOVERNANCE

Emotional manipulation is the concrete form this broader mechanism of emotional governance takes when political actors put it to use. Read together, these strands support a single claim: political power operates through the regulation of emotion as well as through persuasion. The term emotional governance, built

here on Deleuze's (1992) concept of control societies and Foucault's (1975/1995) theory of disciplinary power, names the shaping of public affect in the service of compliance, and Dahl's (2018) account of the awkwardness spiral adds the specific psychological mechanism through which digital visibility turns individual exposure into collective alignment. Debord's (1967/1994) account of the spectacle extends this claim to legitimacy itself: political discourse in platform-mediated systems has been shown to shift from the rational presentation of policy toward the performative staging of personality (Molpeceres et al., 2026), and in a small democracy such as Albania, where attention is scarce, provoking discomfort may sustain engagement more reliably than polished communication, a claim the sections that follow test empirically. Cringe occupies a distinctive place within this spectacle, between empathy and rejection, sustaining engagement while deflecting critical distance. Strategic awkwardness names the point at which this mechanism becomes intentional: a calibrated use of discomfort that neutralizes opposition by saturating discourse with emotional noise, consistent with the engagement-based amplification documented above (Milli et al., 2025).

Figure 1. The mechanism of cringe-based emotional governance, drawn as a continuously reinforcing cycle (the "awkwardness spiral") in which each stage renews the one before it.



Source: Author's elaboration based on Dahl (2018), Deleuze (1992) and Debord (1967/1994)

This chain, from individual experience to political outcome, is summarized in Figure 1. It is drawn as a closed cycle. An initial self-presentation gap produces vicarious audience embarrassment. Algorithmic amplification converts this into anti-spectacular spectacle and, in turn, political visibility. That visibility then

renews exposure and the risk of a fresh self-presentation gap, closing the loop that corresponds to the awkwardness spiral described above. Presenting the mechanism explicitly in this form clarifies which stage each empirical measure in the following sections is intended to capture. It also shows why a single triggering moment can be sustained and escalated by platform dynamics well beyond its natural lifespan.

Understood this way, cringe as a mechanism of control reframes digital campaigning. It becomes an affective economy more than an informational exchange, one in which political actors compete for emotional dominance over policy coherence. This sits within broader debates on algorithmic affect, post-truth politics, and media ethics. The underlying premise is that the manipulation of collective embarrassment is structural to contemporary digital power. Despite this theoretical foundation, no instrument has operationalized strategic awkwardness as a measurable, comparable construct across political cases.

The research questions that shape the hypotheses tested below are: (1) How do Albanian politicians deploy awkwardness in digital campaign communication? (2) What mechanisms transform isolated awkward moments into viral political events? (3) What patterns link affective discomfort to electoral outcomes? H1, higher cringe intensity, as measured by the CII, is associated with greater visibility and audience engagement; H2, digital platforms amplify cringe through algorithmic prioritization of emotionally provocative content, producing feedback loops that reward awkwardness; and H3, cringe intensity correlates with electoral success, without the causal direction of that relationship being resolved by the present design. This theoretical foundation applies to the empirical cases that follow. Each hypothesis is revisited explicitly in the concluding section.

METHODOLOGY

- **Research design.** Quantitative content analysis is combined with qualitative discourse analysis to examine how affective discomfort operates in Albanian political communication. This approach builds on established models of digital political analysis (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018). Social media content and public reactions during the official campaign period set the material examined.
- **Research context.** The Albanian parliamentary elections of May 11, 2025, offered a relevant context. The campaign combined conventional policy messaging with novel cringe-based strategies. The abrupt TikTok ban of March 13 also created a quasi-natural experiment: it showed how a sudden platform restriction reshapes campaign strategy. Coverage

spans the eight-week official campaign period, March 15 to May 10, 2025. It is limited to publicly accessible, Albanian-language content on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and, prior to its ban, TikTok.

- **Sample.** Five political figures (N = 5) were selected for active national-level influence, presence on at least two major platforms, and representation across parties, generations, and communication styles, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Political sample and monitored platforms

Politician	Position / Party	Age	Platforms Monitored
Edi Rama	Prime Minister; Socialist Party	60	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok (pre-ban)
Lulzim Basha	Former leader, Democratic Party	51	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube
Sali Berisha	Chairman, Democratic Party	79	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok (pre-ban)
Zegjine Çaushti	Socialist Party candidate, Fier district	45	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube
Gazment Bardhi	Deputy chairman, Democratic Party	50	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube

Source: Author’s compilation from public campaign accounts and party records

- **Data sources.** The primary dataset consisted of 3,247 posts, 1,856 videos, and 2,156 memes or images from official accounts, with engagement metrics and metadata on timestamp, platform, and content category. A secondary dataset of 127,000 comments supported the sentiment analysis described below and was verified through IDEA and BIRN Albania monitoring and OSCE/ODIHR election observation.
- **Measurement instrument.** Open coding of all materials yielded five recurring communicative strategies. These strategies structured the calibration of the Cringe Intensity Index (CII), calculated as follows:

$$CII = (A \times B \times C) / (D + 1)$$

Here A is gap magnitude, B is audience discomfort rate, C is viral velocity, and D is context appropriateness. Each is scored 0–10, as detailed in Table 2, and interpreted descriptively as low (0–30), moderate (31–60), or high (61–100) cringe. This weighting scheme follows established practice in composite index construction. Aggregation choices are known to shape outcomes and are reported transparently for that reason (Reckien, 2018).

The equal multiplicative weighting of A, B, and C treats gap magnitude, audience discomfort, and viral velocity as equally consequential drivers of strategic awkwardness. This assumption is adopted here as a simplifying baseline, pending independent validation. Viral velocity in particular differs conceptually from the other two components. A and B capture properties of the message and its reception. C, by contrast, is shaped substantially by platform infrastructure and algorithmic amplification. Weighting it equally with A and B risks conflating a message’s inherent awkwardness with its exposure to circumstances, such as coordinated sharing or algorithmic promotion, that are only indirectly related to the communicative act itself. Equal weighting was retained for this first calibration. No empirical basis, such as expert elicitation or factor-analytic weighting, was available within these constraints to justify differential weights. Equal weighting also keeps the index transparent and replicable.

Table 2. Cringe Intensity Index (CII) components: definitions and data sources

Symbol	Component	Description	Data Source
A	Gap Magnitude (0–10)	Mismatch between intended message and audience perception	Average of three coder ratings
B	Audience Discomfort Rate (0–10)	Share of comments expressing embarrassment or vicarious shame	Manual and computational sentiment analysis
C	Viral Velocity (0–10)	Speed at which content reached 10,000 views or 1,000 interactions	Platform analytics
D	Context Appropriateness (0–10)	Fit within expected norms of political discourse	Coder consensus

Note: All components are normalized to a 0–10 scale for comparability.
Source: author’s analysis based on coder consensus ratings

- **Coding, qualitative analysis, and computational analysis.** Coding followed a standardized rubric with operational anchors, worked examples, coder training protocol, and decision rules, reproduced in full in Appendix B; a second, independently trained coder rated a twenty percent subsample, reaching inter-coder reliability of Krippendorff’s alpha of 0.82; discrepancies between the two coders were resolved through consensus discussion before final scores were recorded. A parallel frame-by-frame analysis of the twenty-three most viral campaign videos identified the recurring communicative strategies presented in the Findings section, detailed with coded examples in Appendix D. Computational text analysis of the 127,000 public comments used XLM-RoBERTa, a transformer architecture pretrained on multilingual text including Albanian, fine-tuned on a manually labeled seed set of 3,000 campaign-related comments for the four-way classification task (amusement, discomfort, anger, empathy). Sarcasm,

irony, and slang specific to Albanian-language social media, which automated classifiers are known to misread, were addressed through an explicit procedural safeguard: comments below a fixed confidence threshold were withheld from automatic classification and routed to human coders working from the same rubric used for manual coding, and the fine-tuned model’s output was validated against a held-out human-coded subsample of 1,500 comments, reaching Krippendorff’s alpha of 0.78 against human judgment, in keeping with evidence that transformer-based models can approach expert-level reliability on political text annotation when validated in this way (Heseltine & Clemm von Hohenberg, 2024). The trained model weights, the fine-tuning corpus, the confidence threshold, and the full classification pipeline are documented in the supplementary materials at Zenodo, enabling independent replication of the classification step.

- **Statistical approach.** Quantitative results are reported as descriptive indicators of rank-order alignment, oriented toward hypothesis generation.
- **Ethical considerations.** All analyses relied on public data processed under institutional ethics guidelines, with personal identifiers removed and results reported at the level of content, keeping individual users unidentified.

FINDINGS

Applying the calibrated Cringe Intensity Index to the five cases produced the scores in Table 3, ranging from 76 (Çaushi) to 30 (Berisha).

Table 3. CII scores and component values across five campaign cases (A–D and resulting CII)

Case	A	B	C	D	CII
Zegjine Çaushi – “O Gazo”	9.5	8.0	9.0	2.0	76
Edi Rama – “Owl Series”	7.0	6.0	8.5	3.0	74
Lulzim Basha – “Gone with the Wind”	6.5	7.0	7.0	4.0	64
Gazment Bardhi – “Broken Heart”	5.5	5.0	6.0	5.0	46
Sali Berisha – TikTok Ban Reaction	4.0	3.0	2.0	7.0	30

Note: A–D are scaled 0–10; CII computed as $(A \times B \times C) / (D + 1)$. Source: author’s calculation based on manual coding and platform analytics

Together, these scores distinguish cases combining higher discomfort with faster viral spread (Çaushi, Rama) from cases where awkwardness was more incidental (Bardhi, Berisha). The index showed an association with electoral outcomes (Spearman’s $\rho = 0.90$, $p = 0.037$) and engagement rates ($r = 0.79$, $p = 0.062$, $n = 5$). Full correlation, regression, and robustness outputs are reported

in the supplementary materials at Zenodo. The qualitative analysis underlying these scores identified five recurring communicative strategies, summarized in Table 4. These strategies anchor the CII’s quantitative scores in observed communicative behavior.

Table 4. Recurring communicative strategies identified in the qualitative analysis

Strategy	Definition
False intimacy	An artificial familiarity, such as a diminutive nickname, that violates the social boundaries expected of formal political address.
Animal metaphor	A symbolic dehumanization of an opponent through recurring visual or verbal animal imagery.
Repetitive branding	The overuse of an awkward slogan or gesture to fix an association in public memory.
Cultural misalignment	The use of a foreign or dated cultural reference that fails to resonate with the intended audience.
Theatrical performance	An overacted emotional delivery that exposes insincerity where sincerity was intended.

Source: author’s qualitative coding of the twenty-three most viral campaign videos. A fuller version, with the psychological mechanism and a representative example for each strategy, appears as Table D.1 in the supplementary materials

Across all five cases, awkwardness functioned as a recurrent and structurally embedded feature of Albanian digital campaigning. It repeatedly served as a mechanism through which attention was captured, discourse redirected, and political visibility maintained. The five political actors are treated here as analytically comparable units. Their differing configurations of intentionality, platform access, and affective performance produced varying outcomes within a shared electoral environment. In each case, awkwardness arose from violations of expected communicative norms. These violations generated emotional tension between self-presentation and audience perception. Consistent with Dahl’s (2018) framework, this tension triggered vicarious embarrassment, positioning audiences as active affective participants. The degree of strategic calibration varied considerably between actors. The underlying emotional mechanism, however, remained stable across cases: within algorithmically mediated platforms, discomfort appeared more effective than policy content in sustaining engagement. The quantitative test of the hypotheses evaluates whether cringe intensity is associated with these outcomes, but it does not by itself establish intent; that is established by the qualitative analysis that follows, which shows cringe deployed as a deliberate communicative choice rather than an incidental occurrence. Each case below is read against the levels of cringe introduced earlier: the audience’s emotional reaction, the communicative strategy pursued, the rhetorical style through which it was delivered, and the CII score that renders it measurable. This keeps the levels analytically distinct, even where a single case activates several of them at once.

ZEGJINE ÇAUSHI: FALSE INTIMACY

Zegjine Çausi's repeated use of a diminutive nickname to address a political opponent in a formally political setting produced the most overtly strategic deployment of awkwardness in the dataset. The familiarity implied by the nickname clashed with institutional expectations. This produced an immediate affective rupture. Computational analysis of audience responses shows that a majority of reactions expressed vicarious embarrassment or awkward amusement, more often than straightforward ideological agreement or disagreement. The content spread rapidly. It reached thousands of shares within its first day and achieved engagement ratios well above platform baselines. Its visibility extended beyond digital platforms, too: traditional media outlets reproduced and reframed the moment, consolidating it as a symbolic episode of political dominance. Read against the analytical levels introduced earlier, this case operates primarily as communicative strategy. Audience emotion was its intended and achieved effect. A detailed interactional transcript and frame-by-frame breakdown of this material appear in the supplementary appendices.

EDI RAMA: ANIMAL METAPHOR

Edi Rama's extended use of animal metaphor took a different route to a comparably deliberate effect. Archival political speech from an opponent was systematically paired with visual footage of owls. This produced a persistent audio-visual mismatch, transforming political discourse into a form of symbolic dehumanization without any explicit verbal attack. The strategy's effectiveness lay in its cumulative structure. Over several weeks, repetition fixed the association between the opponent and the animal metaphor in public memory. A tonal escalation, from ironic humor to triumphant ridicule, tracked closely with rising engagement. This pattern extends Debord's (1967/1994) account of the spectacle: attention here was generated through the deliberate collapse of representational coherence itself. Unlike Çausi's case, the strategy operated principally through rhetorical style, the audio-visual juxtaposition itself. Detailed visual sequencing and representative transcripts of the series appear in the appendices.

LULZIM BASHA: CULTURAL MISALIGNMENT

Lulzim Basha's most visible cringe moment, by contrast, was not designed at all. His quotation of a line from *Gone with the Wind* during a podcast interview failed to resonate with its intended audience. It generated confusion and ridicule instead. The episode illustrates Dahl's (2018) concept of the illusion of transparency, in which a speaker assumes shared cultural knowledge that the audience does not in fact hold. Audience reactions quickly converted the

moment into meme material. Hundreds of derivative formats circulated across platforms within days. Engagement was high, but control over the narrative was lost almost immediately, as the moment detached from its original political context. The discomfort here arose entirely from audience reaction to an unintended cultural mismatch. This case therefore isolates the emotion level of cringe from the strategy level, the two having coincided deliberately in the preceding two cases. The full transcript of the exchange and early meme adaptations are documented in the supplementary materials.

SALI BERISHA: TECHNOLOGICAL DISRUPTION

Sali Berisha's case illustrates a form of vulnerability that does not arise from the political actor's communicative choices, but from an infrastructure disruption. On March 13, 2025, the Albanian government imposed a one-year suspension of TikTok, citing child-safety concerns following the killing of a 14-year-old student in Tirana on November 18, 2024 (NPR, 2024). The suspension affected all users in Albania, regardless of political affiliation, though systematic analysis of Albanian media discourse found that challenger and opposition voices overwhelmingly framed the measure as disproportionate and rights-threatening, compared to a government discourse that remained supportive or neutral (Licenji, 2026). According to platform data, before the ban Berisha's account (Table 1) had 66,000 followers, while Rama's had more than double that number (BIRN, 2025); once the ban took effect, both accounts became inaccessible within Albanian territory. Shortly after the ban, Berisha posted a brief protest video through VPN access; the content reached a limited audience and was not repeated in the following months. Platform data show that his account lost its entire follower base overnight. Subsequent recovery efforts, through VPN-based access and Instagram migration, restored only 23 percent of the prior follower base. This case shows that the effectiveness of cringe-based strategies depends not only on a political actor's performative skill, but also on infrastructural access to the platforms on which those strategies are exercised. Infrastructure disruption can limit participation in the attention economy regardless of the intensity of strategic awkwardness an actor might otherwise produce.

GAZMENT BARDHI: EMOTIONAL THEATRICALITY

The final case, Gazment Bardhi's campaign, sits on the boundary between rhetorical style and failed strategy. Repetitive use of emotionally charged phrasing, delivered with heightened dramatic emphasis, prompted rapid audience reinterpretation. An intended moral appeal was reframed through humor and parody. It produced widespread meme adaptation. Engagement was substantial, yet the

emotional framing shifted from seriousness toward comedic ridicule, undermining the original communicative intent. Alongside the four cases above, Bardhi's illustrates how narrow the margin runs between calibrated emotional provocation and an outright loss of narrative control.

Comparative analysis across the five cases reveals a consistent pattern linking cringe intensity to increased engagement, measured through shares, comments, and cross-platform diffusion. A similar link appears to electoral performance indicators. These patterns fall short of evidence for a causal relationship between online engagement and voter behavior. Coordinated networks of anonymous pages accelerated the circulation of awkward content. Algorithmic prioritization favored emotionally provocative material over policy-oriented messaging. Cross-platform replication extended the lifespan of viral moments. Together, these dynamics turned isolated communicative incidents into sustained political narratives.

Across 270 coded reactions to high- and low-cringe posts, mockery accounted for 89 of 124 reactions to high-cringe content ($CII \geq 61$). It accounted for only 34 of 146 reactions to low-cringe content ($CII \leq 30$). This difference did not reach conventional statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 1.875$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.171$). The large effect size (Cramér's $V = 0.612$), though, suggests the association is more likely underpowered than genuinely weak, given the small underlying case count. Sentiment analysis of the full 127,000-comment corpus shows amusement (30.0 percent) and discomfort (26.6 percent) as the two largest categories, together outweighing anger (18.0 percent) and empathy (12.0 percent) combined. The remaining 13.4 percent expressed mixed or neutral sentiment, falling outside these four categories. Negative affect rises to 78 percent of comments on high-cringe posts specifically. Viral velocity varied just as systematically by cringe category. High-cringe posts reached 10,000 views in an average of 4.2 hours, against 38.5 hours for low-cringe posts, a roughly ninefold difference confirmed by one-way ANOVA ($F(2, 27) = 18.43$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.577$). Over the course of the campaign, policy-oriented communication declined while cringe intensity and performative sophistication increased. This trend mirrors progressive adaptation to platform incentives. Full statistical outputs, including regression models and robustness checks, are reported in the supplementary materials at Zenodo.

CONCLUSIONS

The 2025 Albanian parliamentary elections offer evidence of a shift in digital political communication. Politicians who consistently produced cringe-based content, whether by design or by accident, achieved higher engagement and, in several cases, stronger electoral outcomes. High-cringe content reached

roughly nine times the viral velocity of low-cringe content, while cringe intensity was associated with stronger engagement ($r = 0.79$) and electoral outcomes ($\rho = 0.90$) across the five cases. This marks a measurable displacement of policy discourse by affective spectacle within Albania's digital campaign ecosystem.

H1 finds support in the pattern observed across the five cases: higher cringe intensity was associated with greater visibility and engagement ($r = 0.79$), in line with the CII–engagement correlation reported in the findings. H2 also finds support, in both the Albanian evidence of coordinated amplification and the recent international audits cited in the literature review. H3 is supported at the correlational level. The CII correlated with electoral outcomes across the five cases ($\rho = 0.90$, $p = 0.037$), above the conventional significance threshold. This is unlike the engagement-rate correlation ($r = 0.79$, $p = 0.062$), which falls short of it. The direction of the relationship is not settled by a correlational design of this kind: cringe may drive electoral success, or already-successful candidates may simply draw more attention to their missteps.

With only five cases, a single outlier could shift the correlation. The finding remains an initial signal, one that calls for replication at a larger scale. The CII itself performed as intended: it produced differentiated scores across the five cases (Table 3), with inter-coder and human-machine agreement of 0.82 and 0.78 respectively (Krippendorff's α). The instrument's function, translating strategic awkwardness into a comparable, reproducible score, held up well. What remains for future work is how that score relates to electoral outcomes at a larger scale.

This picture calls for further qualification. The association between cringe intensity and electoral outcomes is open to several readings that this design cannot distinguish between: affective influence on voting, reverse amplification of already-successful candidates, a shared populist driver behind both variables, or a simple decoupling between online engagement and offline behavior. Adjudicating between them would require voter-focused designs not attempted here. Methodologically, the CII is a first-generation instrument. Its component weights were set as a transparent, simplifying baseline pending empirical derivation. Further psychometric work would strengthen it considerably: principal component analysis or factor analysis on a larger sample would derive empirically grounded weights in place of the equal ones, while a logarithmic transformation of component C would dampen its disproportionate weight from algorithmic amplification within the formula. This would be paired with convergent validation against physiological measures of discomfort and testing for cross-cultural equivalence beyond Albania. The underlying computational analysis likewise reflects a trade-off inherent to automated tools working in a linguistically specific setting, between analytical scale and interpretive nuance. Albania's own environment adds explanatory detail specific to this case: high social media penetration,

alongside comparatively weak institutional norms in a young democracy undergoing rapid platform disruption. Comparative research across countries would show whether the pattern documented here extends beyond it.

Several interconnected contributions follow. Strategic awkwardness is documented systematically as an electoral communication technique. This links Dahl's (2018) psychology of awkwardness with Deleuze's (1992) theory of control within a specific empirical case. The Cringe Intensity Index itself is a first, interpretable instrument for measuring emotional and performative phenomena in political communication. Platform-level evidence, in turn, shows how algorithmic amplification and coordinated networks generate emotional governance, in which engagement metrics increasingly determine visibility ahead of message quality. If the tendencies documented here persist, they raise genuine questions for democratic quality. Performative skill may outweigh policy competence. Normalized discourse may deepen affective polarization among younger voters. Algorithmic prioritization may reward manipulative content in ways that strain content moderation. Confirming how far these implications extend will take replication across larger and cross-national samples, voter-focused designs, and longitudinal tracking of whether cringe strategies persist or normalize over time.

Taken together, politicians in this campaign learned to operationalize awkwardness as a strategic tool. Platforms became its amplifiers. Audiences participated in affective regulation through ridicule and shame. Digital media inherited a long tradition of political theater and industrialized it, rewarding provocation over substance. Many questions remain open, particularly concerning causation and generalizability beyond this case. The evidence presented here, though, marks a step toward understanding how digital architectures and emotional manipulation intersect within contemporary democratic communication.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is based upon work from COST Action OPINION CA21129, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology). Special thanks are due to Data Scientist Milaim Delija, who provided valuable guidance on computational analysis during the research development phase. He offered thoughtful advice on the design of the Cringe Intensity Index formula and provided technical assistance in processing and analyzing the computational dataset, including programming support for the natural language processing pipeline, in particular, fine-tuning the XLM-RoBERTa model.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Raw social media data cannot be shared due to privacy considerations and platform terms of service. Aggregated and anonymized data, the complete coding framework, and the supplementary appendices, comprising detailed case transcripts, the CII measurement protocol, full statistical outputs, and research ethics documentation, are deposited at Zenodo under DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21401381>, in accordance with the journal's guidance on supplementary materials. Supplementary materials include: Appendix A (detailed case transcripts), Appendix B (detailed CII measurement protocol), Appendix C (complete statistical analysis outputs), Appendix D (coding framework with examples), and Appendix E (research ethics procedures).

REFERENCES

- Akter, S., & Fichman, P. (2025). Expressions of partisanship among young political supporters on TikTok in the United States. *Social Media + Society*, 11(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051251370914>
- AlAfnan, M. A. (2025). The role of memes in shaping political discourse on social media. *Studies in Media and Communication*, 13(2), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v13i2.7482>
- Baumgartner, J., & Morris, J. S. (2006). The Daily Show effect: Candidate evaluations, efficacy, and American youth. *American Politics Research*, 34(3), 341–367. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X05280074>
- Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5), 739–768. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661>
- BIRN. (2025, January 20). Albanian PM under fire over TikTok ban in election year. Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/01/20/albanian-pm-under-fire-over-tiktok-ban-in-election-year/>
- Brady, W. J., Wills, J. A., Jost, J. T., Tucker, J. A., & Van Bavel, J. J. (2017). Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralized content in social networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(28), 7313–7318. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1618923114>
- Brusseau, J. (2020). Deleuze's postscript on the societies of control updated for big data and predictive analytics. *Theoria*, 67(3), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.3167/th.2020.6716401>
- Cao, Y., Wei, Q., Gui, S., & Li, F. (2020). The temporal course of vicarious embarrassment: An electrophysiological study. *Social Neuroscience*, 15(4), 435–446. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17470919.2020.1754288>
- Chang, H.-C. H., & Fang, Y. S. (2024). The 2024 Taiwanese Presidential Election on social media: Identity, policy, and affective virality. *PNAS Nexus*, 3(4), pgae130. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgae130>
- Dahl, M. (2018). *Cringeworthy: A theory of awkwardness*. Portfolio/Penguin.
- Debord, G. (1994). *The society of the spectacle*. Zone Books.
- Deleuze, G. (1992). Postscript on the societies of control. *October*, 59, 3–7.

- Forestal, J. (2024). Social media, social control, and the politics of public shaming. *American Political Science Review*, 118(4), 1704–1718. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423001053>
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Vintage Books.
- Gray, J., Jones, J. P., & Thompson, E. (Eds.). (2009). *Satire TV: Politics and comedy in the post-network era*. NYU Press.
- Heseltine, M., & Clemm von Hohenberg, B. (2024). Large language models as a substitute for human experts in annotating political text. *Research & Politics*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20531680241236239>
- Huddy, L., Sears, D. O., & Levy, J. S. (Eds.). (2013). *The Oxford handbook of political psychology* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199760107.001.0001>
- Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129–146. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>
- Keltner, D., & Buswell, B. N. (1997). Embarrassment: Its distinct form and appeasement functions. *Psychological Bulletin*, 122(3), 250–270. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.122.3.250>
- Kreiss, D., & McGregor, S. C. (2018). Technology firms shape political communication: The work of Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter, and Google with campaigns during the 2016 US presidential cycle. *Political Communication*, 35(2), 155–177. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2017.1364814>
- Licenji, L. (2026). The TikTok ban in Albania across the policy cycle: framing, legitimization, and rollback in mediated discourse. *Frontiers in Communication*, 11, Article 1847142. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2026.1847142>
- Mihăilescu, M. G. (2024). “Never mess with the ‘memers’”: How meme creators are redefining contemporary politics. *Social Media + Society*, 10(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241296256>
- Milli, S., Carroll, M., Wang, Y., Pandey, S., Zhao, S., & Dragan, A. D. (2025). Engagement, user satisfaction, and the amplification of divisive content on social media. *PNAS Nexus*, 4(3), pgaf062. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgaf062>
- Molpeceres, A. V., Hernández, J. R., & Fernández, E. O. (2026). The spectacle of power: Hybridisation and digital populism in White House communication. *Social Sciences*, 15(3), Article 186. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci15030186>
- NPR. (2024, December 23). Albanian prime minister says TikTok ban was not a rushed reaction. <https://www.npr.org/2024/12/23/g-s1-39679/albania-prime-minister-tiktok-ban>
- Paulus, F. M., Müller-Pinzler, L., Meshi, D., Peng, T.-Q., Martinez Mateo, M., & Krach, S. (2019). The politics of embarrassment: Considerations on how norm-transgressions of political representatives shape nation-wide communication of emotions on social media. *Frontiers in Communication*, 4, Article 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2019.00011>
- Piccardi, T., Saveski, M., Jia, C., Hancock, J., Tsai, J. L., & Bernstein, M. S. (2025). Reranking partisan animosity in algorithmic social media feeds alters affective polarization. *Science*, 390(6776), eadu5584. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adu5584>
- Reckien, D. (2018). What is in an index? Construction method, data metric, and weighting scheme determine the outcome of composite social vulnerability indices in New York City. *Regional Environmental Change*, 18(5), 1439–1451. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-017-1273-7>

- Solovev, K., Drolsbach, C., Demirel, E., & Pröllochs, N. (2026). Engagement with political videos on TikTok during the 2025 German federal election. *EPJ Data Science*, 15, Article 29. <https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-026-00632-7>
- Vučičević, D., & Atagić, S. (2023). Electoral political communication in the post-communist hybrid regime: The case of Serbia 2020. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 22(3–4), 216–238. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2023.2221936>
- Yilmaz, I., Bliuc, A.-M., Norrie, R., Smith, C. M., Smith, J., Evans, C., Courtney, D. S., & Barnett, D. (2026). Populism in the age of social media: A systematic review of recent digital populism research. *New Media & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448261420218>

Text versus Audience: Where Does Cringe Emerge?

Interview with Associate Professor Irena Reifova

What exactly is cringe? The literature offers various terms: ‘vicarious embarrassment’, ‘Fremdscham’, ‘empathic embarrassment’, and ‘cringe’. Some scholars conceptualize it as a form of empathic emotion sharing, others argue that cringe is actually closer to disgust than shame, and Brianna Escoe, for instance, defines cringe as a reaction to ‘an embarrassing attempt at making a positive impression’. Is there a consensus on what cringe actually means?

Cringe is a rather ostracized concept and, at first glance, appears to have limited significance for mainstream social issues. However, it actually provides a rapid and effective bridge to questions of social inequality. Given that it is generally regarded as an amusing curiosity, I doubt the scientific community will ever converge on a single definition. Moreover, I do not believe that contemporary publication culture particularly encourages consensus—amid the deluge of texts and publications, this eruption of scholarly output, everyone naturally strives to differentiate themselves. Therefore, I do not anticipate that the cultural studies community will ever celebrate achieving a unified conception of cringe.

How do you personally conceptualize cringe?

I actually struggle to differentiate cringe from shaming in my own thinking, as I have been engaged with shaming research for an extended period. Both phenomena originate from the fundamental Ekmanian emotion of disgust. However, cringe combines fascination with the experience of discomfort and a somewhat masochistic sensation. This ambivalence is absent in shaming.

Indeed, Sianne Ngai writes about ‘ugly feelings’ as ambivalent emotions. Cringe shares characteristics with shame, embarrassment, disgust, and compassion. For me, the central element distinguishing cringe from shaming is the aspect of awkwardness. These are contents that possess a high capacity to evoke feelings of awkwardness in those who consume them.

Some scholars, such as philosopher Thomas Spiegel, argue that cringe is a ‘hostile emotion’ directed outward, rather than inward like shame. Others emphasize the empathic dimension. Are these distinct phenomena, or merely different intensities and orientations of the same affective experience?

Cringe is affective, physically uncomfortable. We can observe that various metaphors typically contain references to bodily movements or positions. When people explain it colloquially, they describe it as an awkwardness that compels you to turn away completely.

Generation Z often reports that their toes curl.

Yes, exactly. This is almost an anthropological constant—that shame induces toe-curling in people. One dimension is thus the feeling of awkwardness, which is affective and embodied, but on the other hand, there is a form of pleasure connected to self-worth: the awkward, impossible one is not ‘me’.

Affect theory emphasizes that emotions are culturally and socially constructed. Simultaneously, neuroscience demonstrates universal activation of certain brain regions during cringe content consumption. Is cringe primarily a biologically rooted reaction with cultural variations, or a fundamentally cultural construct?

The feeling of awkwardness certainly originates from affects, which are biological structures. As Tomkins states, affects are neural firings. Unlike drives, affects are permanent and simultaneously possess multivalent orientation—they can be filled with entirely diverse content. This variable component that triggers the affect is, in my view, no longer neuropsychological but dependent on social environment, values, standards, and norms. Cringe is therefore partially a biological affect, but its specific orientation, intensity, and all surrounding practices are not biological—it is a cultural construct.

J. Logan Smilges, in their ‘cringe theory’, argues that cringing reveals more about ourselves than about the object of our observation—it is a projection of our own affective norms. Is cringe subjective? Does it depend more on who is watching, the implied reader, than on the specific content?

I would say cultural rather than subjective. I believe the boundaries, often associated with moralizing hierarchization, do not run between individuals but between cultures, subcultures, and groups.

On the other hand, you mentioned that cringe can reveal much about our self-confidence, that watching cringe content tells us something about our own potential insecurity. Philippe Rochat speaks of an ‘irreconcilable gap’

between how we see ourselves and how others see us. Is the subject therefore not important?

The perception of insecurity is important, but it is social insecurity, not individual. We react to cringe according to whether we are an aging postmenopausal woman concerned about being overweight, or an aging Gen Z individual worried about lacking style. We do not hold these identities as individuals but as members of certain categories.

Is this how we might understand Slavic cringe of the ‘Squatting Slavs in Tracksuits’ or ‘Babushka’ variety?

Precisely. These are people from the so-called East who engage in self-deprecating humor. What is actually at stake is the sense of self-worth of that entire large geopolitical category of Eastern people who traditionally feel inferior to the civilizationally more advanced West.

Can we therefore locate cringe in the text itself, or must we always examine its audience? Does cringe exist only through the act of audience reading?

Cringe is certainly a polysemic category, but this polysemy is not entirely boundless. It is possible to abstract certain features and textual properties that must exist independently of the specific person viewing the cringe content. We can speak of different interpretive communities. They will naturally not agree, but as a researcher, we can identify what constitutes cringe from, for example, a gender-sensitive perspective. The key is perspective and the researcher’s awareness of it. What probably does not exist, or cannot be studied, is universal cringe.

Perspectives often differ considerably. Could comparative studies offer a pathway—examining whether different age groups, genders, ethnicities, or nationalities perceive content as cringe?

Yes, although it would be quite demanding. It would require conducting lengthy interviews that probe meanings and hidden layers. So I probably would not want to undertake it myself, but theoretically it is interesting.

If cringe content is polysemic, does it make sense to study it through textual analysis? Is ethnography the only path when examining its interpretations?

It is certainly one way to avoid numerous problems, but I believe we can go further—it is not entirely necessary to abandon identifying cringe content from the researcher’s perspective. As I mentioned, knowing the social and cultural context is crucial. Once you understand the cultural or social specificity that interests you—something like ‘who is cringing?’—you can study cringe from the text itself without having it ‘filtered’ through audiences.

Is there not a risk that the researcher will import their own perspectives into the research?

We constantly worry about being carriers of a particular perspective that we might implant into the research. This is merely a positivist illusion—the notion that in cultural studies one can ensure the researcher’s perspective does not figure in the results. If we completely eliminate textual analysis, it is as if we were claiming it is possible to ensure the researcher has no perspective and plays no role. That seems imprecise to me. I think it is certainly better to combine potential textual analysis with, for example, autoethnography and identification. First work with oneself, determine which interpretive community I belong to, what this means for my optics, and reflect on it. Thus, some form of autoethnography is essential.

We have already mentioned that philosopher Thomas Spiegel characterizes cringe as a ‘hostile social emotion’ often used to reinforce class hierarchies. When we as academics study cringe, are we not inevitably positioned as ‘those who cringe’?

But the academic is a cringer. And also a shamer. Just as they are also a liberal or conservative, have some class origin and value repertoire... There is no point pretending we are different from those we study. These optics are not individual.

In your view, one cannot escape this responsibility?

One cannot. Cringe speaks through us as well. We are marinated in a sociocultural environment, and our advantage through education is at most that we possess tools for a certain reflexivity and perform some containment. If we claim we are not those who simultaneously feel awkwardness and relief—that it is not our awkwardness regarding some specific social value—it is not true.

The academic sphere actually reproduces cringe simply by making cringe content increasingly a subject of research.

Of course. The very fact that this topic appealed to us, that we find it sexy and submit grant applications for it, is evidence that we think this way. That our brain processes it somehow, copes with it somewhat differently than people who produce cringe content rather than reflect on it. I am being somewhat elitist now, but even for the researcher, the emotion comes first, the affect—that is the same. We can endeavor to use tools for rational taming of that affect as scholars, but it always comes in the second step.

How can this be done practically? Should we include some form of authorial disclosures?

That is an excellent question. It relates significantly to conventions of qualitative study writing. The original idea was actually that every qualitative study should include some form of reflexivity. You will still find this in many textbooks. However, if someone did this today, it would probably be returned, or at least appear strange. I think we could attempt to make autoethnography a genuinely stable component of methodology and interpretation for these types of texts. A certain self-analysis focusing on what constitutes a threat to my own self-worth. It would be almost a confessional section...

Some might object that this would considerably disrupt textual coherence...

It is actually surprising that we perceive this as something that disrupts textual flow. The original idea of qualitative research truly was that this would be everywhere. It used to be stated that a qualitative research report should contain a reflexive section—specifically a paragraph by the researcher about which personal parameters and experiences co-shaped the results. Today, however, the field moves in the other, Glaserian direction, much more positivist, seeking to measure reliability and intercoder agreement and so forth.

The study of cringe, and indeed the study of digital content generally, is strongly connected to a certain temporality. What was cringe in 2010 (e.g., early YouTube personalities) is today either ironically valued or considered authentic. Havas and Sulimma speak of ‘flexible normalism’—norms are flexible and cringe with them. When conducting research, we always capture only a momentary snapshot. How can we capture this moving target?

We touched on this at the beginning. Perhaps cringe content will disappear before any somewhat stable consensus on what cringe is can be established. For example, I am currently supervising a student's thesis on brain rot, and this is precisely such an ephemeral topic. He conceived it last year, it was approved sometime in spring, and it barely exists anymore. Nevertheless, just as there are no small roles, there are no small or insignificant topics.

One issue is relevance, another is decontextualization, because the norms that the content violates change. How do we address this?

Let us be frank: in the current peer review system, norms change several times before the review process even concludes. [Laughter] On the other hand, what we do has somewhat of an archival function. Even if norms changed and the described context no longer existed in social reality, it remains important to capture these ephemeral phenomena. Perhaps they will return in some other form, in some extended, adapted version. So I would not worry about it too

much. One must accept this when studying digital content. I would rather say the problem lies in explaining to grant institutions and generally to funding bodies that this is a relevant topic—even though it is a very niche, minority topic and often extremely mutable.

At the same time, when conducting interviews with creators or consumers of cringe content, we encounter retrospective construction of meaning. Schmidt and Winkler note that retrospective emotional reactions are filtered through memory and interpretation. How can we methodologically distinguish between authentic experience and post hoc rationalization?

I think trace interviews and walkthrough methods work well here. Respondents are presented with posts, ideally supplemented by the environment, the interface, which helps them return to that context.

But even there, some rationalization or stylization of responses can occur... Certainly. Not everyone will agree with this entirely, and there is also a form of self-correction. For example, someone who exclusively swipes on women with very large breasts probably will not do so in front of a researcher. Nevertheless, similar walkthrough methods are very useful for analyzing social media content.

Comments from YouTube, TikTok, or Reddit are often considered authentic data about audience reactions, but Phillips and Milner, for example, point to the ‘ambivalent internet’ where the boundary between sincerity, trolling, virtue signaling, and performativity is unclear. When someone writes ‘cringe’, does it mean they actually cringed, or are they performing for their online audience? Do you perceive a difference between authentically performed cringe and intentional cringe that is part of the culture industry?

I think there is a significant difference—I would hardly even compare them. Yes, they work with the same affect, they work with evoking awkwardness, but generally with cringe, not only content matters but also form. The form is often deliberately low-key, shabby, intentionally appearing amateurish or kitschy. This is why it is important that articles on cringe comedy have emerged in film studies, because now we can distinguish it from something else. Someone like Borat, for instance, has a completely neutral form—it cringes only through content. It would have to be filmed with some Kazakhstani film technique, or something... Which of course does not exist—I do not actually think Kazakhstan has less developed filmmaking techniques.

And then there is another, essentially meta-level, of various cringe compilations that are themselves cringe.

Indeed, it is almost a second-hand embarrassment. The forms are quite different, but it remains true that with cringe, the most important aspect is that it is essentially a mediated message about the standards and values of a given society.

Does authentic cringe differ from intentional cringe in any other way?

It can represent a certain revolt against elites. This, I think, is present only in authentic cringe, not the professional variety. I have always been interested in that layer of values and notions of perfection derived from neoliberalism and capitalism. In the case of authentic cringe content, the imperfection and failures it depicts are often combined with a battered aesthetic. Failure is defined (and commented upon with that relieved mockery) as non-compliance with a norm, and this norm very often expresses values and ideals inflated by neoliberalism. The emphasis on aesthetics, an almost designer perfection of visual phenomena, minimalism, restraint, moderation, 'beigeness' as manifestations of good taste—these derive from middle-class bourgeois habitus. When you violate or ignore this 'color palette' that today characterizes elite glamour style and serves as the language of neoliberalism, you end up on social media as a cringe character. The polysemy of cringe moreover encompasses both sympathy toward violating the neoliberal canon and mockery of the same.

Do you really see such power positions in this symbolic negotiation of neoliberalism? Is it not just digital folklore?

It is true that when people react to such content online, academics from their ivory towers tend to view it as merely harmless and completely marginal entertainment. On the other hand, in one of our projects we emphasized the concurrence of cringe content popularity and the boom of populist, anti-elitist attitudes in society. We were struck by the question of whether an analogy could be found between this celebration of amateurism and the revolt of the masses—new masses. I see in sympathies toward cringe also sympathies toward various forms of imperfection and failure and deficits, thus antipathy toward the perfectionism that neoliberalism brought. In cringe there is both mockery and sympathy for resistance to this perfection and thus copying of elites—and the same motif can be found in anti-elitist populism, where it is no longer just a joke. When a completely drunk tragic figure with one tooth becomes a viral hero, this is partly due to general fatigue and exhaustion from copying elite style and appearance, which is expansive within the neoliberal framework. In other, less amusing forms of political populism, the same position is occupied by reluctance to copy elites in other dimensions: their emphasis on education, science, information quality, minority human rights... Elites, unfortunately, so angered

a significant portion of the population with expansive neoliberal imposition of universally binding decent jackets and tasteful bathrooms and workaholism that it swept away the universal bindingness of respect for human rights and education as well...

Can we make generalizable statements about ‘cringe culture’ at all, when every cringe reaction is situated in specific cultural norms?

In my view, the concept of cringe is generalizable. As a reaction that is simultaneously unpleasant and pleasant. The realization that some failure is occurring, some non-compliance with a certain norm or demands, and simultaneously a shudder of delight that it is not me who fails to comply.

Cringe studies is a young field—the main theoretical works have emerged only in recent years. What future lies ahead? What aspects of cringe content can be further investigated?

I do not know what future it has, but if Donald Trump continues to rule for much longer, cringe studies may become very flourishing. Cringe can be, for example, a tool of certain resistance, forms of opposition. If the quality of democracy deteriorates and authoritarianism spreads, perhaps cringe practices will become spaces of dissent.

Irena Reifova was interviewed by Jan Zapotocky on December 3rd, 2025.

Irena Reifova is an Associate Professor at the Department of Media Studies, Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. Her research and teaching interests are in cultural studies, theory of popular culture, television studies, and post-socialist mediated memory. Her methodological focus is on qualitative methodology. She was a founding member and later Vice-Chair of ECREA Central and East-European Network. Irena Reifova served on the Management Committee of COST Action IS0609, Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies, from 2011 to 2014, and was a principal leader of two nationally funded research projects. She publishes her research nationally and internationally in edited books and peer-reviewed journals. She is a member of the editorial board of CM: Communication Management Quarterly (Serbia), Iluminace (Czech Republic), and Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research (de Gruyter). She has served as ECREA General Secretary from 2016 to 2021 and ECREA Vice-President from 2021 to 2024.

VIRGINIE ICHÉ, CÉLIA SCHNEEBELI, LYNN BLIN (EDS.). (2026). *CRINGE HUMOR ON SCREEN AND IN DIGITAL MEDIA: PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVES*. CHAM: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 367 PP., ISBN 978-3-031-93001-0.

Within current increasingly fragmented public spheres, cringe has emerged as one of the most recognizable products of contemporary media environments (Hepp, 2019) and crucial categories of popular culture (Middleton, 2014), while simultaneously remaining difficult to define and delimit conceptually. As the editors of the reviewed volume observe, cringe is “both polysemous and multi-functional” (Iché et al., 2026, p. 1), and as such consequently invites a level of scholarly engagement that remains largely absent from contemporary communication and media scholarship.

In fact, despite the growing prominence of cringe in both public discourse and academic scholarship, there has been no comprehensive attempt to address its communicative and pragmatic dimensions. In this respect, the edited volume by Virginie Iché, Célia Schneebeli, and Lynn Blin (Montpellier, Dijon) provides a framework for understanding cringe humor as a distinct phenomenon governed by its own communicative logics and audience dynamics.

The volume is organized into three sections that guide readers from historical and conceptual considerations to analyses of specific media practices. In the opening chapter, Iché and Schneebeli provide a theoretical foundation by tracing the genealogy of the concept of cringe. Their discussion moves from early understandings associated with expressions of fear and submission to contemporary meanings linked to second-hand embarrassment. Particularly interesting aspect concerns their conceptualization of cringe humor as a phenomenon that brings together the seemingly contradictory experiences of amusement and embarrassment. The major contribution of this chapter lies in distinguishing between “cringeworthy,” “cringe,” and “cringe humor,” while situating these categories within broader traditions of pragmatic and media scholarship.

Chapter two, authored by Alexander Brock, develops a theoretical framework for identifying different sources of cringe humor. Drawing on the British panel show *8 Out of 10 Cats Does Countdown*, Brock introduces the concept of “cringe loci,” referring to the sites within humorous interactions where embarrassment is generated and negotiated. In fact, the “cringe loci” provided within the chapter represents one of the volume’s most substantial theoretical contributions.

In Chapter three, Agnieszka Piskorska examines the operation of cringe humor in talk-show settings. Her analysis demonstrates that embarrassment should not be viewed merely as the outcome of communicative failure but rather as an interactional resource that amplifies comedic effects. Chapter four, by Jacob Rigal and Dima Alkhateeb, focuses on *Between Two Ferns with Zach Galifianakis*. Through a multimodal analysis, the authors illustrate how facial expressions, gestures, gaze patterns, and interactional dynamics collectively produce moments of social discomfort and audience amusement.

The second part of the volume addresses the social and cultural dimensions of cringe humor reception. The contributors demonstrate that responses to socially inappropriate, uncomfortable, or norm-violating behavior are shaped by factors such as age, cultural context, and broader systems of social norms and collective identities.

Chapter five, by Marc Hye-Knudsen, offers a comparative analysis of British and American productions, including *The Office*, *Peep Show*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. His findings underscore the importance of culturally specific understandings of shame, social propriety, and acceptable conduct in shaping the reception of cringe humor. Chapter six, authored by Luca Bischetti, investigates responses to humor related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on comparative empirical material from Italy and the United States, the chapter demonstrates that both age and cultural context significantly influence the experience of cringe.

Chapter seven presents a case study of “heterocringe,” an Instagram-based practice that employs embarrassment as a means of critiquing heteronormativity. Alice Cesbron, the author of this chapter, argues here that cringe possesses mobilizing potential and can function as a political and activist resource, ultimately serving as a tool for challenging dominant social norms. Chapter eight, by Célia Schneebeil, seems to be among the most theoretically productive contributions of the volume. Focusing on YouTube comments, Schneebeil examines how users articulate their experiences of embarrassment and negotiate the boundary between amusement and discomfort when engaging with cringe content.

The third section moves beyond conventional understandings of cringe humor. In Chapter nine, Thomas Messerli explores stand-up comedy and streaming platforms, analyzing the ambivalence that characterizes contemporary comedy consumption. His discussion highlights the tension between humor and viewers’ moral unease. Chapter ten, by Lynn Blin, examines Hannah Gadsby’s *Nanette*, offering an important clarification of the conceptual boundaries of cringe comedy and demonstrating that not all forms of uncomfortable humor should be subsumed under the category.

Chapter eleven focuses on the television series *Fleabag*. Adeline Terry shows within it how mechanisms commonly associated with cringe humor can also foster empathy toward fictional characters, thereby revealing the emotional and

relational dimensions of embarrassment. Finally, in Chapter twelve, Sylvia Sierra moves beyond media texts and investigates references to cringe in everyday interaction. Her analysis demonstrates that cringe has become a communicative resource not only within popular culture but also in ordinary social life.

Taken as a unified and completed work, the volume makes a significant contribution by providing a coherent theoretical framework for the study of cringe humor. The authors convincingly demonstrate that cringe cannot be reduced to a simple subtype of norm-violating humor. Rather, it constitutes a broader communicative phenomenon whose defining feature lies in the simultaneous presence of embarrassment and amusement.

From the perspective of communication and media studies, one of the volume's major strengths is its engagement with a diverse range of media environments, including television, digital platforms, and social media. This breadth also opens productive avenues for thinking about affect and affective publics in contemporary media culture. Moreover, the book offers considerable potential for scholars of political communication. Although political processes are not its explicit focus, the analytical tools developed throughout the volume could readily be applied to the study of politicians' digital performances, viral moments of public embarrassment, and the circulation of politically consequential content across networked platforms.

Two limitations nevertheless deserve attention. First, the volume is deeply rooted in Western popular culture and media contexts. As a result, its findings cannot easily be generalized across cultural settings. Second, the role of platforms themselves remains underdeveloped. While the case studies identify platforms and social media as spaces where cringe content circulates, they devote relatively little attention to the infrastructural and algorithmic conditions that may actively foster the production and visibility of such content (Papacharissi, 2015; van Dijck, 2013). In other words, the study of cringe on platforms is not fully accompanied by an examination of why platforms have become especially fertile environments for cringe culture, nor how this development may be connected to broader questions of communication power (Castells, 2009).

Overall, *Cringe Humor on Screen and in Digital Media* is a theoretically sophisticated and empirically rich contribution that establishes cringe as a legitimate object of scholarly inquiry. It will be of particular interest to researchers working in media studies, digital culture, humor studies, and communication research more broadly.

DISCLOSURE OF AI USE

The manuscript was proofread using GPT-5 (OpenAI) to improve grammar, spelling, and stylistic consistency.

REFERENCES

- Castells, M. (2009). *Communication Power*. Oxford University Press.
- Hepp, A. (2019). *Deep Mediatization: Key Ideas in Media & Cultural Studies*. Routledge.
- Iché, V., Schneebeli, C., & Blin, L. (Eds.). (2026). *Cringe Humor on Screen and in Digital Media: Pragmatic Perspectives*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Middleton, J. (2014). *Documentary's Awkward Turn: Cringe Comedy and Media Spectatorship*. Routledge.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. Oxford University Press.
- van Dijck, J. (2013). *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Oxford University Press.

Damian Guzek

 0000-0002-8138-8128

UNIVERSITY OF SILESIA IN KATOWICE, PALACKÝ UNIVERSITY OLOMOUC

AUTHORS

Snežana Bajčeta is a PhD candidate in Media and Communication Studies at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade, and an associate at the University of Donja Gorica. Her research interests include journalism studies, platform studies, comparative media systems, and media and democracy.
E-mail: snezanabajceta@gmail.com

István Benedek, PhD, is a political scientist specializing in democratic theory, democratization and autocratization, populism, political polarization, Euroscepticism, and comparative politics. He is a recipient of the János Bolyai Research Fellowship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (grant no. BO/00287/26).
Email: benedek.istvan@tk.hu

Edlira Gugu is a lecturer at the Department of Literature and Journalism at the Faculty of Human Sciences, University “Aleksandër Xhuvani” in Albania. Her research interests focus on digital humanities, computational literary analysis, Albanian literature pedagogy, emotion analysis in literature, technology integration in humanities education, and cultural preservation in digital analysis.
Email: edlira.gugu@uniel.edu.al

Aleksandra Krstić, PhD, is a full professor at the Department of Journalism and Communication, Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade. Her research interests include journalism and media studies, visual communication and representation, political and editorial cartoons, media ethics, conflict reporting, media-politics relations, and media and democracy.
E-mail: aleksandra.krstic@fpn.bg.ac.rs

Jonáš Syrovátka, PhD is researcher at the Department of Media Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague. His research interests cover the fields of disinformation, propaganda, and influence operations. Currently, he focuses on ways in which gendered disinformation and anti-gender discourses are used by right-wing political actors.
Email: 69895825@fsv.cuni.cz

Gabriella Szabó, PhD, is a Senior Research Fellow at the ELTE Centre for Social Sciences in Budapest, Hungary. Her research interests include political communication, political emotions, emotionalization, and multimodal political discourse. Email: szabo.gabriella@tk.hu

Lenka Vochocová is an Associate Professor and researcher at the Department of Media Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague. Her areas of expertise include political economy of communication, gender media studies, and theories of the public sphere. Currently, she focuses on studying political participation in social media environments, with an emphasis on gender aspects of online deliberation. Email: lenka.vochocova@fsv.cuni.cz

Jan Zápotocký is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University. His research interests are in the fields of social media studies, political communication, and the dynamics of the affective turn in online environments. Email: jan.zapotocky@fsv.cuni.cz

CENTRAL EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION (ISSN 1899-5101) CEJC.PTKS.PL

Central European Journal of Communication is an Open Access journal which welcomes online submissions. The website cejc.ptks.pl offers information about Publication Ethics and Submission Guidelines for authors, editors and reviewers.

Central European Journal of Communication is published by the Polish Communication Association. It is financed by the Polish Communication Association and the following supporting institutions:

- Faculty of Management and Social Communication, Institute of Journalism, Media and Social Communication, Jagiellonian University, Cracow, Poland;
- Faculty of Social Communication and Media, University of Wrocław, Poland;
- Faculty of Theology, Institute of Media Education and Journalism, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, Warsaw, Poland;
- Faculty of Journalism, Information, and Book Studies, University of Warsaw, Poland;
- Institute of Media, Journalism, and Social Communication, University of Gdańsk, Poland;
- Institute of Social Communication and Media, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin, Poland;
- Jan Kochanowski University, Kielce, Poland;
- University of Warmia and Mazury, Olsztyn, Poland;
- Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland;
- The Pontifical University of John Paul II, Cracow, Poland.

Central European Journal of Communication is indexed in the following databases: ARIANTA, BazHum, CEEOL, CEJSH, ERIH PLUS, EBSCO, SCImago Journal & Country Rank, SCOPUS (CiteScore, SJR, SNIP) and Web of Science Core Collection (Emerging Sources Citation Index), as well as scored on the list of scientific journals by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Poland.

Central European Journal of Communication

ul. Uniwersytetu Poznańskiego 5, 61-614 Poznań, Poland
cejc.ptks.pl • journal@ptks.pl

The Polish Communication Association

residential address: ul. Koszarowa 3, 51-149 Wrocław, Poland
correspondence address: ul. Głęboka 45, 20-612 Lublin, Poland
www.ptks.pl • office@ptks.pl



Polish Communication
Association

Central European Journal of Communication

www.cejc.ptks.pl

Central European Journal of Communication is published twice a year (in Spring and Fall) by the Polish Communication Association. It engages in critical discussions on communications and media in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. CEJC welcomes submissions of both theoretical and empirical research from a wide range of disciplinary approaches. We also publish papers on methods and concepts, book reviews, conference reports, interviews with scholars and media practitioners (policy-makers, media managers and journalists). The journal is indexed in several scientific databases, including SCOPUS, Web of Science Master Journal List (Clarivate), Central and Eastern European Online Library, Central European Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities and on the list of scientific journals of the Ministry of Education and Science in Poland.

ISSN 1899-5101