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Article – Open section

Voice on video

Music, affect, and communication in campaign videos in the Australian Voice to Parliament referendum

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Abstract

Audio-visual communication takes up a large amount of everyday communication, including in the political and news spheres. With this proportion still growing, and the emergent logics of sound/music as sharing principle/vector, it is striking that sound/music is still understudied in its ability to communicate outside of a stricter arts-related sphere. This is not least true with regard to music's ability to influence affect and emotions. In this article, I use the case of the 2023 Australian Voice to Parliament referendum to further the understanding of the audio in audio-visual communication. Through a qualitative analysis of two videos, one arguing for and one against the referendum proposal, I show the differing strategies of the campaigns as well as how deliberate use of audio functions as political speech. Thus, I take steps toward bridging a disciplinary divide and highlight the contribution of music as a medium of political communication.

Keywords

Video, audio-visual communication, music, affect, political communication

Introduction

In 2023, Australians voted in a referendum for the first time in over 20 years. The issue voted on was a proposal to change their constitution to include two things: formal recognition of Indigenous Australians, and establishment of a body, The Voice to Parliament, which would advise parliament in matters pertaining to Indigenous Australians. Commonly referred to as "The Voice", this proposal was voted down by a majority in all states and territories, except the Australian Capital Territory, despite early polling showing a comfortable lead in favour (ABC, 2023).

The debate leading up to the Voice to Parliament referendum was fraught. As Bruns et al. (2023) have shown, the referendum appears to have spoken to existing perceptions of division within Australian society, and, as a referendum with a simple Yes/No answer, it was always going to be divisive. Campaigning soon coalesced around two main campaigns, respectively *Yes 23* and *Vote No*, though other, smaller campaigns ran alongside them. Both campaigns fronted Indigenous Australians, using multiple arguments and platforms. Overall, the *Vote No* campaign strongly featured the claim that the Voice to Parliament was a divisive construct in itself and therefore should be opposed, while *Yes 23* focused on the moral cause of recognising First Nations peoples and giving them a say in affairs pertaining to them.

As a white European, settled in Australia, I followed the campaign with interest, both as a civilian and as a researcher with a particular interest in elections, discourses in communication, and video as a mode of communication.

With this article, I examine one aspect of that campaigning – the use of video messaging which included music – and explore the affective impact of example videos. The reason for focusing on video is the large – often academically underexplored – amount of online political communication that takes place via video, especially shorter video forms consumed on social media platforms. This pivot to video (Dunham, 2020) is exemplified by the rise of TikTok as a media platform (Feldkamp, 2021; Li, 2022), with older social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) adding video options to keep up. Recent findings show that 92% of internet users watch internet-distributed videos (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2024). In Australia, Lotz and McCutcheon (2023) show that 72% of screen-viewing Australian adults watch such videos. Videos on digital platforms are diverse in length, format, and content – there is a significant difference between long, highly produced essays and short, everyday narrations. All this video content is encompassed in what Lotz and Lunardi (2025) call "hosted video", which consists of a wide range of types and genres of content, viewed by audiences who are comparatively small against traditional mass media. Micro video as a concept helps us acknowledge that videos on digital platforms serve a myriad of purposes yet have commonalities that make it meaningful to also consider them as a whole.

Political campaigning is adapting to the video-first world – after all, good video wins (Dunham, 2019). Video-centric platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are of

increasing interest to political actors and are where many younger voters can be reached (Park et al., 2023). The use of videos in political campaigning is not new, nor is research on their spreadability, style, and influence (cf. Wallsten, 2010; Brantner et al., 2019; Gbadegesin & Onanuga, 2019; Cervi et al., 2023). The use of music in video communication is prevalent, but there is a lack of attention to this intersection, despite music's well-known ability to contribute to a narrative, especially affectively, and influence our emotions (cf. Juslin & Sloboda, 2001; Kassabian, 2013). As a result, there is still a gap between the understanding of music and of political communication. Here, I begin to address this knowledge gap. To do so, I perform an in-depth analysis of two campaign videos, one from each side of the Voice to Parliament referendum debate. I show how the campaigns utilised the medium of video, and how their messaging compared, particularly focusing on music and the operationalisation of emotions. Through this case, a better understanding of the influence of music in (political) video appears.

Background

The present work is based in a combination of textual analysis of screen content, understood as images and words, with music analysis as based in film music theory, and analysed through a lens informed by affect theory. Film music theory is where the understanding of what music does to and with an audience is best articulated, and where affect and emotions are central to this understanding. As Kassabian (2013) shows, sound and affect are closely connected, a factor often researched in film music scholarship but less present elsewhere. Kalinak (1992, p.15) similarly writes of the "mutual implication" of sound and image.

Therefore, if music is present, it is co-creating meaning with the images through factors like mood, emotion, or characterisation (Kalinak, 1992, p. 30-31), which influence the audience's understanding of such audio-visual work. Kalinak identifies the elements of music as tonality, harmony, rhythm, dynamics, tempo, pitch, timbre, and motif – all of which can be used to further the audience's understanding of a film, its characters, narrative, and message. From a music psychology perspective, Juslin and Sloboda (2001, quoted in Wang & Ji, 2015) have identified the same factors as central. Kassabian (2002) shows how music transports us anywhere in(to) audio-visual art and leads us to identify with its characters. Thus, audio-visual music can bring in affective resonances and influence how an audience experiences character, space, and emotion (D'Adamo, 2018) and draw on particular social and emotional connections (Tincknell, 2010). Therefore, the deliberate use of music in audio-visual work must be understood as part of that work's communication and addressed as such. This is perhaps especially important when we consider political communication, where the stakes are higher in driving an emotional discourse.

To understand the work done by affect in such political videos, I draw primarily from the work of Sara Ahmed, not least because she is interested in what emotions *do* more

than what they *are* (Click, 2019, p. 13). As such, I understand emotions as expressions or impact of affect, where affect is bodily (Massumi, 2002), but also, as Clough (2008, p. 2) writes:

> There is a reflux back from conscious experience to affect, which is registered, however, as affect, such that past action and contexts are conserved and repeated, autonomically reactivated but not accomplished; begun but not completed.

Ahmed's idea of emotions as "sticky" and attached to objects, thereby imbuing meaning (Ahmed, 2014, p. 11-13, 89-95, 194-195) and working to construct people as subjects and objects to us (Ahmed, 2014, p. 92), is especially poignant in the context of political discourses. Not least, Ahmed's wider body of work shows how emotions are powerful tools to construct in- and out-groups, such as the nation, the body politic, or (the) people, and that emotions of any flavour can construct such narratives and understandings (cf. Ahmed, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014). This attention to the cultural politics of emotion makes her approach to affect particularly well suited to analysing political campaign videos. The construction of us-versus-them dichotomies is salient to a debate as polarised and polarising as the Voice to Parliament referendum was. I posit that music can function as a glue for sticky emotions, or as a distribution system, where it aids in attaching emotions to objects and ideas within audio-visual media, and, simultaneously, helps these emotions be received.

Affect theory applied as a lens to audio-visual content allows us to understand the aural as also contributing to affective polarisation (Bakker & Lelkes, 2024). Research into how music is operationalised in political campaigning indicates this salience, as does work engaging with music and artists as political actors. One example is studies of the role of protest music and songs, particularly in the context of the United States, including some that show the role of Black voices in protest music (Hobson, 2008). The focus in this scholarship is often on the role of lyrics (cf. Boucher, 2004; Dunlap, 2006; Kizer, 1983) and music as speech and speech acts (London, 2008). Particularly considering protest songs as propaganda bears this out (Ross, 2013). Artists themselves can be nodes of political action, for example, Bob Dylan's protest songs (Marshall, 2007) and the work of artists like Bono as figureheads in social justice movements (Street et al., 2008). This work is, however, still underdeveloped where the emotional resonance of music intersects with political communication.

It is also worth noting that the work cited above deals with music as a form of political action, which is not what this article does. Instead, I analyse music as being in service of politics, but not in itself political music; it is what London (2008) calls "third-party use" of music. As London also argues, the emotional impact of the music is key to successful third-party use of music.

Music's effect on humans and our emotions as a "gateway" to affect and emotion is recognised within several areas of study, including semiotics (Tagg & Clarida, 2003),

psychology (Hallam et al., 2016), neuroscience (Trainor & Zatorre, 2016), and musicology (Kassabian, 2013). As Gorbman (1987) argued, music in an audio-visual setting has a tendency to slip by our consciousness, affecting us even when unnoticed. Our responses to music, including on the levels of affect and emotion, are influenced by cultural factors (Kassabian, 2013). That said, Mavrolampados and Luck (2018) show that Western-style music is familiar to people across cultures to the point that their physiological responses are similar, though self-reported subjective emotion varies. Consider, also, that all hearing (and some D/deaf) people have some experience with music's influence on our emotional lives, as we experience music changing the spring in our step, our mood, or concentration levels. As DeNora (1999, 2000) shows, music is a "technology of the self", and perhaps even more so in our age of ubiquitous listening (Kassabian, 2013).

Methods

Selecting the videos

To make the selection, I viewed the videos posted on the official campaign YouTube channels of the *Yes 23* and *Vote No* campaigns. Both campaigns posted multiple videos with lengths varying from 10 seconds to several minutes over the course of the campaign. I organised these into a typology based on length and style of content, ranging from very short, snappy soundbites to longer, narrative-style videos. In many cases, the very short videos were edits of the longer ones and were too short and with too sparse sound to be suitable for analysis including a focus on music.

Instead, I selected two longer, narrative videos: from *Vote No*, a video titled *One, Together – Full Documentary*, and from *Yes 23*, one titled *Aunty Bilawara Lee*. The latter is typical for a type of *Yes 23* video, sitting at around two minutes and centring on one Indigenous individual's narrative of personal resonance with the referendum question. During the campaign, *Yes 23* posted a total of 75 videos, of which 15 were single-person stories between 1:30 and 2:30 minutes long (all videos are still available on the Yes23 YouTube channel; Yes23, n.d.). *One, Together*, however, is an outlier in terms of length at nearly nine minutes. It is a very rich text, which allows for a nuanced look at the audio-visual strategy of the campaign, and is one of several videos focusing on Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, a lead spokesperson for the campaign. No other videos were this long, and this particular video was the source of several shorter edits. However, *Vote No*'s YouTube channel was deleted during my data collection, which regrettably leaves me without an accurate number of videos posted by them. I also considered impact, where these two videos were among the most watched on the respective YouTube channels;[1] I have not attempted to estimate their spread outside of these channels.

By including this longer video from the *Vote No* campaign, I acknowledge that I am giving more time to their communication. However, as I will show, there is also a much more deliberate style of communication happening from the *Vote No* campaign, which

warrants a closer look and a deeper understanding, not least as the videos on this channel were produced by an entity called *Fair Australia*, which reporting shows is a part of right-wing lobby group *Advance* (Wilson & Buckley, 2023). On the other hand, the shorter *Yes 23* video highlights some of the missed opportunities for them and the wider Yes campaign. Most importantly, both videos are representative of the respective campaigns, of their messaging in and the production style of their videos. The fact that *Vote No* produced this longer video, styled as a professionally produced film and featuring a high-profile Indigenous person, while *Yes 23* focused on shorter, less polished videos and a wide range of Indigenous people, indicates something central about their strategies.

The analyses

In the analyses below, I apply an inductive textual analysis by picking out overall narratives as well as particularly a/effective moments and examining what the audience is being asked to feel and, therefore, how they are expected to receive the messages of the videos. This type of close reading, seen in other video analyses, such as those of Stein (2015), Stevens (2020), or Coppa (2022), which is combined with music analysis (as Liljedahl, 2019, also does), is in itself a form of textual analysis, based in the film music analysis outlined earlier. By closely reading the videos and considering their elements, a comprehensive analysis emerges that does not privilege nor ignore either element but gives each space in the understanding of the video as a singular piece of work. Therefore, the analyses below weave between the elements, following them as they come to prominence or recede into the background. Such weaving makes it possible to follow the more salient and impactful parts of the video; this also furthers the focus on affect and emotions.

I honed this method, which I now call the "Mixing Desk method", during previous work (Svegaard, 2019, 2022), which I adapted here to allow for more focus on spoken words. It is inspired by Chion's (1994) concept of synchresis: the co-reading of a visual moment and a musical one as they occur simultaneously and inform the understanding of each other. One way of thinking of videos with continuous music is as a string of synchretic moments of co-constituted meaning between the elements of a video – music/sound, words, and images. Depending on the style of the video, these elements have different weight and prominence that shifts over the duration of the work.

Emotions are, of course, not easily measured, and expressed differently on individual as well as cultural levels, requiring a qualitative method for analysis. They are operationalised in political communication in culturally specific as well as general ways, and, as a growing field of study shows, affective polarisation is a factor in how we behave as political actors. It is perhaps tempting to think of anger or fear as emotions typically operationalised for this end, but as Ahmed (2014) shows, emotions such as love or shame can work powerfully to create us-versus-them dichotomies. An affect-informed analysis is therefore interested in drawing out what emotions (are attempting to) do within the videos as part of political speech. Identification and feeling-with are common tools of film music to

guide the audience through the narrative. These videos are working to similar ends and using similar tools.

Case 1: *One, Together* – the case for a No

One, Together is quite long for a campaign video, and its structure and shifting music allow it to expand its argument and weave a complex narrative. From the opening, it argues its central point of oneness and togetherness through a narrative of familial and romantic love. Only at the end of the video is the intended purpose made evident: to argue for a No vote in the Voice to Parliament referendum, revealing that it is not a documentary, despite its subtitle. *One, Together* is structured in six acts and tells the story of and by its main protagonist, Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, one of Australia's most

Table 1
An Overview of the Acts of One, Together

Time	Person(s) in focus/ speaker	Music	Narrative keywords
00:00	Senator Price	Guitar, soft, gentle, open	Welcome, introduction in language, heritage, background
00:59	Senator Price, then Mr. Lillie	Guitar foregrounded, stronger, more decisive	Relationship, family, children, blended family
02:22	Senator Price	Softer again, guitar remains, pensive, sadness – as narrative shifts to politics, long pauses build to arpeggios, supporting the drive in her story	The challenges of Indigenous Australians, particularly violence and domestic violence, choice to enter politics, raising of their children
04:48	Senator Price, then Mr. Lillie, visuals show both	Soft, plucking guitar, gentle under her voice	Love as something that belongs in/to Australia, in homes Concern that home will fall apart, not give opportunities in the future, reasoning unclear Their children and blended family/diversity as uniquely Australian
07:05	Both together	Lyrics enter, male first, then female, then duet, sentimental, emotional, longing. The song is pre-existing (see below)	Lyrics tell a story of fear and worry alleviated by togetherness and love Scenes of domestic bliss
08:05	Senator Price	Soft, slides to the background to foreground spoken words, positive mood At the end brings in two lines of lyrics, exiting on an up-beat song	The message about the Voice as a vehicle for division, asking us to vote against it

prominent Indigenous politicians, and its secondary protagonist, Colin Lillie, whom the video introduces as "Songwriter, Proud Scozzie [Scottish person] , Jacinta's Husband". On the surface, it tells the story of their relationship, about adversity in Senator Price's life, and overcoming this through love.

Table 1 provides a rough outline of the main characteristics in each of the short acts in the video and is included for clarity. I identified the change in acts by the often-coinciding shifts in music, visual focus, and focal person; in this video, the soundtrack signalled changes first, quickly followed by a marked visual shift in setting and protagonist, and finally in thematic content. The table gives an overview of the workings of the video before delving into a deeper analysis.

In the beginning

The opening to the video shows Senator Price in a bushland setting. Golden light, soft focus, and gentle movements dominate the visuals for the entire runtime, supported by high production value aesthetics. The music opens the video along with the pleasant imagery, setting the tone before any words are spoken. This music is soft and open, expectant, and sets a positive mood. From the start, the music places itself within a country-music aurality, particularly through the sound of the guitar, which is the dominant instrument throughout. By doing this, the music marries itself to the visual impression of rural life, bush, and an authenticity that relates to both genre and place (Bauder, 2016; Smith & Brett, 2000). This emphasis of rural Australia in both visuals and music sets expectations and signals the intended audience and a particular view of what Australia is. To an audience in the know, who share these particular aesthetic preferences and understandings of Australia, the use of country is a marker of identity (Kassabian, 2013). The viewer is led towards understanding Senator Price as the protagonist and to associate her with positive emotions.

Spoken dialogue begins shortly after. We hear the welcoming words as Senator Price is zoomed in on, identifying her as the speaker though her voice is non-diegetic. It is worth noting that the first words we hear are a greeting in Warlpiri, Senator Price's Indigenous language, and that the introduction foregrounds her heritage and dual-culture upbringing. The mix of culture is operationalised to outline an idea of humanity as the one thing that binds all people together regardless of heritage, though this is also quickly specified as an Australian humanity. As Senator Price says, "I belong to this world, just as all other human beings belong to this world, like all other Australians belong to Australia". Oneness is thus specified as Australian oneness, where Australia is understood as colour-blind (Bonilla-Silva, 2015), a place where race is not a divisive factor in the now. It is also a creative choice that allows Senator Price to stand in for all Indigenous Australians. Overall, the video speaks at once to an idea of national exceptionalism, one of "regular rural folk" as the heart of the nation and as something uniquely and authentically Australian, which the protagonists exemplify.

Woman meets man

Music foreshadows the shift into the second segment; the melody shifts, becomes stronger, and the style of guitar playing becomes more dynamic, decisive, and positive. The shift coincides with a shot of Senator Price and Mr. Lillie, arms around each other. Visual intimacy along with positive, authentic emotions in the music invites the audience closer, suggests points of identification with the two leads, as well as directing sympathy towards them and their obvious love for each other. The synchresis of those changes drive the narrative forward; with the aural shift towards what can be understood as a more "masculine" musical landscape through the use of the guitar (cf. Kielich, 2025), Mr. Lillie's presence is heard before it is seen. As the act opens visually and narratively, the theme of family continues with the introduction of Lillie and of their blended family, of love, their relationship, and the upbringing of their children. The soundtrack stays within the country idiom, fitting very well with the visuals of a cabin-like house in a rural setting and the subsequent scenes of domestic bliss and idyllic rural family life, supporting the spoken narrative.

About a minute into this segment, Mr. Lillie's voice takes over. He, too, speaks of their love against resistance and raising their children, encapsulated in his statement that "we are one". The musical motif of this segment is further connected to Mr. Lillie when we see shots of him playing the guitar, which places him within the music, embodying the sounds that are evoking love and strength. The music functions as leitmotif (cf. Bribitzer-Stull, 2015) and works as a characterisation of him with warm, country masculinity.

While the video constructs the protagonists and their family as relatable, they are also simultaneously exceptional. The spoken narrative emphasises humanity and Australianness as universal values that allow this family to blend together across differences: an extraordinary love that is idealised yet attainable.

Indigenous woman

The third act is perhaps the most personal, focusing on Senator Price's own history, including mentions of violence and abuse in the community where she grew up. A physical change of setting from bush to town signals this shift too, leaning into a perceived division in Australia between rural and urban populations, though mitigated by the same golden light, probably alluding to Senator Price's origins in the Northern Territory, around the central dessert area of Australia.

Leading the audience into this different emotional landscape, the soundtrack drops to a more pensive, dark mood, starting with a floating keyboard chord. The subtle use of music works well to underpin the Senator's words as she tells how her experiences led her to enter politics. The music is soft enough to be less noticeable and thereby not announce itself as doing the emotional work it is actually doing in providing the emotional valence for the story. As the segment builds to its conclusion – that your accomplishments define you (implicitly, not your background) – the music appropriately builds with it, scaffold-

ing the story with an emotional surge, lifting the audience up out of the darker past. This emotional congruence, or parallel development (Gorbman, 1980, p. 189), scaffolds the narrative and bridges well to the next act, which returns to the themes of love vs. division.

Love and difference

"It is important to me that we don't divide ourselves along lines of race in this country", Senator Price says, opening the next act. They make explicit the undercurrents in the previous segments, which can now be understood collectively as speaking against the idea that race matters. Soft humming by human voices is added to the music in this act, increasing the invitation to the audience to identify with the speakers. The music otherwise remains solidly in its country idiom, and the central guitar again signals the presence of Mr. Lillie, who takes the word after the opening.

His voice is clear, but there is a slight wobble, a tension that shows strong emotions, and carries the argument through these emotions. Mr. Lillie speaks of his concern that Australia will be less fair in the future, and he suggests that the nation can lose its exceptional state of equality and opportunity, something he connects to the ways in which the country is blended – like his family is. It is difficult to doubt his sincerity – an assessment largely grounded in how he sounds. However, when reading a transcript of Mr. Lillie's arguments, they do not entirely make sense. He speaks of his own immigration to Australia and of his concern that newcomers will not have the same opportunities that he did, and later states that anyone "could be Aussie", which appears to contradict his former points. He also speaks of his blended family, his love for his kids, and that he will not stand for "a line going through my family", though what or where that line *is* is not explained. Instead, it invokes an unknown threat, marked as serious through his passionate delivery. Throughout, the emotional resonance in his delivery is compelling, which carries the apparent contradictions and tenuous connections through in what can best be described as affective communication. As Kassabian (2002, p. 56) argues, music in narrative film "serves three broad purposes: *identification*, *mood*, and *commentary*". In this case, the mood is central to the acceptance of Lillie's arguments, as is the identification that music has aided in establishing through the short video. Thereby, the affective narrative is able to "cover" the less convincing spoken narrative.

Voice in song

The fifth and penultimate act speaks directly to our emotions. It is a musical interlude without any spoken dialogue – essentially a music video. It therefore requires a recalibration of the mixing desk to centre the lyrics and music in different ways. For reasons of space, I am therefore going to reduce this act to its simplest points.

First, the song is a love song, which drives home the romantic story between its protagonists. Second, the song, which is "Night & Day", is written and performed by Lillie and Price.[2] Music gives us an idea of what it is like to be the artist (London, 2008) – a con-

versation between artist and audience on an emotional level. These two factors ground the narrative in the love story between the protagonists, helped by strong synchresis underlining the message of love with images of that same love. Even though not everyone would recognise the origin of the song, "Night & Day" is about overcoming obstacles to love together, beautifully concluding the emotional arc of *One, Together* up till this point.

The message

In the final act, the video gives the campaign message that it has been building towards, and thus the arguments made earlier make sense in retrospect. To make space for clear, verbal communication, the music is pared back and slides into the background from the prominence it had just prior – a move from emotional to verbal communication. Apart from the first seconds, featuring the Australian flag, the focus is on Senator Price speaking directly to the camera. Senator Price explains that the referendum is coming, and that a Voice would mean Australians are treated differently based on the colour of their skin – the very opposite of all we have seen modelled by her and Lillie in the video. Working from the emotional identification the video has built, she ends by saying she will vote no because this "will divide us". In the final moments, the video zooms out, a wide shot of her and Lillie sitting in a gorgeous landscape at sunset, and the central message of "Vote no to the voice of division" is written across the screen.

Only now is it clear what the purpose of the story was – especially in terms of its emphasis of family, love, mixed backgrounds, and blended family constellations, intended to contrast with this presumed future division. By equating the family and the nation, the video casts the Voice to Parliament as a force that will split this beautiful family along with the country. The video's established discourse of humanity as the opposite of racial identification comes to fruition in suggesting that because the Voice would represent Indigenous Australians, adopting it would be the end of equality.

A transcript of this video might not make a strong argument in words alone, but it does not have to. It is even more compelling for not making an intellectual argument. Because this is an affective and emotional argument, it relies on us to identify with the people we see, believe in their emotions, and reflect them back. Music supports the affect and moves the narrative along, scaffolding the verbal argumentation. As Cohen (2010, p. 881) argues:

> The emotional associations generated by music attach themselves automatically to the visual focus of attention or the implied topic of the narrative. Because film content provides the object of emotion generated by music, the film helps to control the definition of the object of the emotion experienced during the presence of music.

The soft and emotional music helps the audience go with the flow, get drawn in and along, and be allowed to feel with and for the characters in the video. This congruence (Cohen, 2010) gives the audience a higher chance of understanding and recalling the argu-

ment in the video. At the same time, these characters share their emotions above all. This is a video about and of feelings. It is not meant to be an argument about rights or laws, it is a story of love through adversity, and as such is using emotional resonance in its goal to draw in and convince its audience.

Case 2: *Aunty Bilawara Lee* – the case for a Yes

Where *One, Together* was, at its core, a love story arguing for a No vote, this video is a biopic arguing for a Yes vote. Like with the *Vote No* video, the agency, etc., behind this video is not known, nor is the composer.[3] With its shorter runtime, this video has a more focused message, but it also breaks down into segments (see Table 2), though much shorter and less clearly defined.

Table 2
Outline of Aunty Bilawara Lee

Time	Person(s) in focus/ speaker	Music	Narrative
00:00	Auntie Bilawara Lee	Piano trills, cheerful	Introduction, a few words in an Indigenous language
00:13	Auntie Bilawara Lee	Soft, sustained, floating keyboard chords in pensive mood + occasional piano, more positive mood	Outlining the history of Indigenous rights efforts
00:46	Auntie Bilawara Lee, in parts in conversation with an unnamed and unheard gentleman	Shift to more sad chords, then back to the same softly sustained	Outlining challenges Indigenous Australians meet
00:55	Auntie Bilawara Lee	Piano adds trilling chords	Speaks to how to find solutions through giving Indigenous people their say
01:45	Auntie Bilawara Lee	Returns to the soft, sustained chords	Not asking for more than recognition

As with the first video, one instrument is the significant bearer of music: here, piano rather than guitar. In addition, the music is more uniform: The dynamic changes are minimal, and the changes in mood similarly small. These differences are significant, not least the lack of a clear connection between music (genre) and argument, and the less robust affective scaffolding of the story that comes from the minimalist approach in the score.

Introduction and history

The opening to the video is similar to the opening of *One, Together* in that its central figure, who is an Indigenous woman, greets the audience (this time in Larrakia/Gulumir-

rgin language), explains who she is, including her family, heritage, and country connections. However, that is the only real similarity between the two videos. The introduction, lasting just over ten seconds, is underscored by gentle, broken-up chords on a piano, reminiscent of birdsong. They can be described as gently cheerful, mostly neutral, but in a major key that gives a bit of a lift to the mood. Underneath are soft, sustained chords on a keyboard. These chords are the main musical element, which carries through the entire video; the piano's broken-up chords and trills are the dominant instrument because they are the most noticeable element, while the sustained chords are low in the mix and very subtle. They are what Gorbman (1987) termed "unheard": They make no fuss and want us to not consciously hear them. This does not mean they do not exact any influence – according to Gorbman, this unheardness is the entire modus operandi of film music. However, where the music in *One, Together* also signified place and authenticity, the music in this video does not perform the same kind of identification or linking of person, topic, and genre. This music is neutral, lacking signification and emotional weight, and is reminiscent of stock music.

As opposed to the *Vote No* video, this video moves swiftly ahead to the main character, the titular Aunty[4] Bilawara Lee, and her perspective on Indigenous peoples' struggles for recognition. This second segment is carried mostly by the sustained keyboard chords with occasional piano embellishments. The music is soft and dreamy, the tonality and use of sustained chords bring a longing quality, a reach towards something pensive and with a touch of sadness, which underpins Aunty Bilawara Lee's story of Indigenous peoples' struggles. Meanwhile, Aunty Bilawara Lee is in the centre of the visuals against a blurred background; this style of videography is dominant throughout and a significant amount features her speaking to the camera. At intervals, the visuals leave her to show slow, soft shots in a similar style, centring Indigenous art and culture.

Aunty Bilawara Lee lists the momentous experiences she has lived through in the history of Indigenous Australians struggling for rights and recognition. As mentioned above, the music contains some emotional cues for the audience, though they remain subtle. The positive effect of this is a foregrounding of the spoken voice and its very powerful statement; the segment gives us an understanding of Indigenous history in Australia as seen through a single life. However, the softly longing music does not support the scope of the words, which would have benefitted from stronger emotions in the soundtrack. Additionally, the sound quality drops for a moment when the Uluru Statement from the Heart[5] is mentioned. Unfortunately, this distraction risks pulling the audience's attention towards the change in sound quality and away from the narrative, as it did my own.

Challenges and solutions

The following two sections highlight some of the struggles Indigenous Australians meet. Appropriately, the music moves towards a sadder tone at this point. That change becomes more noticeable when Aunty Bilawara Lee begins to speak of potential solu-

tions, especially her wish to be heard regarding Indigenous issues as a person whom they affect. She links this to the potential of Voice to Parliament to provide a "seat at the table" and implement local solutions to local issues. Here, the piano returns with its trills, injecting a hint of joy or hope into the narrative. For a few moments in this part of the video, the visual technique of close focus/blurry background is exchanged for a wider shot of Aunty Bilawara Lee in conversation with an unnamed Indigenous gentleman, with both in focus and the area around them clearly visible. The change in focus centres the plurality of Indigenous Australians and the collective gains, Aunty Bilawara Lee is arguing, and that she is not alone in her call for recognition. In conjunction, the music's injection of hope and joy into the narrative underlines the message that a Voice would be a step onto a path of better outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

Not asking for much

In the final section, we briefly hear what can be understood as responses to some of the common misinformation about the Voice (such as that documented by *The Guardian*; Remeikis & Butler, 2023), which spread widely on social media during the campaign (Graham, 2024). Aunty Bilawara Lee states that Indigenous Australians are not asking for much, only recognition, not money or "your backyard", and to be "included in the national debate". These are the final words of the video, which ends on the *Yes 23* campaign logo. As Aunty Bilawara Lee speaks her final message, the music is soft, sustained, pensive keyboard chords, floating under her words. They hint towards the gravity of the referendum, though the music is still subtle and nondescript. These pensive notes are not a call to action, as asking for a vote is. Instead, they almost contradict the hope and power of a Voice, which Aunty Bilawara Lee has otherwise clearly stated.

This contradiction between subtle music and powerful message is a central concept in this video, and a central problem. While this video has a clear political message, it fails to provide the affective hooks needed to create an emotional impact from the narrative. It is not utilising the "gateway" of music, but uses its words. By giving prominence to the words alone, it leaves those words unsupported by the music, and thus with less affect to carry the argument.

Discussion

The two videos analysed here demonstrate two different styles of political communication and of use of video for this purpose. *One, Together* is marked by a high production-value style of visuals as well as the use of music, which appears deliberate and effectively employed. By using music, which supports the narrative of the video, the emotional resonance of the story is enhanced and the communication becomes more effective as a result. The use of cues such as music genre and golden light further supports the meta-narrative of Australia as a unique place with a culture that is under threat from a

potential Yes vote in the Voice to Parliament referendum. It is a style of communication that leans on the affective and uses the concept of an exceptional love story between two people to extrapolate to the entire nation; it argues that a Voice would be divisive for the country as a whole. Using music strategically is a central part of how and why the emotional argumentation style is effective as political communication, given what we know of music's ability to guide an audience's identification and engagement. The ways in which this video uses the tools of a soundtrack, such as genre, tonality, instrumentation, and the use of vocals, is an example of effective use of music in this manner.

On the other hand, while *Aunty Bilawara Lee* is a well-argued work, it does not take its audience on an emotional journey. Instead, this video uses a different style of argumentation, where it relies on ideas of what is best for Indigenous Australians, which it substantiates through the lived experience of a respected member of an Indigenous community. There is no reason this story could not also be emotionally engaging; however, it is not, primarily due to the lack of affective support from the soundtrack. This music's minimal shifts is a large part of why. There are no hooks to drive affect, no emotional scaffolding of highs and lows in what is otherwise a well-told story of Indigenous struggle for recognition. Instead, this video uses its direct textual communication without affective support from the soundtrack in what is almost the opposite strategy to *One, Together*.

Despite Gorbman's (1987) argument that audio-visual music works well even when not consciously heard, it still must move us to work (the meaning of the word "emotion" is, after all, "to move"; Ahmed, 2014, p. 11). Together, the two videos show the effects of this exact phenomenon and, consequently, why paying attention to music in political communication is important. But, these videos also demonstrate some of the direct political cues that music can give through emotional valence.

By leaning into the country idiom, *One, Together* borrows place and authenticity from the genre, as well as drawing on an understanding of the genre as a bridge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians – as long as they are rural or regional (Baumer, 2015). Paired with an argumentation that hinges on the idea of oneness across so-called identity politics, the music fits the message. In addition, the tone and mood of the music support the narrative of the love story and invites the audience to identify with it (Kassabian, 2002). If such identification is established, the love between the couple can also create an image of Australia as equivalent to this personal love: a nation and family which is brought together across apparent divides, which flourishes in equality across differences, and gives opportunities to all. Thereby, the love between Senator Price and Mr. Lillie is also the love from/towards the nation.

But it is a love that has limits, primarily the limit of suggesting that Indigenous Australians suffer from systemic disadvantages. Ahmed (2014, p. 122–143) examines what it means to do something "in the name of love". She argues that love shapes collectives (a powerful in-group), and that love is directed towards a loveable object, often idealised, such as is the case for the Price-Lillie family, who are an idealised object themselves while

also performing ideal love. The perceived threat to this love, which remains vague and unarticulated until the last act of the video, is therefore a threat we as audiences relate to emotionally as we identify, through music (Kassabian, 2002), with the couple and family. The construction of this ideal as set within rural Australia also constructs this as the beloved, idealised Australia, the at once unique and relatable Australia, where divides do not exist. The limits of this Australia lie in disagreement with the idealised image. Suggesting that systemic inequalities exist is not welcome in this golden-lit, soft and warm Australia. That this point is argued emotionally rather than through verbal communication is central to why it is so effective.

The focus on The Voice to Parliament as divisive and unfair was a central argument of the entire *Vote No* campaign, and it is clear that this video is a well-considered part of that line of argumentation, and that resources were dedicated to make this argument work in video format. This reflects the coordinated *Vote No* campaign in general. It coalesced early, this video was also an early appearance relative to the campaign, which only ramped up in the last month before the referendum in October 2023; *One, Together* was posted already in April 2023. *Vote No* also had a deliberate strategy of fronting Senator Price and, secondarily, Nyunggai Warren Mundine, two prominent Indigenous politicians – a unified front, a strong and simple message, and an emotionally laden argument for a No.

As an example of *Yes 23*'s campaigning, *Aunty Bilawara Lee* also serves well. *Yes 23* argued very differently. In the video, Aunty Bilawara Lee tells a story that is, in many ways, as personal as the one in *One, Together*, and localised in her community, just as Senator Price is localised in a specific idea of place in her video. The differences in priorities from the campaigns are apparent from the start. While this video is well executed, apart from an unfortunate audio issue midway, it does not evoke emotions in the same way and does not have as strong and clear a message. On its surface, this story should be compelling as a testament of the impacts of the status quo on Indigenous Australians, as well as an argument about representation and historical injustices, but it is not. As I argued above, this is largely due to the minimalist approach to music, which does not invite the audience into the story, and does not provide sufficient identification with its protagonist.

Aunty Bilawara Lee's story was one of many such stories promoted by *Yes 23*. The Yes campaigns were not as united as the No campaigns. There was a small, grassroots, movement for a No from Indigenous people and supporters, who argued that the Voice was not the right way forward, but *Vote No* easily dominated. *Yes 23* also dominated the wider Yes campaign space, but it embraced a multi-pronged approach with multiple arguments for a Yes. This is reflected in the *Yes 23* campaign videos, which featured a wide range of Indigenous Australians, some well-known,[6] but mostly regular Australians. This strategy showed the wide diversity in Indigenous Australia but also meant that there were many different messages on why a Yes was desirable. The messaging focused more on a Voice being the "morally right" thing to do, with several lines of argumentation around what this meant. Spending patterns for advertising also show this diversity of approach versus

the more focussed *Vote No* campaign (Bruns & Angus, 2023). Ultimately, the lines of argumentation did not resonate with voters (Redbridge Group, 2023), despite the 2017 Australian plebiscite on equal marriage succeeding with a similar strategy (cf. Chen, 2019; Gravelle & Carson 2019), while the singular No messaging was apparently successful.

Conclusion

In this article, I have analysed two videos from the Australian Voice to Parliament referendum debate. These videos, posted on YouTube by the two largest campaigns in the debate, *Vote No* and *Yes 23*, are examples of the two campaigns' strategies and priorities. They also exemplify the differences in argumentation employed by the two campaigns. Where *Vote No* had a clear and direct message, argued through an emotionally laden tone, *Yes 23* used a wider range of argumentation and were less emotionally engaging in their argumentation.

Through close reading, using the mixing desk method, I examined each video and showed how the narrative is emotionally and affectively influenced by the use of music. *One, Together*, which was part of the *Vote No* campaign, argues through an emotional message that a Voice would divide the nation, both in general and specifically through its telling of the love story of its protagonists. It is a love that is first personal, then expanded to encompass an ideal (rural) Australia, and then operationalised to inject concern for the future of the nation and the family as "one". In this video, the music acts to support all elements of this argumentation. It injects a sense of place, of Australia, and works to enhance the emotional engagement with the love between Senator Price and Mr. Lillie, and thereby also supports the argument of a couple and nation at risk of being divided by outside forces in the form of the Voice to Parliament.

The second video, *Aunty Bilawara Lee*, argues that a Yes in the referendum would give Indigenous Australians recognition and representation. It further argues that these factors would both be the culmination of a decades-long civil rights struggle, and better the outcomes for Indigenous Australians by giving them more influence in matters that concern them directly. Though the video's protagonist argues passionately, her passion and emotions are not supported in the soundtrack, and thus fails to engage emotionally the way it happens in *One, Together*.

I am not arguing that having better music on the *Yes 23* videos – or less attention to it from *Vote No* – would have swayed the vote alone. What I have shown here is that music, as a conveyor of emotion, was utilised effectively by *Vote No* and not by *Yes 23*, and that something similar is true for their use of video as a medium. I have also demonstrated that audio-visual communication as affective argumentation needs and deserves more deliberate attention from scholarship concerned with political communication, even more urgently as we consume more and more of our news and political information through online video formats.

Notes

1 On the Yes 23 YouTube channel, "Aunty Bilawara Lee" is the most watched video above 30–35 seconds long as of August 2024 (https://youtu.be/H3SCyiH_sll?si=uvjb2e83BfsossQP). With the deletion of the *Vote No* channel during this investigation, the numbers for their videos are unfortunately not available (an archived version can be viewed at https://web.archive.org/web/20230427014032/https://www.youtube.com/embed/NYvCdvUDy7U.

2 "Night & Day" was released in 2012 on the SnapShot II album, featuring and promoting Indigenous artists. SnapShot II was released by CAAMA Music (more info can be found at https://www.caama-music.com.au/

3 I was able to discover credits for a different Yes video, which may suggest a similar approach with other videos, where no central agency is credited, but rather a group of creatives and producers. This video, featuring a mix of well-known and everyday Indigenous Australians was directed by Cate Shortland and Tony Krawitz with music by Sonar (Jolly, 2023). See Jolly (2023) for full credits.

4 "Aunty" and "Uncle" are honorifics for respected elders among many Indigenous peoples.

5 *The Uluru Statement From The Heart* is a document created by a caucus of representatives from a large range of First Nations peoples in Australia. The document calls for a Voice to Parliament as one of three key proposals to better lives for Indigenous Australians, the other two being Truth and Treaty (the statement can be read in full at ulurustatement.org).

6 The *Yes23* campaign created a video with Olympian Cathy Freeman, where she explains her support (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0X1H4ms2BtI), as well as a shorter edit of the same video.

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