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Brittany Haslem
Old Dominion University, brittanyhaslem@gmail.com

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TIKTOK AS A DIGITAL ACTIVISM SPACE: SOCIAL JUSTICE UNDER

ALGORITHMIC CONTROL

by

Brittany Haslem
B.A. December 2011, University of Tennessee

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Approved by:

Myles McNutt (Director)

Allison Page (Member)

Yvette Pearson (Member)

ABSTRACT

TIKTOK AS A DIGITAL ACTIVISM SPACE: SOCIAL JUSTICE UNDER ALGORITHMIC
CONTROL

Brittany Haslem
Old Dominion University, 2022
Director: Dr. Myles McNutt

TikTok, a video sharing application, has become the center of viral internet culture. The
app has risen in popularity so quickly that scholarly literature investigating its vast societal
impact is still nascent. TikTok is not only used to discuss popular culture topics and create
trends, but also being utilized as a tool for social justice activism in the United States in the wake
of a tumultuous year with major events such as the coronavirus pandemic, a resurgence of the
Black Lives Matter movement, and the 2020 presidential election. TikTok activism is not
without critiques, ranging from concerns of foreign government surveillance and data mining to
questions of TikTok's impact on creator mental health and the effectiveness of digital activism. I
argue that despite these critiques, TikTok holds cultural value as an impactful and meaningful
tool for social justice activism and entry-level democracy in the United States in the summer of
2020. Using two case studies and data compiled from interviews with content creators
themselves, I provide a snapshot of how this app was used by content creators to facilitate
grassroots digital social justice campaigns during this historically significant period, and aim to
support the legitimacy of this form of digital activism. My intent is to contribute to a better
understanding of the process of activism in novel digital spaces and encourage further
discussions about TikTok, civic engagement, and digital activism.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Danielle Goldstein, whose kind, chaotic, and wonderful spirit is sorely missed.

This thesis is also dedicated to husband, Joe, and my daughter, Amelia June. I love you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Unlock your phone, download TikTok, and stay a while. In three or four taps, you are rewarded with the very first video on your For You Page (FYP): Gravestones being scraped and cleaned, the years of moss and grime being satisfyingly scraped away as the narrator's soothing voice tells the story of the decedent's life and death. The app instructs you to swipe up to watch the next vignette. This time it's an air fryer recipe, but even with newfangled technology you're not much of a cook.

Swipe.

A young man inside his 95 square foot New York apartment is beaming as he tells the story about the peanut butter he just bought from a vendor on the sidewalk in the East Village. *Why on earth would someone rent an apartment that size? Why did he buy peanut butter from the street?* You're relieved to see others in the comments have the same questions. You scroll to read them all as the 60 second video continues to loop automatically in the background. One of them reads "At least you left the cabbage this time!" *This isn't even his first-time buying sidewalk food?*

Swipe.

Police officers armed with batons and guns surround you. A piercing scream cuts through the chorus of protestors chanting "no justice, no peace," and the camera spins around to show the crowd being coated in a merciless blanket of pepper spray. The screams cut short, and the video begins again. Police officers armed with batons and guns surround you once more.

The smirk you didn't even realize had formed during your lighthearted scroll fades from your face. You find yourself searching the comments for more information. *How can I help?*

There's a protest happening tomorrow not far from your home. You screenshot the details and plan to go.

Swipe.

A dog running on a snowy hill. You set your phone down before you can even see him reach the top. The abrupt switch from what feels like wartime footage to pet videos is jarring and unsettling, almost like motion sickness.

This is what it can be like to spend time on TikTok. You're pulled deeply into people's lives and stories through quick encounters, forming connections with people you'll likely never meet or even see on the app again. The content is chaotically varied, particularly at first when the algorithm hasn't had the chance to learn about you. Each swipe is a surprise, leaving users questioning what might come next. Will it be funny, or serious, or just plain weird? Will you like it? What will it make you feel about yourself and the world? TikTok isn't something that is necessarily just *used*, but rather something that is *experienced* quite viscerally. It sends you places you never expected to go, showing you new vantage points and ways of life from people who aren't already in your social circles. This is part of what makes the experience of TikTok different from other social networks. The goal is to find content that interests you, not to connect with people you know, or even people at all.

There is a depth and breadth of scholarly and popular literature that discuss the dangers, importance, and uses of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat.[1] Jackson et al. explore Twitter's role in becoming an important platform for

[1] See, for example: Jackson, S. J., Bailey, M., Welles, B. F., & Lauren, G. (2020). *#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice (The MIT Press)* (Illustrated ed.). The MIT Press; Tufekci, Z. (2018). *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (Reprint ed.). Yale University Press; Aral, S. (2021). *The Hype Machine: How Social Media Disrupts Our Elections, Our Economy, and Our Health--and How We Must Adapt*. Currency.

disenfranchised populations in their book *#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice,* and how Twitter activism—or "whatever platform may rule the day" (Jackson et al., 200)—should be taken seriously by policymakers, presidential candidates, and advocacy organizations. Similarly, in *Twitter and Teargas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protests,* Zeynep Tufekci notes the importance of social media platforms, though she investigates Twitter's use more globally with the Zapatista uprisings in Mexico, the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, and an uprising in Istanbul's Gezi Park. Tufekci also investigates how digital technologies transform social movements by narrowing in on the features and affordances offered by Facebook, Twitter, and Google and comparing the strengths and challenges of digitally networked social movements to more traditional organizing methods (Tufekci, xxix). Ringrose and Mendez take a more focused look at Twitter activism in their article "Mediated Affect and Feminist Solidarity" by exploring the role of affect in a case study of feminist teens who used Twitter to organize physical activist movements to challenge rape culture in their school (Ringrose and Mendez, 85-96). This thesis is informed by all of these works and intends to apply these methodologies to study the gap in scholarly literature about the relationship between TikTok, affect, and activism, particularly in the summer of 2020 in the United States.

While Twitter and Facebook have been extensively studied, TikTok's popularity merits attention. TikTok is a wildly popular video-sharing application that has catapulted into popular culture and claimed its importance on the global stage at such a speed that scholarly literature is only now catching up to confront its impact on the space of social media. TikTok is not only a medium for discussion of popular culture topics, but is also being utilized for social justice activism in the wake of a tumultuous year with major events including the coronavirus

pandemic, George Floyd's murder, a resurgence in the Black Lives Matter movement, and the

2020 U.S. presidential election.[2] This thesis investigates TikTok as a tool for activism. I focus

primarily on TikTok's use during summer 2020 in order to theorize TikTok's relationship to the

overlapping events of the period. By exploring the app's production features and affordances,

considering the role of affect in a viral protest video by creator @kareemrahma, sharing the

experiences of two activist content creators through interviews, and reviewing a case study of a

successful TikTok community organizing effort to ruin a Trump rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, I will

provide a snapshot of how this app was used by content creators to facilitate grassroots digital

social justice campaigns during this historically significant time period. Ultimately, I argue for

the legitimacy of TikTok as a platform for digital activism.

As previously mentioned, TikTok is astoundingly popular. According to Wallaroo Media,

as of September 2021 TikTok surpassed 2.6 billion downloads globally and 1 billion monthly

active users globally—130 million of those active monthly users being from the U.S. (Wallaroo,

2021). This compares to Twitter's 38 million, Facebook's 302.8 million, Instagram's 112 million

(Statista, 2021) and Snapchat's 102 million (Dapareportal, 2021) active monthly U.S. users. As

TikTok is a rich and relatively untapped research area, I will narrow the scope of this project to

focus on U.S. users in particular, with an eye toward TikTok's most popular demographic:

Generation Z, or "Gen Z," those born between 1997 and 2012. Forbes reports that over 40% of

TikTok's users are between 16-24 years old and 90% of them use the app daily (Fromm).

Though the app appears to have become the center of viral internet culture out of thin air,

TikTok as we know it today is an evolution of a number of different applications. Originally

named A.me and then later changed to Douyin in 2016, TikTok received its final name from its

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[2] E.g., topics related to environment/climate change, racial injustice, police/prison reform, local community change, healthcare reform, humanitarian efforts, LGBTQ+ rights, etc

China-based parent company, Bytedance, in 2018 when it was launched globally and merged

with another popular video-sharing app, Music.ly. Music.ly was released in 2014 and offered

many of the same production features as modern TikTok like lip-syncing to songs and threading

videos and narratives together with the use of hashtags and sounds. Since the merger, TikTok's -

popularity has grown exponentially despite headline news of the application being banned in

India in 2020 (Pahwa, 2020), data mining and privacy concerns (Fowler, 2020), and the threat to

ban TikTok in the United States by President Donald Trump (Swanson et al., 2020).

The latter development points to the unavoidable politics of TikTok as an app when

considered in an American context. Talks of U.S. national security concerns around TikTok

began gaining traction in 2019 when the Committee on Foreign Investment, the federal panel

that reviews foreign acquisitions on American firms, began investigating TikTok's influence in

the United States (Nicas et al., 2020). The main concerns centered around the acquisition of

American data by the Chinese government, censoring content that does not align with the

Chinese Government and Communist Party directives, and the willingness of ByteDance,

TikTok's parent company, to conform to U.S. regulations and policies. TikTok has been

criticized for enacting policies aimed at censoring videos that feature political themes,

particularly the protests in Hong Kong.[3] A ByteDance spokesperson said that the company's

decision to restrict videos of a political nature was intended to keep the app a "fun" place, but

that they had changed the policy sometime in early 2020 (Nicas et al, 2020). President Trump's

administration threatened to ban TikTok and other Chinese mobile apps like WeChat from app

stores in September of 2020 due to these concerns. Shortly after, the American companies Oracle

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[3] See: Rubio (https://www.rubio.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/9ba023e4-2f4b-404a-a8c0-e87ea784f440/FCEFFE1F54F3899795B4E5F1F1804630.20191009-letter-to-secretary-mnuchin-re-tiktok.pdf). Hern (https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/sep/25/revealed-how-tiktok-censors-videos-that-do-not-please-beijing).

and Walmart were set to acquire TikTok, but ultimately the deal was shelved as the Biden administration decided to conduct its own review of the validity of the security risks. As I write this thesis, there has not been much of an update to this situation, and TikTok carries on as it did before the threat of ban. This framing of TikTok as a national security concern is important because it reinforces a key theme of this thesis: TikTok is a political app. It is a place with polarizing potential, where strong affects can move through and be distributed. Whether by design or not, activism happens there regardless.

Much of TikTok's popularity—and the ease with which it can take on both political and "fun" purposes—results from the effortless onboarding processes. There is a low barrier of entry to begin watching TikToks because the app does not require a person to create an account or log in—encouraging users to jump right in and start watching. TikTok allows users to browse as guests, removing the requirement to create a TikTok account to view videos, though they forfeit the ability to interact with videos and other users in every way. Being able to enjoy the app without creating an account is what got me in the door, so to speak, but the lure of a more enriching experience persuaded me to create an account after all. If a person chooses to browse as a guest, they can't post their own TikToks, they can't like or comment on other TikToks, and they are unable to interact with other users through direct messaging. In short, they miss out on a big part of the participation and community building aspects of the platform.

When I first stumbled upon TikTok in November 2019, I was searching for a diversion from the stressors of everyday life. TikTok's design and interface made it incredibly easy for me to not only sign up but remain on the app and participate. The app is adept at capturing a user's attention and keeping them actively scrolling. According to Wallaroo Media, TikTok users spend an average of 52 minutes per day on the platform, and the youngest users aged four to fifteen

spend an average of 80 minutes per day on TikTok (Wallaroo Media, 2021). The features of the platform immerse the user into a seemingly endless feed of content. Each video automatically plays when you open the application, suddenly dropping the user into the homes, cars, neighborhoods, and lives of strangers; these private spaces become global public spheres (Ruehlicke) where opinions and concerns can be voiced and discussed. Users communicate their interest level to the app's algorithm by favoriting, sharing, commenting, or watching the video to completion. TikTok claims that "while you are a guest, we'll continue to try to personalize the For You feed to give you the best possible TikTok experience" (TikTok, n.d.). Since TikTok's algorithm uses the like, share, and comment data to personalize the For You Page, a browsing guest would likely not have a feed as highly personalized as a registered user.

Before I approach the subject of how the algorithm functions, I want to first make a distinction about how I will be speaking about the algorithm in this paper. "The algorithm" is very much a character in the story of TikTok. Users speak about the algorithm as if it were an omniscient user, just out of sight but ever-present, with ultimate power and authority over your in-app experience. To TikTokers, the algorithm itself has goals, agendas, feelings or thoughts toward certain populations and ultimate authority over their success on the app. This anthropomorphizing of the algorithm has bled into the culture and language both within and about the app—so much so that I find myself speaking in these same ways when describing the algorithm. I will discuss this in more depth, but for now, I want to make clear that I understand that the algorithm on TikTok does not possess feelings, have "goals" in the same sense that living beings have goals, nor does it think or make decisions on its own. Though I will refer to the algorithm at times with this language, it is only to further illustrate the sentiments of TikTok users. The goal of TikTok's algorithm—which is likely many algorithms running

simultaneously—is to connect users with *content* they want to see. This differs from other social media platforms, like Facebook, that want to connect users with people—"friends"— they might know. Because of this content-based goal, users don't need to follow anyone to receive a personalized feed. Similarly, users who create content don't need high follower counts for their content to be viewed or even go viral.

TikTok thrives on its participatory culture, meaning it has low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, has highly viral trends that spread to other platforms, and members who form supportive and engaged communities (Jenkins et al., 2009). There are countless examples of high-impact collaborative efforts amongst communities on TikTok: theater kids, composers, and established professionals working together to produce a full-fledged virtual Broadway Musical called *Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical* (Alter, 2020) that generated $2 million to benefit the Actors Fund (Actors Fund, 2021), aspiring influencers creating engagement pods as a form of labor organizing and resistance, and users organizing politically motivated targeted campaigns, like the Tulsa Rally call-to-action discussed later in this thesis.

These communities, centered around specific interests, identities, goals, or trends, are often referred to as "sides of TikTok." Examples could include "Frog TikTok", "Leftist TikTok", "Lesbian TikTok", "Straight TikTok", "Couch Guy TikTok", or "Berries and Cream TikTok"— the latter is a trend that resurrected a rather unhinged Starburst commercial from 2007 and ran with it, creating remixes of the song and attributing "little lad energy" to content creators.
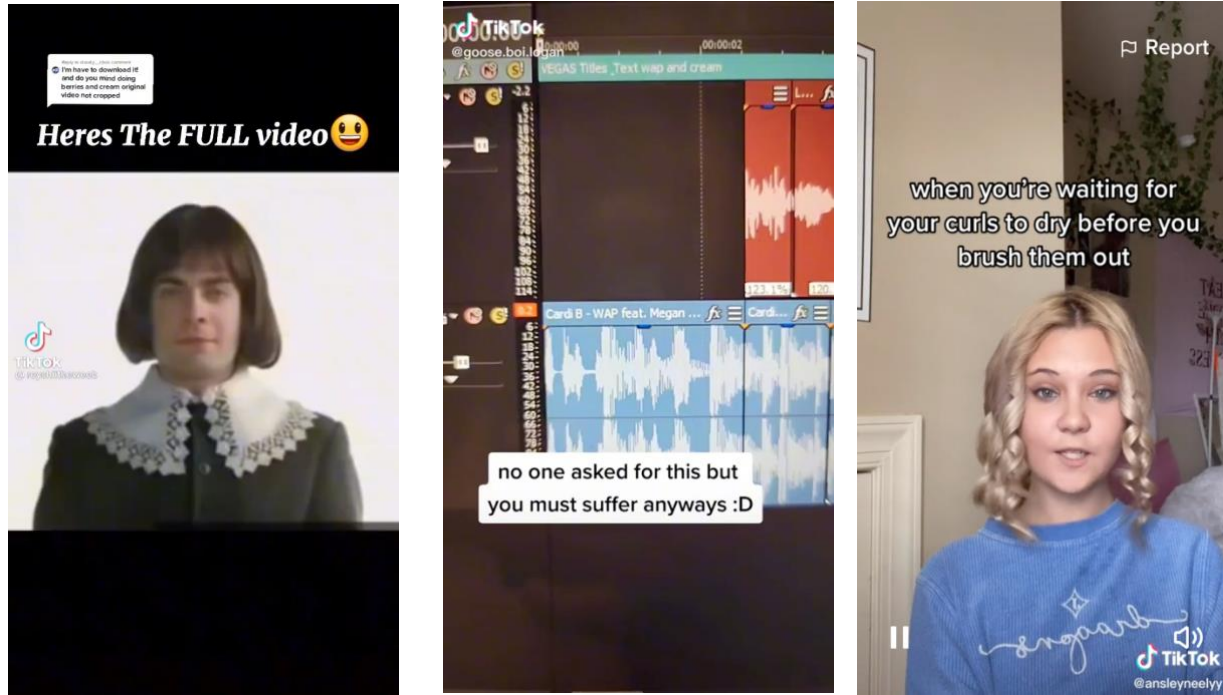
*Figure 1: Left: Berries and Cream original, @reyshiittheweeb,
middle: Berries and Cream Remix, @goose.boi.logan, right:
Berries and Cream "Little Lad Energy", @ansleyneelyy*

The sides of TikTok a person is on become personal and sometimes private—so much so that some users refuse to share what side of TikTok they're on. When the algorithm does its job right, the "For You Page" (FYP) *feels* like a representation of you—including all the sides of you that you may not share with people "irl" (in real life.) Once you provide data to the algorithm about your interests by interacting with a video focused on a specific topic, you will continue to see that content until you show the algorithm that you are no longer interested by withdrawing your participation over time.

My own personal experience reflects this, and inflects my approach to this project. In January 2020 I watched cat and dog videos, vegan cooking in action, layered "inside jokes" that morph into trends you would only understand if you've spent a great deal of time on the app,

and—I'll be vulnerable a bit here—Harry Styles concert footage. But by mid-March, some of our country's youngest adults were faced with their first national crisis: the coronavirus pandemic. I noticed that Gen Z users began to produce content with a more serious tone. Through the use of these highly engaging and creative 15-second to 60-second videos (though now users can create videos up to 3-minutes in length), users discussed heavy topics such as the coronavirus pandemic, partner abuse, eating disorders, Black Lives Matter (BLM), sex work, mental illness and health, student loan debt, LGBTQ+ rights, and women's rights, to name a few. On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. This major event gained national attention and the trending content on TikTok immediately shifted away from dance trends and toward the topic of police brutality. Nearly every social media platform, news outlet, and corner of the internet exploded with social justice content.[4]

It is important to note that the time in which I joined TikTok is critical to my experience on the app. Social Justice topics were trending after I had already established my interest in such topics with the algorithm. This is to say that, because I communicated my interest in social justice topics, my FYP was saturated with such content at the very start of its prevalence and continues today. Due to the ephemeral nature of the app, if a person joined TikTok as I write this in March of 2022, when national attention on social justice issues has somewhat diminished, that person would not enter the same sort of "pipeline" I did. In fact, unless that person were to seek out and intentionally engage with U.S.-based social justice content, they may never have such content on their FYP—unless another major event sparks national interest, and then this social justice "pipeline" would emerge again. In the summer of 2020, that pipeline was easily accessible to all U.S. users. It is safe to say that nearly every U.S. user was exposed to social

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[4] E.g., topics related to environment/climate change, racial injustice, police/prison reform, local community change, healthcare reform, humanitarian efforts, LGBTQ+ rights, etc

justice content due to the sheer volume of TikToks on the subject, and therefore had ample opportunity to interact with such videos. Content creators were being held accountable to speak on the subject by their viewers—and if they weren't talking about police brutality directly, they were talking about *why* they weren't talking about it.

The algorithm's goal of providing only the content a particular user is interested in creates an unavoidable and complicated variable for researchers.[5] As a result of this powerful algorithm, I am stuck in a bubble of content I'm *hoping* to find and that directly impacts what I perceive as "popular" or "trending" on TikTok. Currently, social justice related content still makes up the majority of my FYP, though admittedly it is less than it was at the height of national attention on the BLM movement in the summer of 2020. While I still get the viral trends mixed in with my interests, it is impossible for me to know what another user's FYP contains and what they perceive as trending. Andrea Ruehlicke notes that "personalization systems both shape and are shaped by users" (University of New Brunswick, 2020). The personalized FYP I experience is a product of providing enough data for the algorithm to tailor videos to my preferences. With this critique in mind, one thing is for certain: social justice content after May 25, 2020 was undeniably saturating nearly every platform. TikTok videos specifically were shared across other platforms, making a person's chance of seeing the videos—even if they weren't TikTok users—relatively high, further supporting my claim of this application's cultural significance.

TikTok as an application and its use for activism is not without critiques, from the aforementioned concerns of foreign government surveillance to data mining, questions of TikTok's impact on creator mental health, and the effectiveness of digital activism. I argue that

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[5] To reiterate: "The Algorithm" does not possess goals, but the intention of its designers is to provide the ultimate personalized experience.

despite these critiques, TikTok holds cultural value as one of the most impactful and meaningful tools for social justice activism and entry-level democracy in the United States in the summer of 2020.[6] In what follows, I provide a snapshot of how this app was used by content creators to facilitate grassroots digital social justice campaigns during this historically significant period and aim to support the legitimacy of this form of digital activism.

Chapter 2 will explore TikTok as a "platform," a carefully chosen word that indicates the company's allegiances and position, or "what they do and what they do not do, and how their place in the information landscape should be understood" (Gillespie, 327). I will also cite some of the production features and affordances that make TikTok a unique production space, and how users—particularly activist creators— manipulate these features to their benefit. By examining several example TikToks, I will illustrate instances of features being used both normatively and subversively, showing the creative ways that users co-opt features to accomplish divergent goals.

Chapter 3 focuses on what I believe to be the most important affordance the application provides: production features that allow users to create affective responses in viewers that subsequently energize social justice movements and community building. Through a contextual analysis of a TikTok protest video, I will explore two of the more impactful affective aspects TikTok affords users: the ability to add music or audio files to their videos, and the first-person perspective encouraged by the platform's design. In order to better understand the affective power of music, I will look at the relationship between affect and Black culture through music by investigating "This is America" by Childish Gambino and the use of Jazz in documenting Black experiences. Chapter 3 will also explore TikTok as a mechanism for producing collective

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[6] Entry-level democracy in this thesis is the act of dipping a toe, so to speak, into political participation. As a citizen cannot vote in the United States until they are 18 years old, entry-level democratic action can be distributing petitions, protesting, online activism, and other legal ways to participate in political matters.

effervescence through documenting sousveillance, further demonstrated by the first-person perspective in the selected example. To conclude this chapter, I highlight three pitfalls of TikTok activism and consider the ethics of this platform in the social justice sphere.

In Chapter 4 I share interviews with two activist TikTok creators, @f4kegvccipurs3 and @segyrella, exploring their experiences with being on TikTok, with the communities they find there, and the implications for their mental health. These interviews attempt to approach the larger question of the effectiveness of TikTok as a tool for activism. By comparing and contrasting the experiences of both creators, I aim to provide a snapshot of what it was like to be an activist TikTok creator in the summer of 2020 and further show the drastic range of experiences that one can have on the app.

Chapter 5 will consider the critiques of digital activism, also referred to as "slacktivism", and analyze a case study of a successful effort organized by TikTok users in which the goal was to lower attendance at the Trump campaign rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma in June of 2020. By first historicizing the importance of the initial date chosen by the Trump campaign, June 19th, 2020— also known as "Juneteenth"—and recounting the cultural events that occurred during this time, this chapter historicizes the motive for this form of protest before considering the impact this movement had on popular culture by surveying the media reports, tweets, and TikToks that ensued. This chapter serves to provide evidence that TikTok activism can be successful and is a valid form of activism despite the pitfalls and concerns of slacktivism.

I struggle with the fact that this thesis will be out of date the moment it is published; technology, particularly when dealing with algorithms and platforms, changes faster than scholars can keep up. Therefore, I want to convey that the information herein highlights a snapshot of a specific moment in time and I recognize that this moment may no longer be "true"

when referenced, but I hope that the information I provide leads to a better understanding of the process of activism in novel digital spaces. My intent is that through this understanding, new questions will arise about TikTok and the relationship between young people, social media, and civic engagement, for continued study by scholars. I'm hopeful that this snapshot can provide a foundation for further study as the platform adapts to a changing world.

CHAPTER II

G@M!NG THE SYSTEM: TIKTOK FEATURES AND THEIR USES

Charli D'Amelio, known by her followers as the Queen of TikTok, has the highest follower count on the app with over 130 million followers as of February 2022. Charli, a 17-year-old white creator who emerged as a member of the collaborative creator group the Hype House, is famous for posting dance trends on TikTok. One of her most liked videos with over 13 million likes shows D'Amelio and two friends doing the "Renegade" dance. The only thing in the caption of this video are the usernames of the two friends dancing alongside her. D'Amelio did not create the "Renegade," nor did she give credit to the original creator, then 14-year-old Atlanta native Jalaiah Harmon (Felix, 2021). As a result of this theft, D'Amelio was given opportunities outside of the app that further catapulted her to mainstream celebrity status; she was quickly signed to a talent agency, invited to perform alongside singer Bebe Rexha to open for the Jonas Brothers, and struck a brand deal with Sabra Hummus to star in a Super Bowl commercial in the four months following her viral TikTok.

D'Amelio and other prominent white creators like Addison Rae have been repeatedly called out for profiting off the creativity of uncredited Black creators (Felix, 2021). As journalist Taylor Lorenz notes, "To be robbed of credit is to be robbed of real opportunities" and "in 2020, virality means income…" (Lorenz, 2021). Without credit, Jalaiah missed out on the brand deals and fame that kick-started Charli D'Amelio's career. From this pattern of white creators stealing Black creators' work sprung a hashtag in June of 2021 called #BlackTikTokStrike, a movement aimed at addressing this misappropriation (Onwuamaegbu, 2021). During the strike, Black creators would no longer share original dance work.

"MADE A DANCE TO THIS SONG!" is the first text to appear on the screen of a TikTok made by @theericklouis. In the video, he pretends to have choreographed a dance to Megan Thee Stallion's hit song "Thot Shit," but bounces around and throws up his middle fingers instead. "SIKE.", the screen reads, "THIS APP WOULD BE NOTHING WITHOUT BLK PEOPLE."
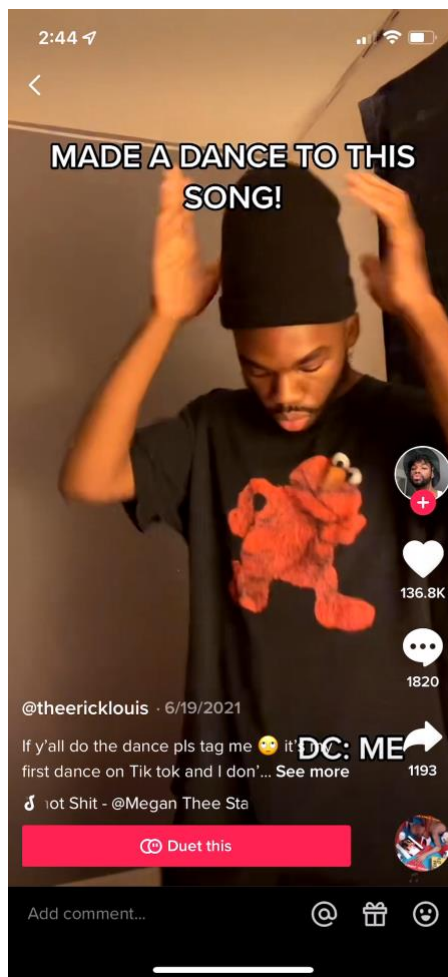
Figure 2: Black creator protest, @theericklouis

For users who feel suppressed by the algorithm because they share messages that are controversial or political in nature or are members of a marginalized group, subverting the systems in place and hijacking features to meet their goals becomes necessary. This chapter will explore the affordances of the platform that are used not simply to create content but to engage in activism by deploying these affordances in unexpected ways.

Strategizing against the algorithm has become commonplace on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. In "Weapons of the Chic: Instagram Influencer Engagement Pods as Practices of Resistance to Instagram Platform Labor", Victoria O'Meara looks at engagement pods, users who band together and commit to engaging with each other's content consistently, as form of labor organizing and resistance in response to the unique conditions of Instagram. Attempting to resist the suppression they experience, users fight back against the platform by manipulating the same production features that are used to suppress them to work in their favor. In what follows, I will first examine TikTok as a platform and what being a platform signifies in media studies. Then, I will detail how TikTok's position as a platform impacts user behavior. Finally, I will provide background information on the existing production features and explore the normative and subversive uses of two of the most common features manipulated by TikTok activists to avoid moderation: closed captioning and voice-over.

TikTok as a 'Platform'

According to Gillespie's "The Politics of Platforms," the term 'platform' serves intermediaries by positioning "four semantic territories that the word 'platform' has signified in the past (Gillespie, 349). The first is computational: as it relates to infrastructure that supports various applications, hardware, and operating systems. The second, architectural: drawing from

the Old English Dictionary's (OED) definition of "a raised level surface on which people or things can stand, usually a discrete structure intended for a particular activity or operation" (Gillespie, 350). [7] The third, figurative, also from the OED's definition: 'the ground, foundation, or basis of an action, event, calculation, condition, etc.' and 'a position achieved or situation brought about which forms the basis for further achievement' (Gillespie, 350). Lastly, the fourth, political: with regard to the ways in which politicians use 'platform' to formally signpost goals and endorsements for their campaign (Gillespie, 350). These definitions are just vague enough to be applied differently to different stakeholders simultaneously, allowing platforms like TikTok to juggle competing interests—all the while limiting their liability with regard to matters of user-generated content and expression (Gillespie, 348).[8] This point serves as an important reminder that TikTok does not simply need to please its average users to be successful, but also the influencer-status users who bring engagement to the platform, advertisers, investors, and entire governments. There is simply no way to make every stakeholder completely satisfied with the platform, and the stakeholder with the least priority tends to be the average users themselves. The app isn't built for activism, and the fact that making money is inherently the focus of the platform's development means it will never be designed for the purpose of making activism more effective or accessible.

      Despite this, users always find ways to manipulate affordances within technologies to work for their benefit. An affordance is "an action possibility formed by the relationship between

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[7] Gillespie cites the 2006 version of the OED.

[8] See: "YouTube must present its service not only to its users, but to advertisers, to major media producers it hopes to have as partners and to policymakers. The term 'platform' helps reveal how YouTube and others stage themselves for these constituencies, allowing them to make a broadly progressive sales pitch while also eliding the tensions inherent in their service: between user-generated and commercially-produced content, between cultivating community and serving up advertising, between intervening in the delivery of content and remaining neutral. In the process, it is offering up a trope by which others will come to understand and judge them" Gillespie (348)

an agent and its environment" (Nye & Silverman, 2012).[9] This action and its subsequent uses are

not always intended, or not intended to be used in the ways in which users co-opt the action. An

affordance may refer to a perceived affordance. Perceived affordances are a "subset of

affordances." A perceived affordance uses a more restrictive definition that requires an agent to

be aware of the affordance, either through direct perception or experience. A perceived

affordance is "a possible action to an agent" (Nye & Silverman, 2012).[10] I define the production

features and organization of this platform as affordances and perceived affordances. In what

follows, I will explore these affordances and add to those definitions by including the ways that

users have utilized those features for purposes not intended by the designers of TikTok's

interface.

Production Features & Affordances

The table below is not intended to be a complete reference list of production features on TikTok,

but rather the ones that are most relevant in the scope of this thesis. New features are added and

augmented by TikTok regularly, and at least one of these features came to existence while

writing this thesis. Many of these definitions are directly from TikTok's Help Center.[11] One of

the more enticing aspects of TikTok is that users don't have to leave the app to create high-

quality and visually striking videos; the vast array of production features included in TikTok's

interface rivals all other free applications designed for editing videos. Many of these features

have been present on the internet and other platforms for years. However, the additional ways

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[9] Nye & Silverman cite Gibson 1977, 1979
[10] Nye & Silverman cite Norman, 1988.
[11] *TikTok Help Center*. (n.d.). TikTok. https://support.tiktok.com/en/

users may deploy these features, particularly populations who feel the algorithm is working

against them, is unique to TikTok.

Table 1: Features & Affordances

Hashtags	A word or phrase preceded by the hashtag symbol (#), or 'pound'. This is used as a way to categorize TikToks so that other users may find the content, or so that the creator can convey what type of content they are distributing. Hashtags can be used to signify content meaning or be used to create engagement by flagging the content as something that may already be trending (whether the hashtag accurately describes the content or not). This can be as simple as #pizza for a DIY pizza video or #NFLSuperbowl, an event-specific hashtag that may either be used to participate in discussion about the event or to capitalize on its current popularity.
Captions	A small blurb at the bottom of the video. Captions are sometimes used to describe what is going on in the TikTok, to augment a joke, direct users toward other creators, or provide further context. Captions can be misspelled or written in code to subvert algorithmic moderation. (e.g., "le$bean", pronounced luh-dAH-luhr-bEEn)
Closed Captions	Written dialogue from the video. The closed caption is not always a direct transcription, as this feature has been co-opted to allow for moderation subversion. Creators often misspell words, replace words, and use emojis to get around words they have spoken that may violate community guidelines or that the creator suspects will cause their content to be removed.
Sounds/Audio	Arguably one of the most important features on TikTok—so much so that TikTok themselves has written a blog post about it: "TikTok opens directly to a full-screen viewing experience with the For You feed.

Table 1: Features & Affordances, Continued

Sounds/Audio cont.	And it does so with the sound *on*. TikTok currently has an extensive library of songs and sounds to accompany your videos. You can also create your own sound that other users can add to their videos. Best practices include using sounds that match the vibe of your video, and consider timing your actions to match the beat of the sound you choose." [12] Creators can create their own sound files for other creators to use. Inside the app, you can search by sound the same way you would search hashtags. Sounds trend on TikTok, and TikTok encourages users to utilize trending sounds to get engagement from other users.
Filters/Creative Effects	Broken down into categories: trending, new, interactive, editing, and beauty, and filters/creative, there are countless effects to choose from. This is where the majority of the production features live on the platform, and where users can be the most creative. A few examples of these effects are: ● Text - Users can overlay text on their videos. This can be used in conjunction with closed captioning. ● Transition – "Transitions give creators another opportunity to impress viewers by cutting quickly between two shots. Creators can choose between several fun options, including turn off TV, which makes your transition look as if a scene is beginning or ending like a TV shutting off, or scroll, which makes your transition look as if you're scrolling from one shot to another."[13] ●

[12] TikTok. (n.d.). *The importance of sounds*. TikTok Creator Portal. https://www.tiktok.com/creators/creator-portal/en-us/tiktok-creation-essentials/the-importance-of-sounds/

[13] *Getting started on TikTok*. (n.d.). TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/creators/creator-portal/en-us/category/getting-started-on-tiktok/

Table 1: Features & Affordances, Continued

Filters/Creative Effects cont.	- Green Screen – change your location, your hair, or yourself entirely into another creature. - Voice over – "Voice-over is a simple tool creators can use to elevate their videos. Whether it's a vlog, a recipe, or a DIY project, voice-over lets you tell your story over video. - Voice effects – Speaking of voices, voice effects can change how your voice *sounds* in videos. Ever wanted to sound like you're holding a megaphone? How about a robot? This is the tool for you. - Adjust clips – The adjust clips feature helps you reorganize, cut, and even replace sections of your TikTok video with a new clip. This allows creators to edit within TikTok without the need for other editing apps."[14]
Stitch	Released in September of 2020, "Stitch allows creators to clip and integrate scenes from another user's video into their own. It provides fun opportunities to reinterpret and add to another creator's videos. You can build on their stories, tutorials, recipes, math lessons, and more."[15]
Duet	"TikTok's popular Duet feature lets you create videos with other creators. Duets have many advantages, including being able to collaborate alongside other creators' videos and automatically tagging the account you Duet with. The traditional Duet places your video next to the original one in a left-and-right layout. But there are several options to choose from. React lets you show your response to the original video via a picture-in-picture display. Top and Bottom places your reaction video above the original one.

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[14] *Getting started on TikTok*. (n.d.). TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/creators/creator-portal/en-us/category/getting-started-on-tiktok/

[15] *Staying up to date with features*. (n.d.). TikTok Creator Portal. https://www.tiktok.com/creators/creator-portal/en-us/tiktok-creation-essentials/staying-up-to-date-with-features/

In practice, the aforementioned features can be used normatively (i.e., as the app intends) or subversively to combat the app's demonstrated bias against marginalized groups, as evidenced in this chapter's introduction. User @marciahoward38thstreet uses both the closed captioning and voice over features in the example video below in a subversive manner, misspelling nearly every word to avoid algorithmic moderation.

Figure 3: Feature manipulation and moderation subversion, @marciahoward38thstreet

Misspelling captions and closed captions and using symbols so the words are written in a pseudo-phonetic fashion (e.g., "le$bean", pronounced luh-dAH-luhr-bEEn, for lesbian, and "ouid" (said with a little French pizzazz) for weed/marijuana). In the video above, @marciahowaard38thstreet openly acknowledges her tactics for trying to keep her content safe from moderation. She misspells several words and phonetically conceals words like justice with "just us" and suppressed with "soup pressed". Her video reveals that, despite her efforts to mask, the algorithm is still detecting the activist slant in her content. To prove her theory, she shares a screen recording of the suggested sounds that automatically populated as she attempted to publish her video. Among the options were audios titled "BLM", "This is America", and "The Purge"—all sounds that are closely related to activist movements on the app.

Explaining concepts or themes through analogies, coded language, or by referencing viral TikToks are also popular methods of camouflaging content; this can be accomplished by using features both normatively (as intended by TikTok) or subversively. In late 2021, the lost language of Tutnese experienced a resurgence on TikTok amongst African American users. Tutnese, also referred to as Tut, was developed by enslaved African Americans as a way to communicate with each other in the presence of their oppressors (Daniells, 2021). To some, it seemed a welcome discovery to find more information about their ancestral heritage on TikTok. However, others feared the power that comes from a clandestine language would be lost when it became revealed to white users. With over 13 million views of #tutnese, African American creators struggled with their decisions to speak in Tut—or even mention it—on the app. To address this conundrum, many users decided to create private Google Classrooms and Discord channels to help other African Americans learn how to speak and write Tut while keeping the language private from non-African American users (Brutus, 2021). In the example below,

@thatbrownguurl recounts her experience of finding Tutnese. She uses the closed caption feature and text over video normatively, meaning she does not try to avoid moderation by misspelling words or writing words phonetically. At the end of the video, @thatbrownguurl includes spoken and written Tut words; though she uses the *features* normatively, her *intention* is to code her language so that viewers who are not African American will not understand her messaging.

Figure 4: Tutnese introduction, @thatbrownguurl

In addition to coded language, it is also common for creators—even those who are more popular on mainstream TikTok— to have multiple backup accountsin the event that their account

is deleted without warning.[16] In Chapter 4, we see this exemplified in the interviews with TikTok activists @f4kegvccipurs3 and @segyrella, who both created backup accounts in order to get around the suppression of their main accounts.

Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the affordances and features of TikTok in order to provide a foundational understanding of the application. TikTok's adoption of the term "platform" indicates that they juggle a delicate balance between competing stakeholder interests. However, because the platform heavily values monetary gains, user satisfaction is not always their top priority. Black creators experience discrimination and suppression on TikTok, and white creators are more visible and consistently paid more for brand deals than Black creators (Carmen, 2020). The Instagram account @InfluencerPayGap, created by talent agency manager Adesuwa Ajayi, sheds light on the pay disparities amongst influencers by asking influencers to anonymously submit intimate details of their brand deals, engagement rates, income, and personal demographics (Carmen, 2020). When Ajayi began sharing breakdowns of influencer pay, concerning trends began to emerge about the pay gap. She found that Black creators are consistently underpaid for their influencer work when compared to white creators (Carmen, 2020). Relatedly, content by Black creators has been admittedly suppressed by TikTok (Lorenz, 2020). Fewer views and less engagement means fewer brand deals and income opportunities on the platform. For this reason, marginalized users must take matters into their own hands to ensure their financial success and success on the app overall.

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[16] These accounts are sometimes called "spam accounts."

TikTok is not a space intentionally built for activism, but this doesn't deter activists from employing the app's features to their benefit—including against TikTok itself. Users who experience discrimination from advertisers and the app's algorithm have been forced to develop other ways to game the system in order to find success on the app. Externally, users create collaboration collectives as a form of labor resistance as exemplified by Atlanta-based Black "engagement pods" Collab Crib and Valid Crib. These collectives collaborate *outside* of the app, living physically together, creating content, and improving engagement metrics full-time. But while these practices are consistent across all creators, for Black creators they take on an activist spirit: several companies pulled out of brand deals with Collab Crib just before fulfilling their promises, including a home furnishing company that claimed "their demographic wasn't a fit for their brand" and a potential backer who chose to invest in an all-white creator house instead (Lorenz, 2020), threatening their sustainability and reinforcing the suppression they are working together to confront.

Internally, users push back against algorithmic moderation by manipulating features like closed captioning and voice over, which is further reinforced by creator interviews in Chapter 4. Misspelling words, spelling words phonetically, and using coded language or double speak are common attempts to achieve this, creating a sense of camaraderie within the community of users participating in this collective code-making. This sense of camaraderie resulting from group participation will be further demonstrated in the Minneapolis protest TikTok case study in the following chapter, and the Tulsa rally case study in Chapter 5. The features and affordances examined in this chapter culminate to create an all-in-one space for activists to create affectively powerful content that stirs participation from other users—a baseline that will support the

mechanisms discussed in the forthcoming chapters.

CHAPTER III

THAT FUNNY FEELING: THE POWER OF AFFECT

In May 2021, Bo Burnham released a Netflix comedy special titled *Inside* that he wrote, edited, starred in, and filmed entirely on his own from inside his home during the pandemic lockdowns of 2020. Burnham, who got his comedic start on YouTube, is known for his satirical songs. The songs of *Inside* have themes ranging from silly to depressing, with Burnham sharing a candid view of his mental health struggles and how they were exacerbated by the isolation of lockdown. One song from *Inside*, "That Funny Feeling," particularly resonated with Gen Z and became a trending sound TikTok. Though "That Funny Feeling" has been used by creators to discuss a variety of topics, one striking way it was applied was to express hopelessness about climate change.

"Total disassociation, fully out your mind" is the caption on one of the most liked TikTok's of this trend begins near the end of "That Funny Feeling", flashing video clips of a wild fire and a flood raging through a New York City subway. The sound continues to lyrically paint a bleak picture,

> "*Googling derealization, hating what you find*
> *That unapparent summer air in early fall*
> *The quiet comprehending of the ending of it all*
> *There it is again, that funny feeling*
> *That funny feeling*
> *There it is again, that funny feeling*
> *That funny feeling*
> *Hey, what can you say? We were overdue*
> *But it'll be over soon, you wait*
> *Hey, what can you say? We were overdue*
> *But it'll be over soon, just wait*"

More disheartening and surreal clips match the beat and transition with Burnham's lyrics: a flooded Planet Fitness, kayakers wading through an interstate, icebergs breaking apart, a fire on the surface of the ocean, and an emaciated polar bear. This trend was not intended to simply discuss the song in the abstract or speak more generally about Burnham's special. Rather, users took the song as an opportunity to reflect and then express themselves emotionally by creating and sharing TikToks. "That Funny Feeling" became an anthem of the feelings Gen Z has about the poor state of the environment. This demonstrates that TikTok is not simply a space to make content to be consumed, but is also a place where users can develop and share emotional connections, make emotional declarations, and derive meaning in their lives. TikTok affords an efficient device in which affects can be identified, amplified, and distributed; users can observe feelings, have a feeling in response, and then express that feeling to others using sound and music without leaving the platform, creating a sort of affective loop.

As established in the previous chapter, TikTok provides an array of features that afford users the ability to create emotionally moving content. By focusing on two affectively powerful aspects of TikTok, sounds/music and the platform's encouragement of first-person filmed perspectives, I will demonstrate affect's role in media studies and how affect moves through and finds expression (Sampson et al., p.7) on TikTok. These two aspects will be viewed through an activism lens, by way of a contextual analysis of a TikTok protest video from the Minneapolis protests in 2020.

This chapter will first investigate the affective power of music and how music can carry collective meaning through popular culture. In order to better understand the significance of the music featured in this video example, "This Is America" by Childish Gambino, I will explore the relationships between Black culture, music, and affect, by investigating the use of Jazz in

documenting Black experiences. Drawing from Tyfahara Danielle Singleton's dissertation, *Facing Jazz, Facing Trauma: Modern Trauma and the Jazz Archive*, I will connect the storied past of Billie Holiday's *"Strange Fruit"* to "This Is America" by Childish Gambino.

Next, this chapter will explore the significance of the location and perspective of the video and how it relates to the concept of sousveillance, defined by Allissa V. Richardson in *Bearing Witness While Black* as "the act of looking from below—from a less powerful social position—to observe the actions of authority figures" (Richardson, 199), and how TikTok is a unique tool for documenting sousveillance. Finally, I will highlight three pitfalls of these movements: How these affective mechanisms can result in collective trauma for the communities participating in online activism, how the tumultuous landscape of the app as well as the activist themes in their content force them to make a choice between remaining in their online communities and preserving their mental health, and the ephemeral nature of TikTok activism.

What is Affect?

Throughout this chapter, the word "feel" will appear quite often. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, this is somewhat a result of the great deal of time spent on TikTok over the course of writing this thesis. It's difficult to reiterate the sentiments of the users observed without speaking in the ways in which they speak. When I refer to users claiming to *feel* something, I'm speaking on the topic of affect. The definition of affect is somewhat hard to grasp, in fact, its ineffability is woven into the very definition. In *Affect and Social Media: Emotion, Mediation, Anxiety and Contagion,* Sampson et al., states that affect is "often said to occur 'outside', on the jagged edges of human awareness", and that affect theories encourage creative and interdisciplinary thinking— a "movement away from disciplinary specificity"—

causing an "ungraspability of affect" (Sampson et al., p.6). Lewis Goodings offers a generally accepted definition: "affect relates to the forces at play in the patterns of motion and rest that are often delivered via an intense set of feelings, operating across both material and discursive practices" (Goodings, p.27). Sampson et al. breaks down the following three distinct aspects of affect as the following:

1. *Affect can be grasped as moving through the hardly noticed sensations, indexed in bodily rhythms that are disrupted and excited, like those considered to occur in, for example, eccrine gland secretion and cardiac ectopy.*

2. *Affective activity is said to penetrate bodies fully outside of awareness through the trillions of neutrinos that pierce through us, every second, unannounced and unnoticed.*

3. *Affect is also said to occur in the nonconscious manipulations of sentiment through Facebook news feeds. These various processes or movements are for many affect theorists the hidden realities of being, distorted by perception, culture and so-called consciousness. Consciousness itself is sometimes regarded as a particularized momentary assemblage, 0ne that we attempt to actualize and stabilize or locate a "me", a "you", an "it".* (Sampson et al., 2018, p.6)

In short, affect moves often unnoticed through the typical sensations felt in our physical bodies, is catalogued without thought or awareness, and can be manipulated through the media with which we interact.[17] Drawing from Ringrose and Mendes' idea of "mediated affect," this chapter will focus on how TikTok mediates "energetic flows and physical qualities of social life

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[17] Eric Shouse defines a feeling as a "sensation that has been checked against previous experiences and labelled", and an emotion as the projection/display of that feeling. See: Shouse, E. (2005). Feeling, Emotion, Affect. *M/C Journal*, 8(6). https://doi.org/10/5204/mcj.2443

including physical material reality" and how TikTok mediates "material, bodily capacities to affect or be affected" (Ringrose & Mendes, 87). Similar to part 1, "Digital Emotion", edited by Sampson et al, I aim to show the ways in which affect and feeling find expression and are influenced on TikTok (Sampson et al., p.7) and how the affective impact of such videos—how TikTok videos and trends are experienced and how those experiences impact physical environments like protests—further blurs the dichotomy of 'online' and 'offline' (Ringrose & Mendes, 88).

Minneapolis Protest Video Case Study

The following TikTok video example will be referenced throughout the remainder of this chapter. This video by Kareem Rahma, an Egyptian-American creative, was taken at the Minneapolis protests on May 28, 2020, in response to the murder of George Floyd (Martin, 2020). "This is America" by Childish Gambino, which will be heavily discussed in the *Music and Affect* sub-section of this chapter, is overlaid with the ambient audio. Just behind the music, protesters can be heard chanting "no justice, no peace" and screaming directly at officers. The whirr of a helicopter circling and surveilling from above is ever-present.

A person can be seen standing on the roof of a car, unmasked, wearing a short-sleeved shirt, with their camera aimed at something behind the TikToker. A second person seen slightly in the foreground wears a full white ski mask and is clothed in long sleeves, pants, and possibly gloves. The video quickly pans to the Minneapolis police precinct building. There are at least 9 officers visible on the roof, all in full riot gear and aiming guns at the crowd below. Panning back and forth, a sea of more than 40 police officers stand on the street behind a barricade. A cut in the film now shows officers standing slightly above a crowd behind a tall fence. Only a few

feet in front of them behind another barricade is a line of protestors screaming at the officers and waiving homemade signs. We then get a larger survey of the scene: protestors scattered in the street, smoke bombs illuminated by the street lights, a helicopter ominously hovering from above, and a protestor pouring milk into the eyes of another protestor to help soothe the effects of tear gas.

The video ends with a side-by-side photo of Colin Kaepernick, the NFL player who famously took a knee during the National Anthem in protest of police brutality, and Derek Chauvin, the Minneapolis police officer responsible for George Floyd's death. Kaepernick is seen kneeling in his team uniform, while Chauvin is seen kneeling on George Floyd's neck.[18] The text overlay reads "WHICH KNEE BOTHERS YOU MORE??", a question referencing the public outrage at Kaepernick's act of protest, and the perceived lack of public outrage to Chauvin's brutality.

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[18] See: Streeter (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/sports/football/george-floyd-kaepernick-kneeling-nfl-protests.html)

Figure 5: [Minneapolis Protest TikTok](), @kareemrahma

Music & Affect

The protest video example above can be easily found by searching the hashtags

#BlackLivesMatter, or searching for the sound "This is America." Searching by sound is a

primary method of finding TikTok videos; similar to the way hashtags are inventoried, TikTok

audios present an opportunity for users to convene over events and topics. Hashtags can

document, memorialize, and carry events through time, as Jackson, et al. puts it, "the ongoing

visibility of the hashtag on Twitter is an example of how the narratives constructed by particular

publics are lasting and how particular stories carry symbolic weight even when the events lie in

the past" (Jackson, et al., 119). The way videos are organized inside the platform offers users an extremely easy way to access videos from multiple perspectives of the same event. When a user searches for a specific audio, like "That Funny Feeling" for example, they are able to click the sound and see all the videos using that sound including the 'original' in a grid arranging from most to least viewed. "That Funny Feeling" results in over 12,000 videos applying the song to in differing creative ways to communicate varying affects. This same grid is also accessible by tapping on the audio directly from a video on the user's FYP. At a quick glance, the user is given the original posting of the audio file and can distinguish relevant videos from there. This differs from Twitter where searching hashtags can often provide muddled results packed with retweets and heavy text blocks. TikTok's platform has a clean design that draws a user's eyes directly to the video content and encourages consumption of massive amounts of information quickly. Although this design makes finding specific content very easy for a user who is seeking it, it can also create a harmful and intense experience for witnesses, those who carry the collective memory of state mandated injustice and pain to their people, by presenting an overwhelming grid of sensitive content.

The prominent audio featured in this TikTok example was intentionally chosen to strengthen an emotional response of the viewer and communicate a storied narrative. The audio used in the example is a mashup of the songs "This is America" by Childish Gambino and "Congratulations" by Post Malone, but Gambino's "This is America" specifically carries a heavy meaning in popular culture. "This is America" documents the generational grief of Black communities and the music video is a form of witnessing. Part of the power of this song is that the accompanying music video's visual symbolism reinforces the lyrical topics of gun violence, police brutality, the stereotyping of Black people, and the continued trauma to Black bodies and

communities. The video is arguably more impactful than the song as the lyrics are designed to be ambiguous at times and suggestive more than definitive. The strong lyrics of the song combined with the visually striking video force the viewer to sit with the powerful social commentary by Gambino.

By exploring Billie Holiday's performance of "Strange Fruit," we can find a clear argument for the affective impact of music for documenting real experiences of the traumatized. In Tyfahara Danielle Singleton's dissertation, *Facing Jazz, Facing Trauma: Modern Trauma and the Jazz Archive*, Singleton states that "understanding the music in its historical contexts requires one to see the traumatic history which created it, a history that is constantly threatened with erasure by a society that wants to see itself as post-racist. That history—that evidence—is foundational to American history, a history built on trauma" (Singleton, 27). Singleton asserts that we should think of Jazz singing as "a performative oral history" (Singleton, 37). Billie Holiday's performance—the intense physical personification of trauma to the Human Spirit, serves to force a cruel history and her bold dissent to be seen, heard, and felt. Singleton continues, "when the jazz singer testifies to trauma through her song, she performs another function that makes her testimony not only essential to her own survival and the rebuilding of her subjectivity, but to the survival of all those to and for whom her song speaks…Seen in this way, the singer of jazz, has much responsibility, with so many dead to awaken" (Singleton, 25).

Songs like "Strange Fruit," first performed in 1939, and "This is America," released in 2018, rest upon a foundation of hundreds of years-worth of songs of Black protest. Music has the ability to archive community trauma, and much like Billie Holiday's performance of "Strange Fruit," "This is America" when heard and viewed evokes emotion and solidarity for witnesses. Singleton points to Nancy Baker's assertion that "Strange Fruit" found its roots in a Black

protest song documented in *Negro Songs of Protest,* arranged by Lawrence Gellert (Singleton, 42). This is to say: it is clear that trauma is not a single catastrophic event from the past, but rather it continues and remains ingrained in the everyday lives of witnesses. The musical testimony of this pain reminds us that these heinous acts are not so far in the past—nor allowed to be forgotten—and the trauma is certainly not in the rear-view.

Similar to how Billie Holiday's physical performance of "Strange Fruit" created depth and added meaning to the lyrics, the music video for "This is America" has shaped the way that listeners interpret the song. The use of this song in the TikTok example further intensifies the parallels between the music video and the real-life violence the protesters witnessed and experienced. Using this audio adds to the affective response a viewer feels because it is accessing a layered popular culture meaning and pairing it with striking *real* visual footage. Additionally, when songs become associated with protests as "This is America" became, they take on new collective meaning. "This is America" is now reminiscent of a distinct time, the summer of 2020, and it stirs specific sentiments: anger, fear, desperation, resistance, and comradeship, to name a few. "This is America" continues the legacy of documenting the collective trauma of Black bodies set forth by Black cultural touchstones as documented in *Negro Songs of Protest* and personified by Billie Holiday's performance of "Strange Fruit". Accessing the emotions that have become associated with "This is America," protest TikToks can be used to reignite collective feelings and organize protests once more.

Collective Effervescence & Sousveillance

Like other social media platforms, TikTok provides a space for production where individuals can create, maintain, and distribute content. As demonstrated earlier in this thesis,

social media at large has been used by marginalized publics to access public discourse and create their own counterpublics (Jackson, et al.,xxxiii). As I will demonstrate in this section, TikTok provides a unique space for marginalized publics to commune and energize unified movements. This section will demonstrate this by examining Émile Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence and Allissa V. Richardson's application of sousveillance. The first person-perspective encouraged by TikTok's user interface elicits a kinetic response in the viewer. TikTok is place where an individual with a relatively low technological buy-in can create a powerfully produced 60 second film without intermediary approval.[19] These mini-films comprise multiple clips, varying vantage points, devastating footage, and emotive music, eliciting a powerful affective response in the viewer and encouraging active participation in collective action. Relatedly, the protest footage in the video example reveals another effect of the first-person perspective; the viewer's emotional response is guided primarily by what the creator documents. In this case, the user films himself in the middle of a protest, where he shows riot police armed with guns, surrounding him and other demonstrators. This demonstration of the power imbalance positions the viewer as a protestor and serves as an invitation for the viewer to join in acts of collective protest.

The desire to belong as a member of collective protest is further described by French sociologist Émile Durkheim who developed the term Collective effervescence to describe the sense of "being swept through one's actions by a larger power when one is within a crowd moved by a common passion" (Tufekci, 89). The first-person perspective of the TikTok video allows a viewer to feel like they are part of the crowd. TikTok protest videos encourage a relationship between individual expression and increasing participation in collective movements

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[19] During the summer of 2020, 60 seconds was the maximum length a TikTok video could be. 3-minute TikTok videos became an available feature in December of 2020.

(Tufekci, 89). In *Twitter and Teargas*, Zeynep Tufekci notes that protesting is a joyful activity for many people, providing an "existential jolt," particularly if the protest presents risk of harm to the participants (Tufekci, 88). I argue that the highly emotive nature of the video footage combined with the affective intensity of "This is America" adds to the urgency of necessary participation by virtual witnesses by clearly expressing the sense of danger and severity of the protest; engaging this "existential jolt." For pre-voting-age youth activists, protesting— being part of a collective movement with others who share your passions— is a legal method of practicing democracy. Time and again, the idea that youth could play a major role in revolutionary events has been squashed despite the success and impact of those actions. AAs was true of previous generations' youth activists, Gen Z is using tools available to them. TikTok provides a unique space for energizing protest involvement by harnessing the power of affect.

In "The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions in and around Social Movements*"*, James M. Jasper writes that affective and reactive emotions are an integral part of protest activities at every stage and that these emotions can explain "why individuals join protest events or groups, ranging from emotional responses they can have as individuals to those that recruiters can stir in them" (Jasper, 404-405). As Tufekci notes, the collective effervescence of online activists—their desire to participate in something bigger and find belonging— result in virtual experiences that can quickly result in physical manifestations of resistance and activism (Tufecki, 89). The result of this TikTok is that the viewer can be emotionally compelled to act by creating a virtual environment wherein the viewer feels they are part of a collective movement with high physical stakes—and it only required a smartphone. The entire video is created within the app, eliminating the need to use several editing applications to achieve the desired effect. The

ease of TikTok's interface and the vast array of production tools TikTok affords users allows this affective response to be generated easily.

 It is affectively powerful to see the protestors stand in resistance, vocalize their dissent, maintain a bold upward gaze with those in positions of power, and to see those authority figures staring back down. I argue that these highly affective TikTok protest videos act as a recruitment tool of sorts by stirring a reactive emotional response in the viewer. This act of documenting authority figures from a position of lesser power is known as sousveillance, a show of resistance to the power imbalance.

In *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Simone Browne explores "Blackness as a key site through which surveillance is practiced, narrated, and resisted" (Browne, 2015). She begins by unpacking the word surveillance as being composed of the French prefix *sur-*, meaning "from above", and the French verb *veiller*, meaning "observing or watching" (Browne, 18). Surveillance implies an imbalanced power dynamic, and is most understood as "organizations observing people" (Browne, 18), whereas sousveillance, *sous* meaning from below, implies an attempt to combat the power imbalance. Browne cites Steve Mann for coining the term sousveillance "as a way of naming an active inversion of the power relations that surveillance entails" (Browne, 19).

To begin to examine the TikTok protest video example through the lens of sousveillance, it is important to first discuss the geo-political aspects of the location in which the protests occurred. Minneapolis Police Department's Third Precinct, where this video example takes place, is designed to encourage surveillance of the surrounding neighborhoods by creating rooftop access for police officers to maintain a high vantage point whenever they deem necessary. The geographical location of the precinct is important, as it is strategically placed at

the center of a juncture between highway 55, the train line, and Little Earth— a Native American public housing project and the last ungentrified area in the city (Aizura, 2020). The space between highway 55 and the train line now serves as a homeless encampment due to the bulldozing of working-class neighborhoods to build the highway. In "A Mask and A Target Cart," Aizura describes the precinct as being "made to be defended from all sides, because police stations embody and enact state violence" (Aizura, 2020). The Third Precinct was created to surveille and intimidate poor, Black, and brown people specifically.

In this TikTok example, we see a literal visual representation of sousveillance in action. The police officers (surveillers) can be seen in the video on the rooftops of the station wielding guns and shooting rubber bullets at the protesters below. Due to the first-person perspective of the video, we, the viewer, also become a sousveiller. We are quite literally looking up at the authority figure, and they are looking back down at us. We are also in the crowd and part of the crowd. The rage of the protestors and the police officers surrounds us; it is almost palpable, and it welcomes the viewer to *feel* as if they are involved in the dangerous act of sousveillance.
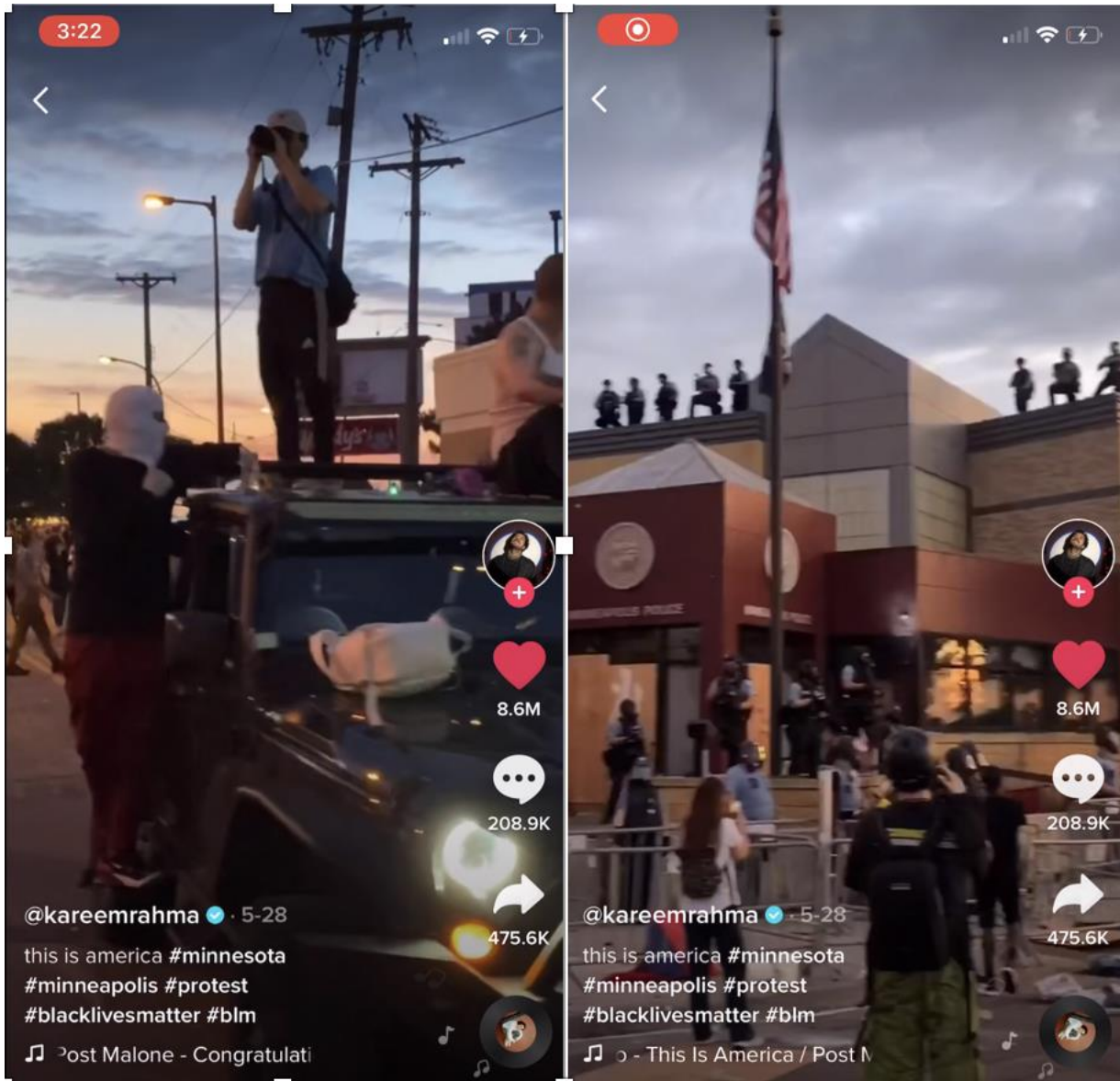
Figure 6: Screenshot photo from video above. The Sousveiller (left) and the Surveiller (right)
@kareemrahma

It is imperative to recognize that Kareem Rahma, the creator of this video, put himself at extreme risk of physical, mental, and emotional injury. Rahma is boldly "assuming an oppositional gaze to establish a degree of narrative power," and in doing so he is putting himself at risk of retaliation by police (Richardson, 82). We, as the viewers, are witnessing a sacrifice of

bodily safety by this filmmaker while our physical bodies are not harmed. By filming police

brutality, Rahma and other Black and brown witnesses are not only opening themselves up to the

obvious physical risk, but also the emotional, mental, generational, and community trauma that

comes from witnessing. They are risking death and permanent life-long damage to add this video

to the body of knowledge of state-imposed pain in the hopes that they will gain virtual

connection with others around the world (Richardson, 18). Richardson asserts that there are

wounds caused by witnessing, but that speaking for the slain (Richardson, 10) and setting the

record straight (Richardson, 17) by representing their own narratives is valuable. The wounds

suffered by activists, namely activist burnout and poor mental health caused by witnessing and

suppression, are corroborated in interviews with activist TikTok creators in the next chapter.

Conclusion

Though I have shown in this chapter that TikTok creates a distinct and affective space for

organizing and disseminating social justice information, it is important to question the ethics of

TikTok in the social justice sphere. Granted, a TikTok user's ability to create powerfully

affective mini-films is certainly the biggest strength of the platform as a social justice tool, but I

do not claim that it is a wholly positive one and it is important to identify its limitations. As

established in the introduction to this thesis and in Chapter 2, the intense personalization of the

algorithm's design is responsible for the satisfaction users experience with their FYP. However,

this personalization and the addictive nature of the platform can make it difficult for users to take

a step back when their mental health demands a break.

As will be expanded upon by the creator interviews in Chapter 4, utilizing the power of

affect on TikTok can be an effective way to engage collective effervescence, but users may be

overwhelmed with the mental and emotional turmoil of witnessing a large quantity of protest

videos.[20] The ways in which a user can opt-out of content they find difficult are largely

ineffective at providing immediate relief. Another substantial concern and potential for harm in

this protest video specifically is that there are no attempts to subvert the algorithm, moderators,

or police surveillance. The relative ease of subversion is an affordance of TikTok as evidenced in

Chapter 2. In later TikTok protest videos we start to see methods of subversion implemented like

the use of filters to distort protestor's faces and captions or text blocks with intentional

misspellings or emojis to communicate a deeper meaning that may not be understood by the

forces intending to delete the video or dox the protestors. However, the faces of several

protesters can be seen in the Minneapolis protest TikTok example. It is not clear if their

permission was given to be filmed or if Rahma was unaware of the potential dangers of showing

protesters' faces. Protest participants who are filmed and identified by police can be surveilled

and monitored indefinitely; police implement facial recognition software, license plate trackers,

mobile surveillance towers, drones, and cell-site simulators to identify protest participants on the

ground (Libby, 2020). After the protest, police go a step further and initiate continued

monitoring of protestors' social media accounts.

In an attempt to combat the potential harm to BLM protestors in the summer of 2020,

some TikTok users followed in the footsteps of Hong Kong activists by sharing protest strategies

and tactics to keep themselves and other protesters safe (Groundwater, 2020). Unfortunately, it is

evident by viewing some of the most viral protest TikToks from this time that many protest

attendees did not heed these suggestions. As shown in the TikTok video example discussed in

this chapter, some attendees arrived fully covered with ski masks, gas masks, and all black

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[20] Content moderators should also be considered here, as they are inundated with content they do not choose to view and are subject to the same negative effects.

clothing, and were prepared with first aid supplies, while others arrived in scant clothing with their faces fully exposed. The TikTok features that afford users these subversion methods are effective only if they are used by creators. Until this point was more broadly communicated within the activist community on TikTok, the potential for harm to protestors remained present.

In this chapter I have illustrated how TikTok's affordances lend to the efficiency with which affects can be identified, amplified, and distributed by the platform's users. TikTok's features allow users to create affectively powerful content through the ability to add music/sounds to their videos and by the first-person perspective encouraged by the platform's interface. By looking at "That Funny Feeling," "Strange Fruit," and "This is America," this chapter explored why music is affectively powerful and how it can transcend its original context and garner new meaning collectively recognized in popular culture and in activist communities. I have also addressed the defining features of surveillance and illustrated how TikTok is a distinct space for documenting sousveillance. TikTok's design allows users to tap into the power of affect by encouraging a first-person filmed perspective, inviting viewers to feel as though they are part of the crowd and participating in the act of sousveillance.

Whether these affectively powerful TikToks result in material or virtual activist participation—or somewhere in the fuzzy line between 'online' and 'offline,'—it is real and can be impactful, as you will see in the Tulsa Rally case study in Chapter 5. This analysis leaves me convinced that, despite the aforementioned critiques of digital activism, TikTok is a valuable tool in the activists' arsenal. In agreement with Richardson, I believe above all else that the potential to speak for victims of injustice (Richardson, 10) and the ability for activists to represent their own narratives (Richardson, 17) is invaluable to activist movements.

CHAPTER IV

OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE BARRICADE: THE TIKTOK ACTIVIST CREATOR

EXPERIENCE

As noted in the introduction to the previous chapter, TikTok is a space where users can

share their voice and make emotional declarations on a global scale. The truth is that not all

voices are valued or even welcome on TikTok, and the platform has openly admitted to the

suppression of "disabled, queer, and fat creators", at least according to a 2019 report by the

German news site, Netzpolotik (Botella, 2019). TikTok encountered a similar accusation in May

2020 after content using racial injustice associated hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter and

#GeorgeFloyd were suppressed. In a press release from TikTok regarding this instance, the

platform brushed off these accusations, calling it a "technical glitch" that was not an "intentional

act to suppress the experiences and invalidate the emotions felt by the Black community"

(TikTok, 2020). TikTok claims to be a platform that "exists to create joy and inspiration" and

that it is important that "nobody feels unwelcome, unheard, or unsafe on TikTok" (TikTok,

2020). Though TikTok doesn't own up to the suppression of racial justice content directly, there

are several conflicting reports, such as the Netzpolitik article cited above and an exposé by

Megan McCluskey of *Time.* McCluskey published a series of interviews with Black creators that

revealed a consensus that the shadowbanning of their accounts was not a "glitch", but that it

indicates a clear pattern of discrimination (McCluskey, 2020) where Black voices are not always

welcome or heard.[21]

In what follows, I share interviews with two activist TikTok creators, @f4kegvccipurs3

and @segyrella, exploring their experiences on TikTok, the communities they find there, and the

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[21] To be shadowbanned is when a user's content and profile are hidden from other users on a platform.

impact on their mental health. These interviews attempt to approach the larger question of the effectiveness of TikTok as a tool for activism and how creators are impacted by their time on the app. Their jilted relationships with the algorithm, both in their opinion and as revealed by TikTok themselves, are shaped by their identities as Black women. When their content was suppressed, or "shadowbanned", they engaged in acts of resistance by manipulating the app's features similar to the examples covered in Chapter 2. The trauma of the racial tensions of the summer of 2020 was exacerbated by the burden of defending their existence and human rights in the virtual sphere as well as in material physical spaces. The result of this constant resistance was a decline in mental health for both creators, which is a common pitfall of the quickly forming movements on TikTok. By comparing and contrasting the experiences of both creators, I aim to provide a snapshot of what it was like to be an activist TikTok creator in the summer of 2020 and further show the drastic range of experiences that one can have on the app.

Methodology

This study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Human Subjects Review Committee at Old Dominion University and received exempt status.[22] The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows:

       1. The creator must be at least 18 years old.

       2. They must have shared some form of activist content (e.g. topics related to: environment/climate change, racial injustice, police/prison reform, local community change, healthcare reform, humanitarian efforts, LGBTQ+ rights,

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[22] Exempt status approved November 3, 2021

etc.)[23] to their TikTok account between January 2020 and September 2021.

3. They must have at least 200 followers by September 1, 2021.[24]

My method for identifying and recruiting prospective interviewees involved first attempting to get in contact with creators I already followed. Then, using the search function in TikTok, I searched hashtags such as #blm, #socialjustice, #blacklivesmatter, #blackout, and #blackvoicesheard, to find users who share content related to those social justice hashtags. Next, I verified their follower counts and their age before scrolling through their TikToks to ensure the hashtags they used accurately reflected their video content.[25]

This initial contact with creators proved difficult for a myriad of reasons. First, I want to clarify that though I am a diligent observer of this activist community and feel quite involved behind the scenes, I have never created a TikTok myself or attempted to create bonds within these communities. Because of this, I appear as a nobody—a lurker, a ghost—with no identity and no representation of my beliefs or intentions with this community on my profile. Until recently, my TikTok profile did not even have a profile picture, only a gray circle with a person-like icon in the center. I therefore cannot blame the members of this community for being wary of me and my proposition to chat about their activism.

Secondly, in order to directly message someone on TikTok, you have to follow each other—also called being "mutual" or "moots." As previously mentioned, I had no content posted and therefore did not have any followers; I could not directly message anyone on TikTok unless they followed me back. My workaround for this was convoluted, but involved checking the

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[23] Many of these issues overlap. Frequently, creators who post activist content as described above will address many social justice topics as they intersect.

[24] This number is a bit arbitrary, but I wanted to be sure the creators I interviewed were relatively active and engaged with by other users.

[25] I verified their age to the best of my ability. Often, users put their age directly in their bio. If it was not there, I watched several of their TikToks to extrapolate clues about their possible age. If it appeared they could be over 18, I would go forward with attempting to contact them—but always verifying their age first if I received a reply.

user's TikTok profile to see if they had linked their Instagram account. If they had, I could follow them on Instagram and send them a message request through that application—hoping they would accept my request, read my message, and respond. As you can imagine, this was not very well-received. My Instagram account does have content—photos of my daughter, travels, and photography work—but I am still a stranger.

Lastly, in the age of Zoom fatigue and the pandemic in general, it is a huge ask to get on a 45-minute Zoom call with a complete stranger to discuss one's online activity. I often received replies but was then quickly ghosted (or even blocked) when the ask seemed too great. Again, this is nothing I can fault; I understand the space and energy my request would take for the interviewee. In the end, I contacted over 40 creators, received replies from 4, and interviewed 2 for this thesis. As I have expressed in my acknowledgements, I want to yet again extend my gratitude for the content creators who agreed to speak with me.

Interviews

The following interviews with @f4kegvccipurs3 and @segyrella highlight the vastly different experiences activist creators can have on TikTok. These interviews provide further evidence of many of the key elements of this thesis, including claims that TikTok actively suppresses or shadowbans Black creators, concerns about TikTok's negative impact on creator mental health, and the pitfalls of online protest organizing as covered in Chapter 3. These interviews provide first-hand insights into what it was like to be an activist creator on TikTok in the summer of 2020.

User: @f4kegvccipurs3, she/her, 20 years old.[26]

@f4kegvccipurs3 is no stranger to speaking up. As a child of immigrant parents, she has experience from a tender age mistreatment by white people. She recalls a memory of being harassed by a police officer at a traffic stop when she was a young child. In the car on their way home from worship, her mother, wearing African attire, was pulled over and accused of driving a stolen vehicle. Even after being cleared by checking her license and registration, the officer continued to pick at them, asking questions about her clothing, where they were coming from, and where they were going. A year or two later, the same officer stopped her mother when she was parked outside of her home after returning from a long day of work. As he pestered her with questions regarding her whereabouts that day, she informed him multiple times that she needed to go inside her home to use the restroom. He refused to halt his line of questioning. When the officer continued to badger her, @f4kegvccipurs3, around 7 years old at the time, yelled, "just let my mommy go pee!" These are some of her earliest memories of encounters with police. She describes these experiences as integral, sticking in her mind, and becoming a part of who she is today. As she grew older, she experienced people being more intolerable toward her family's Blackness and immigrant status. She spoke out against injustice whenever she could and later found herself using platforms to reach a wider audience.

When I asked @f4kegvccipurs3 what it was about TikTok that motivates her to post social justice content vs. on other platforms, she said that her follower count on TikTok is much higher than it is on Instagram—the only other contending platform for her content. After posting

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[26] Because I am including TikToks that identify this subject's public username and face, I included that I would not be anonymizing my subjects in my IRB exemption application, which was approved provided I only interviewed users with public profiles and referred to them by their TikTok usernames. Of course, I included this in the informed consent to my subject and informed her that she is more than welcome to opt-out of my inclusion of her videos and username if she wanted. This user consented voluntarily to her public content being shared in this thesis.

a few TikToks speaking out against racial injustice, she began to gain traction and a lot of followers. To her, it is easier to reach viewers on TikTok than it is on Instagram. She also noted the format on TikTok makes her feel as though she can speak her mind; she can simply speak into the camera and people respond to that. The social climate when she started to get attention on TikTok played a big role in why @f4kegvccipurs3 believes her content suddenly mattered—because she is Black, and people were open to listening, "even though Black people have been saying the same things for over 400 years."[27]

She believes that if someone joined TikTok now, they would not have the same experience she did with her social justice content. There wasn't a foundation for social justice on music.ly because there was no national attention on social justice and no demand by users to be educated on those topics. She feels that it wasn't until 2020 that people cared and thought, "maybe Black people are people."

When @f4kegvccipurs3 was first making content, she was stuck on "straight TikTok" with mostly videos of dance trends. It wasn't until she started interacting with and duetting people who were speaking out on topics she cared about that she began to find her community. "Kind of like a cult, once you're finally initiated, you can't get out! This is the one cult I'm happy to be in." She notes that she was able to access other creators who share her lived experiences, thoughts, and opinions, "I genuinely believe TikTok has helped me find my people." Beyond that, she expressed the ability to reach people outside of her immediate community, "when like-minded people come together to make content or discuss topics that will not just educate people in the community but also outside of it—that's a powerful thing."

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[27] The resurgence of national attention on Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020.

A major reason in why some of @f4kegvccipurs3's TikToks get more views than others is her utilization of the production tools on the app. Generally speaking, she finds that she gets more engagement when she uses features like stitch, duets, audios, greenscreen, etc., than when she simply films a clip of herself. She has played around with her use of hashtags over the years to see what impact it would have on views. In the early days, she started putting random hashtags, or hashtags that didn't relate to her content but that were trending, in her captions. This caused a dramatic increase in her viewership and engagement on her videos, but it was mostly from users outside of the safety of her community. This strategy may have succeeded in casting a wider net and increasing engagement, but it ultimately resulted in the decline of her mental health. @f4kegvccipurs3 received many hate comments and messages, including messages telling her to kill herself. She stopped using random hashtags and now sticks to hashtags that are more commonly used in her circle to protect her mental health. When I asked if she was concerned about reaching a new audience by limiting her reach, she described how she and other activist creators share the load; if she can't open herself up to the vitriol of the internet that day, or if her videos are shadowbanned, another creator will be able to. They essentially carry the burden together; in an unspoken ebb and flow of create-and-rest, they provide breaks to each other.

Another way @f4kegvccipurs3 protects her mental health is to be diligent about the data she feeds the algorithm and blocks accounts that don't align with her views. "If you have BLM in your bio, but you're posting triggering [content], I will block you. I do not want to be associated with that." Encountering white users who claim to be activists only when it is convenient is incredibly frustrating for @f4kegvccipurs3. Her activism online is her life—it's not a trend, and her trauma is not available as a tool for performative allyship.

I'm a very proud Sierra Leonean Black woman…I can't take this off. I can't go home at night and rub off my Blackness like how you rub off your makeup. I'm stuck in it, I sleep in it, I fester in it, I cry in it, I eat in it. It is me. So, the fact that people can take off their cloak of activism and put it on whenever it's cool absolutely sets me off. Not all of us have that…luxury. Not all of us have that privilege.

She has interacted with the algorithm in such a way that she doesn't see a lot of performative allyship on her FYP anymore.[28] When it does occasionally pop up, she quickly blocks the user and her personalized feed adjusts fairly quickly. One exception, however, is when it comes to live video feeds embedded within the flow of her FYP.[29] Live videos she is shown often do not match what she has communicated with the algorithm that she wants or doesn't want to see. She will often see videos that include rooms filled with Trump flags and users using racist terms. When I asked why she thinks the algorithm has decided that content is what she wants to view, she said, "It feels like they're poking at me." To @f4kegvccipurs3, it feels like TikTok is trying to be intentionally controversial to bait her into engaging with someone outside of her usual circle—a space she has made to be safe for herself.

On the topic of allyship, @f4kegvccipurs3 notes a striking way in which white creators try to be "good allies" on TikTok. One creator she cites in particular, @taversia, she/her, has over 440k followers and is known for her allyship. @Taversia, a white creator, often duets Black creators' TikToks. Rather than adding anything to the clip—and I mean *anything*—she does not make a single sound or facial movement, she uses her platform to try to amplify the original Black creator.

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[28] A sort of superficial form of support. Carmen Morris, contributor for Forbes, says, "allyship is an authentic support system, in which someone from outside a marginalized group advocates for those who are victims of discriminatory behaviour, whether that is at an individual level, or systemically and process driven. With authentic allyship there is an obvious, and genuine attempt, to transfer the benefits of privilege to those who lack it, in order to advocate on the marginalized groups behalf, and support them to achieve change. Performative allyship, by contrast, is where those with privilege, profess solidarity with a cause. This assumed solidarity is usually vocalized, disingenuous and potentially harmful to marginalized groups" (Morris, 2020).
[29] Live videos consist of users—who a person may be following or not— streaming in real time. These videos are folded into the mix of posted content as one scrolls through their FYP.
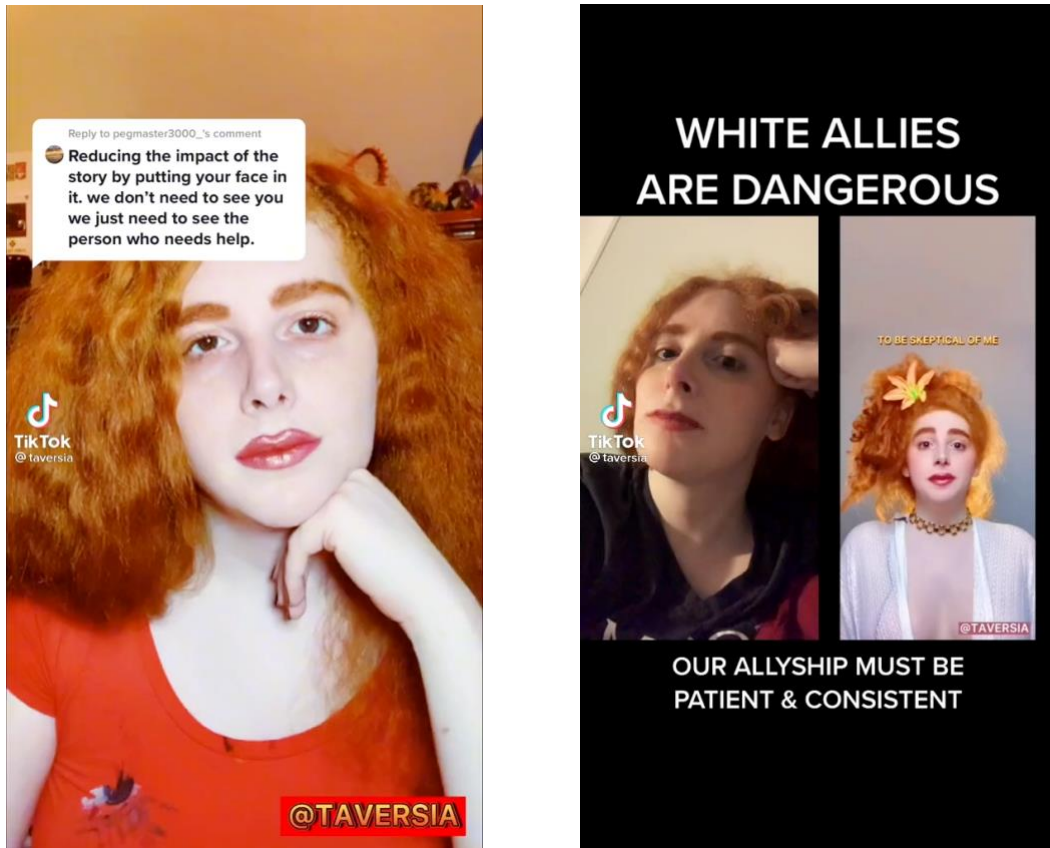
Figure 7: Right: White allyship #1, @taversia, Left: White allyship #2, @taversia

@f4kegvccipurs3 notes that it is not uncommon for a white creator to post nearly identical content as a Black creator, but get significantly more engagement. This is how @taversia tries to leverage her algorithmic privilege to promote suppressed Black creators. There is no consensus amongst the activist community on whether or not this form of allyship should be celebrated. Concerning @taversia specifically, her comments section is often full of discussions about why they should continue to allow a white creator to gain more traction than a Black creator in this way. For @f4kegvccipurs3, it's a welcomed action, as "we have to give

credit where it's due.[30] She has 8 times more followers than me but she is mutual with me. We, as a black community, need to accept respectful help from white people."

After @taversia included @f4kegvccipurs3's handle in a video aimed at bolstering Black owned TikTok accounts, she was pleased to see an increase in her follower count. However, this form of white allyship might come at a price. According to @f4kegvccipurs3, white creators who use their platform to amplify Black creators get punished by the algorithm for doing so. She recalls instances of @taversia's account being shadowbanned, and that her follower count to engagement ratios often don't add up.[31]

Shadowbanning is a hot topic on most sides of TikTok. To be shadowbanned is when a user's content and profile are hidden from other users on a platform. The intention of this moderation technique is to reduce the visibility of spam posts or content that violates a platform's community guidelines. When a user is shadowbanned, they are not alerted to this fact—this is by design, in hopes that the user will not simply open another account and continue to violate community guidelines (Stack, 2018)—but they will see a dramatic flatline of engagement with their content. In a 2018, following a controversial Vice article that seemed to misunderstand the definition of shadowbanning, President Donald Trump accused Twitter of shadowbanning prominent Republicans and called the act "discriminatory" and "illegal."

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[30] @f4kegvccipurs3 is speaking on her own opinion here. She does not—nor do I— intend to claim that her statements represent the sentiments of entire populations.

[31] Meaning, she has nearly half a million followers but has several videos with less than 50,000 views, indicating that her content is not being shown to all of her followers, let alone users who don't yet follow her.

Figure 8: Photo, Tweet by Donald Trump re: shadowbanning

In the article, *Vice* claimed that Twitter had shadowbanned some Republicans because their accounts "no longer appear in the auto-populated drop-down search box" (Thompson, 2018). However, the search feature on Twitter allowed users to find these prominent Republicans, their accounts just weren't in the list of suggested accounts that populates before a user presses the return key to access search results. Their profiles and content were still visible. This event might not be the root cause of the shift in the definition of shadowbanning, but the definition for the everyday internet user has since shifted.

Today, to the average user, shadowbanning isn't a distinct line in the sand that your content is viewable or not but more of a gradient. As @f4kegvccipurs3 describes it, shadowbanning can mean that a user's content is being halted by the algorithm. If her content is getting low likes compared to the number of followers she has, if her audio is deleted from a video, if her video is deleted outright, if she's getting fewer comments, all hate comments, or no views at all, she believes she's been shadowbanned. She may still be searchable and her content

is not completely hidden from being viewed, but it appears as though her TikToks are not being ranked by the algorithm in the same way as other videos.

There are many reasons @f4kegvccipurs3 and other creators attribute to TikTok's shadowbanning. Making jokes about prominent white creators, using hashtags related to racial justice (e.g., #blacklivesmatter, #blm), themes of resistance, using certain words either verbally or written in the captions/closed captioning, and the color of their skin, to name a few. To combat this shadowbanning, creators attempt to subvert the app's moderation through creative self-censorship as demonstrated in Chapter 2 and exemplified in the example below.

For @f4kegvccipurs3, the subversion efforts are most disheartening. She doesn't want to have to rely on her backup account, which she felt compelled to create out of fear her main account would be deleted. To @fkegvccipurs3, her main account is "the inside of [my] life and mind." Misspelling captions, using analogies, altering her vernacular, diluting her message, and outright changing her personality to somehow meet the algorithm's wants is also taxing because she feels it forces her to change who she is for certain videos to stay live. In exasperation, @f4kegvccipurs3 ends this line of inquiry with, "all I want to do is talk about the things that affect me as a queer Black woman in America."

In the end, @f4kegvccipurs3 concludes that TikTok has helped her find communities that celebrate some of the most important parts of her identity—her Blackness, her queerness, her African heritage, her life as a neurodivergent woman, and so on. In particular, finding creators who celebrate Blackness has been healing to her,

> *You don't have to act one way to be Black. Why does my Blackness have to be defined by whiteness? My Blackness is not the enemy, and the way I express myself is not the enemy. These two things can coexist and cohabitate, and I can make myself into a truer identity of myself, regardless of what people perceive as Black or white.*

In times when she's battling content suppression or dealing with hateful commenters, she asks herself if she should continue with her activism work. She concludes, however, that she has to talk about the injustices in her life. It's who she is. "This is my boxing glove", she says as she points to her throat. TikTok is a valuable tool for @f4kegvccipurs3 to continue the work she believes she was born to do; with the larger platform TikTok affords, she is able to reach people both inside and outside of her communities to share her voice and lived experiences.

User: @segyrella, she/her, 21 years old.

@segyrella lives less than one block from the George Floyd memorial in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Over the course of the summer and early fall in 2020, she posted several protest TikToks that went viral. Her most viewed video, clocking in with over 17 million views, is a mash up of clips from protests she attended in Minneapolis, complete with a trending protest audio from this time, "My Tears are Becoming a Sea" by M83. The original audio in her third most viewed video, with over 3 million views, was so powerful that other creators stripped the audio and reused it in some of their own videos.[32] The entirety of this encounter occurs on the street in darkness with a smoky haze illuminated by the street lights. A constant alarm sound can be heard in the background. The majority of the focus is on one particular officer in riot gear: a helmet, goggles, gloves, a gas mask, a belt with various weapons, and a very large gun that I assume shoots rubber bullets. Other officers in the video are seen brandishing batons and standing boldly facing @segyrella. A few times, she flips the camera around to face her and her cousin, the only other protester who appears to be with her. Through the shuffling of the camera, I can count at least 30 officers surrounding them on all sides; I get the sense that there are many

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[32] This refers to the organic audio recorded by the user at the time of the incident.

more I cannot see, as @segyrella quickly swivels her head to keep an eye on them. Below is a

transcript of this 59 second video:

> **@segyrella's cousin:** "I DON'T CARE! YOU SHOT ME FOUR TIMES ALREADY,
> SHOOT ME AGAIN! THESE BULLETS DON'T HURT ME! I WON'T BACK
> DOWN!
> **Unknown male speaker:** You're going to get hit by a car—
> **@segyrella's cousin:** LET ME GET HIT BY A CAR! [long pause] I don't want to
> move, I don't want to leave. No, they don't get to win. They are not more than us, they
> are not more than us! YOU ARE NOT MORE THAN ME! YOU ARE NOT MORE
> THAN HER! OUR BLACK IS NOT A THREAT! [pause] I DON'T FEAR YOU! I
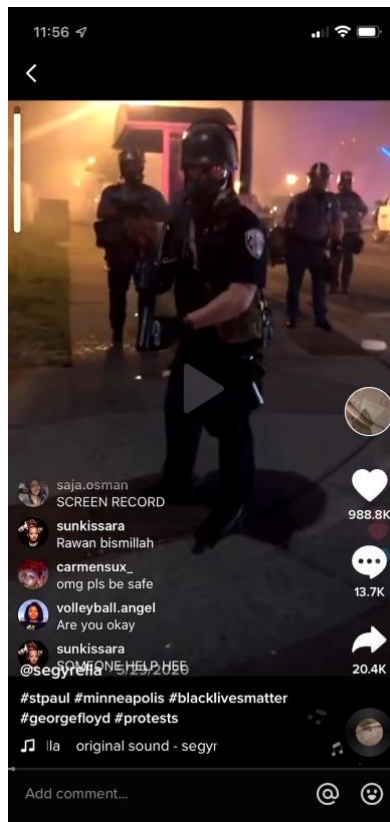> DON'T FEAR YOU! YOU DON'T HURT ME!"

Figure 9: Minneapolis Protest
#2, @segyrella

Her pain is palpable, but so is her strength. The comments range in sentiment with everything from supportive to vile, like: "That is one strong woman!! I felt the pain in her voice!! 🙄", "I'm scared are you ok?", "TRUMP 2020", and "if the rubber bullets don't hurt her then use the real ones," for example.

At one point, according to the analytics provided to @segyrella by TikTok, her profile had received around 7 million views. She never made the conscious decision to try to become a popular activist; prior to the eruption of protests just outside her front door, she shared less-serious content on TikTok. After her protest videos began to go viral, she quickly became overwhelmed by the heightened attention. *The New York Times* contacted her for an interview, which she declined out of fear for her safety. Musical artists asked if she would use their songs in her protest videos, but she "was like…no." It felt inauthentic to take requests like that. When selecting audio for her videos, she asked herself what song felt right for the vibe: "I was there when I was filming the videos, so just the kind of emotions and stuff, like whatever song can kind of resemble that. A lot of the trending songs weren't really up to my standard… they felt very… performative..."

When she was physically attending protests, she felt like a target because she was filming. She recalls feeling paranoid that people were looking for her because she had previously shared videos to her TikTok that showed her face. Eventually, she decided that she would only go out during hours when it "wasn't as crazy," often early morning hours. She was even recognized in person a few times, "you never know who will recognize you [from your TikTok]." She remembers that there were a lot of white supremacists coming to Minneapolis at the time, and it was a frightening possibility to have to encounter them in person. Self-identified white supremacists were commenting on her videos. She wondered if they would seek her out or

recognize her. She started to cover her face and relied on protest safety videos she saw on her FYP to help protect her; plus, "goggles and masks make teargas less painful."

Thankfully, @segyrella was never physically harmed through her activism; the mental toll, however, was heavy. She started to notice that her content was getting far less engagement, and the comments she did receive were mostly negative and not from her supporters. She expresses "that kind of felt a little bit intentional on TikTok's part…I felt like that was to push me out of TikTok or something. Even when I tried to report them to TikTok, they wouldn't do anything…like they were trying to bully me out of it." When she tried to report this to TikTok directly: "silence, crickets from TikTok". She felt like she had no control over her account, and even suspected those negative commenters could have been spam accounts. She feared she was shadowbanned.

TikTok seemed like the right place for her content because it is more catered toward video-sharing and, in her experience, the net is wider; more users can be reached than on other platforms. She tried to use Instagram, but quickly felt their community guidelines were harsher than TikTok, as some of her content would get deleted by the algorithm three seconds after she posted it. Twitter didn't quite feel right either, because it felt more global—or perhaps less relevant to her—because it is not personalized in the same way that TikTok is. She wanted to try to keep her content live and viewable on TikTok, so she had to strategize.

To combat being shadowbanned, @segyrella tried to play the algorithm by misspelling words in her captions. When supporters *could* see her videos—many of which were informing viewers that she was shadowbanned—they tried to help her crawl out of the void: "if it's a video of something really tragic, someone will comment 'boosting this for the algorithm' or something really random like, 'oh, my dog went to the park today'—something completely off what the

video is about because they don't want TikTok to associate it with something that would violate

their community guidelines." According to @segyrella, they're trying to "confuse" the algorithm

as though it's "like a weird little game…and only certain people can get it." The logic is that if

the comments discuss dogs, and the video flags as a protest, maybe the algorithm will be

confused enough to leave the video up. She switched gears and tried to live stream on TikTok

instead, and it offered a temporary solution. Her first live stream had over 20k viewers, and she

thought this was going to be the answer to increasing her engagement again. However, the next

time she went live, there were only 40 viewers. Unfortunately, none of these tactics seemed to

help increase her engagement. With around 200k followers at the height of her profile's

popularity, some of her videos received less than 100 views total.

One day, she was prompted by an in-app notification from TikTok. She recalls that the

message asked for her permission to use her protest videos for TikTok's marketing. She "thought

that if I gave them—if I agreed to it, they would…let go of the shadowban, but they didn't."

@segyrella believes TikTok used her content for ads as recently as February 2021, for Black

History Month[33]. They gave her the title of "TikTok Creator[34]," and she was even in their

newsletter. She felt negatively toward TikTok because they were shadowbanning her content

while using it for their advertisements at the same time. She questioned if she should have sought

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[33] @segyrella recalls her videos were in TikTok's promotional ads for Black History Month and in support of Black Lives Matter. I cannot locate any of TikTok's ads; it appears they are not catalogued anywhere, and are removed once the ad has run its allotted time. I could not find @segyrella's content in TikTok's online newsroom, but it is possible her content was distributed in a newsletter only received by verified creators.

[34] @segyrella is unsure what this title was supposed to mean, and neither am I. She is not referring to being "verified," identified by a blue check next to a username, according to TikTok, as "an easy way for notable figures to let users know they're seeing authentic content, and it helps to build trust among high profile accounts and their followers. For celebrities, non-profits, or official brand pages, this badge builds an important layer of clarity with the TikTok community" (TikTok, 2019). She did not receive any benefits, and was not made a member of the Creator Fund—a TikTok fund that monetarily rewards creators (who meet certain qualifications) for "doing what they do best" (TikTok, n.d.).

a lawyer: "every time I try to get in contact with someone, there's no one person they can direct me to. Who is even in charge of this? Who is running this show? I don't know." She remarks that

> *It felt very alienating. It felt very isolating. There wasn't really anyone I could talk to about it. I remember at one point I tried to—I was confused if I should reach out to a lawyer or something because TikTok was using my content. It felt like a tradeoff: they don't delete my video and they get to use my video—because they told me that technically some of my videos did violate their community guidelines…but they wouldn't take it down because it was getting so many views. Like, people were on the app because of it…It was bringing them so much popularity that they were like 'we'll keep your videos but we're going to use them'*

When I asked @segyrella the very loaded question of why she thought she was shadowbanned, she had a surprising answer: her location. The climate in Minneapolis was unstable at the time, and she believes because she lived there, she was considered a threat, "I could literally take out my phone whenever and start anything." She and other residents received phone notifications alerting them to the curfew and informing them to stay indoors. The National Guard was on her street all hours of the day and night. Her cell phone didn't work on several occasions, which she suspects was purposeful cell-jamming by the police—meaning she couldn't do live streams. This forced her to record the protests and post the videos at a later time. The short intervals when she was able to get signal enough to go live, she believes TikTok's algorithm was surveilling her videos for the alarm and siren sounds that were constant on the streets of Minneapolis. She felt she was being watched all the time—by both the local police and TikTok— "I don't know if it was paranoia or something but…yeah." She feels this was a common sentiment amongst local Minneapolis TikTok creators: they were being suppressed because they lived where the action was happening.

When the protesting began to die down, @segyrella thinks TikTok continued to shadowban her because activism was no longer the message they wanted for their platform: "they don't want social justice on their platform anymore. I think they're sick of it. They try to

be neutral, but I don't think they're neutral. I think at one point they had enough, they wanted their platform to go in another way. They didn't want it to be a social justice kind of platform." She tried to bury the social justice posts on her profile by sharing more superficial and "fun" content, but it made no difference. To her, that account had been permanently blacklisted. She created a second account as an experiment. When I asked what kind of content she posts on this account, she laughs and says "nothing serious!" Overall, she notices Black creators have far fewer followers than white creators. She feels like Black creators who complain about suppression often get punished for it: "the ones that do complain are silenced…you have to take what you get and don't throw a fit." So, she only shared videos with trending and lighthearted themes, and even tried to make her FYP on the original account totally different. However even that proved difficult, as "it's such a deep algorithm, whereas on the new one I can change it very easily because I haven't had it for a super long time." @segyrella feels her original account was so data heavy with social justice themes that it was unchangeable; it felt as though the algorithm would make choices for her, even when she tried to communicate that she wanted to see something else entirely.

As established in the introduction of this thesis, one cannot simply unfollow or unfriend a creator in hopes of scrubbing their content from their feed. The algorithm's design is content based, not friend or follower based like other social media sites. Therefore, once @segyrella communicated her interest in protest videos and racial justice content, it was hard to find her way out. There is a button called "not interested" meant to provide users with a direct option to communicate that they no longer wish to see similar content, but it is not entirely effective. The first issue is that the "not interested" button is not intuitive; rather than being located on the main video screen it is buried in the "send" interface of the app or can be accessed by holding a finger

down on the video engaging a modal window. Furthermore, tapping "not interested" does not

guarantee similar content *won't* be shown, only that it *might* be shown less *(TikTok, n.d.)* over

time; it does not provide the immediate relief activists and witnesses require. So, they are

essentially left with three options: commit to the process of recalibrating their preferences with

the algorithm despite the pain they may endure, delete the application and start fresh, or leave the

application altogether, losing whatever community they have built within the app. These choices

can be devastating for activists. For @segyrella, she has effectively abandoned her activism

account altogether because of the lack of control of her FYP and the inability to crawl out of the

shadowban void.

      @segyrella feels she was able to build a community with some local Minneapolis

creators, but beyond that the connections are fairly superficial. She harbors a complex and

mostly negative relationship with TikTok now, and has experienced severe activist burnout,

articulating "the feeling that we're never going to get anywhere…just kind of hopeless." She also

feels like momentum fell flat because once the "officers were arrested, people were like okay,

now what do we do?" There wasn't a leader that could guide everyone to the next assignment.

@segyrella's observations are in line with Tufecki's claims that infant movements such as this

lack the infrastructure required and organizational leadership to make tactical shifts (Lozada,

2017). Some people wanted justice for this specific incident (justice being the officers arrest),

while others wanted a revolution involving systemic and radical change. The two camps were

never able to get in sync and work together cohesively despite TikTok's algorithm bringing their

content together. At protests, she felt she could identify the two groups, and it was shocking how

different the goals were for each. @segyrella no longer participates in activism—in person or

online—for her mental health, but she can't bring herself to delete her original account. "There's

history, you know?...I feel like it is closed a little bit for now, but maybe I'll go back to it… it's complex."

Conclusion

The interviews with @f4kegvccipurs3 and @segyrella highlight the vastly different experiences activist creators have on TikTok. They both expressed belief that TikTok definitely impacted—and perhaps was somewhat responsible for—the rise in national attention on topics of racial injustice, though @segyrella suggests TikTok is also responsible for the decline in activist content on the platform when activism no longer fit their agenda. @f4kegvccipurs3 feels she gained an enriching and supportive community, and despite the content suppression she experiences, she feels carried and invigorated by that community. Conversely, @segyrella feels isolated, alienated, suppressed to the extreme, and manipulated into letting the platform use her content for advertising.

There is no denying that the topic of shadowbanning is the top concern for both @f4kegvccipurs3 and @segyrella. There were distinct similarities in how both creators attempt to subvert algorithmic moderation. When their content was suppressed, or "shadowbanned", they engaged in acts of resistance by manipulating the app's features similar to the examples covered in Chapter 2 (e.g. misspelling captions, creating backup accounts, etc.). Both creators believe they are shadowbanned because in their videos they discuss racial injustice, speak on their Black experiences, and the simple fact that they *are* Black women. @segyrella added location to the list of reasons she believes she is shadowbanned; being in Minneapolis, the epicenter of protests against racial injustice and police violence in the summer of 2020, made her a target for surveillance and suppression. The sentiments that they are being suppressed because they are

Black mirror those of the members of the Atlanta-based content collaboration houses, Collab

Crib and Valid crib, explored in Chapter 2.

Mental health concerns were also shared by both creators, though they approach coping

with poor mental health as a result of their time and experiences on TikTok rather differently.

The experiences of these two creators echo a key point made in Chapter 3: the intensely

personalized algorithm intended to provide users with content they want to see can also make it

difficult for users to effectively communicate their desire to opt-out of activist content when their

mental health demands a break. When users encounter negative emotions from viewing TikToks,

as both @f4kegvccipurs3 and @segyrella experienced, they are left with little recourse for relief.

They must make the difficult decision to either commit to recalibrating their preferences through

being intentional about their engagement with videos they no longer wish to see, delete the app

and start fresh, or make peace with forfeiting the communities they may have joined behind by

leaving the app altogether. For @f4kegvccipurs3, committing to recalibrating her FYP was the

right choice for her. The community she has cultivated provides support when she needs to step

away from activist work or when she is shadowbanned. In @segyrella's case however, she not

only chose to start fresh with a new account, but also to cease sharing activist related content

altogether.

One of @segyrella's most viral TikToks, which was examined in this chapter, offers

another example of the key facets of Chapter 3: affect, sousveillance, and collective

effervescence. TikTok's design allows users to tap into the power of affect by encouraging a

first-person filmed perspective and affording users the ability to add music to their videos. Due

to the production features afforded by the platform, @segyrella was able to produce a viral

TikTok that documented sousveillance in an affectively powerful way. In fact, the audio from

@segyrell'as TikTok was so well-received that she noticed other users applying her original sound to *their* protest videos. The first-person perspective in which the sousveillance was documented combined with the visceral audio stirred a collective effervescence of online activists—a desire to participate in something bigger and find belonging. It is affectively powerful to see the protestors stand in resistance, vocalize their dissent, maintain a bold upward gaze with those in positions of power, and to see those authority figures staring back down. @segyrella attributes much of the attention to and participation in protests in Minneapolis to TikTok; viewers who encountered her protest video or others like it felt compelled to join the movement. The lack of leadership and unified direction @segyrella perceived at the offline protests in Minneapolis corroborates one of Tufekci's critiques of this form of organizing. These burgeoning movements driven by affectively powerful videos can create swiftly organized and intense protests, but can also result in the lack of resources, infrastructure, and organizational leadership required to make tactical shifts (Lozada, 2017).

Finally, when approaching the larger question of the effectiveness of TikTok as a tool for activists, @f4kegvccipurs3 and @segyrella's answers also contrast. They both harbor complex relationships with TikTok's algorithm, which has colored their experience with TikTok and activism at large. For @f4kegvccipurs3, TikTok is a valuable tool for her to continue the work she believes she was born to do; with the larger platform TikTok affords, she is able to reach people both inside and outside of her communities to share her voice and lived experiences. Additionally, she feels activism can still be accomplished on the platform so long as creators cultivate tight-knit communities to support each other when they face suppression or shadowbanning. In @segyrella's case, she feels TikTok *was* an effective tool for social justice activism in the summer of 2020, at least for a time. At some point, she thinks "... they had

enough, they wanted their platform to go in another way. They didn't want it to be a social justice kind of platform" anymore. As a result of this shift, she feels she, along with activists like her, were purposefully isolated, alienated, and suppressed to the extreme in order to tamp protest messaging. @segyrella suffers extreme activist burnout, abandoning the belief that organized movements will produce change. Therefore, she no longer thinks activism can be successful on TikTok—or anywhere.

This chapter substantiates many key points discussed in this thesis thus far, but most notably that Black creator suppression on TikTok exists and has the potential to cause mental harm, necessitating the need for diligent subversion. The experiences shared here echo the vast majority of the experiences I have observed on TikTok and that have been reported in news media.[35] Though I have stated that experiences on TikTok vary widely—which is the case here as the experiences of these two creators are near opposites in many areas—these interviews shed light on commonality found amongst Black TikTok creators. These interviews provide rich accounts of life as a digital activist during this historically significant period, adding to our understanding of the impact and effectiveness of TikTok as a tool for activists.

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[35] See: McCluskey (https://time.com/5863350/tiktok-black-creators/)

CHAPTER V

…IF IT WEREN'T FOR THOSE MEDDLING KIDS: TIKTOK COLLECTIVE POWER

IN PRACTICE

In the late-night hours of June 11, 2020, Mary Jo Laupp, a 51-year-old resident of Fort Dodge, Iowa, uploaded a video to TikTok to discuss the news of President Donald Trump's intention to hold a campaign rally on June 19th, 2020 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. To Laupp, the decision to hold the rally on June 19th, also known as Juneteenth, in Tulsa, Oklahoma—the site of the deadly Tulsa Massacre of 1921—was reprehensible. Laupp and many other TikTok users expressed outrage at President Trump's tone-deaf choice which was atrocious enough on its own, but even more so considering the other major events happening in America and the world during this time: the resurgent Black Lives Matter movement and the coronavirus pandemic. Trump's decision was seen to some as a flagrant nod to white supremacists and a disregard for human life as the rally would likely aid in the spread of the COVID-19. Allowing her rage to guide her, Mary Jo Laupp hatched a plan to embarrass the President that caught on like wildfire, resulting in a collective action campaign that made international news.

In this chapter, I argue that this digital activist campaign granted legitimacy to TikTok as a space for more than just young people's dance trends, but a space for digital activism. Thus far, this thesis has demonstrated how the features of TikTok can both aid and harm activists and activist movements. This chapter seeks to analyze an activist movement that originated from TikTok to provide a clear example of how the key points from the previous chapters are represented in practice. In what follows, I will break down the details of this case study, first looking at the 'why' by historicizing the time and place at the epicenter of this incident in order to provide a foundational understanding of the motive behind this collective action. In doing so, I

want to make clear that this campaign was not the result of unfounded anger or adopted by teens who were simply bored; instead was rooted in clear understanding of the political implications of the rally and was strategically planned to hit Trump where activists believed it would hurt most: his public image. Next, I will examine the 'how' by analyzing the initial TikTok call-to-action by Mary Jo Laupp and an example of a popular TikTok response that followed, which demonstrates some of the production features and subversive methods discussed earlier in this thesis. Transitioning from the 'why' and 'how,' I will discuss the 'what' by positioning these actions relative to but distinct from slacktivism and the overarching concerns scholars have with digital activism. Finally, I will explore the impact and aftermath of this collective action by recalling the response of the Trump campaign, the media, and TikTok and Twitter users to further support my claim that this TikTok call-to-action marked TikTok as a legitimate space for activism.

The Significance of Juneteenth & Tulsa

As mentioned earlier, TikTok is particularly popular amongst Generation Z, or "Gen Z", those born between 1997 and 2012. As with anything that has a large young base, TikTok's global significance has often been diminished to a space for young people to discuss topics deemed superficial. The apparent failure of the Tulsa rally was attributed to Gen Z by several news outlets, but reports often failed to acknowledge the activists' motivation while oversimplify this call-to-action as a "prank".[36] This type of rhetoric lessens the importance and impact of digital activist campaigns like this one. Rather than a "prank," I argue the Tulsa call-to-action was likened more to another form of protest: a quasi-virtual sit in. Providing thorough context to

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[36] For example, see: Lorenz et al. (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/style/tiktok-trump-rally-tulsa.html), Aleem (https://www.vox.com/2020/6/21/21298177/trump-tulsa-rally-low-turnout), and Law (https://time.com/5856720/rumps-tulsa-rally-teens-tiktok-kpop/).

this case study is especially important because it demonstrates that the activists involved were motivated by a clear understanding of the political implications of the rally, further supporting my claim that this form of activism should be taken seriously.

As I write this paper, we are well into President Joe Biden's term—despite Trump's insistence that he won the election—and more than one year removed from the resulting insurrection on January 6th, 2021. We now have a clearer picture of the strategies used by each presidential campaign. We, as a nation, saw Trump rely on his familiar tactic of firing up his base and showing his self-proclaimed strength at his large political rallies. Despite being in the midst of the global coronavirus pandemic, with Covid-19 claiming over 600,000 lives in the United States alone (New York Times, 2021), President Trump held over 40 in-person general election rallies (Wikipedia, 2020). Political rallies are made-for-media events, and it is evident that rallies were a crucial part of the Trump campaign strategy in 2016 and continued to be in 2020.

Trump's rallies in particular serve to solidify his brand to his supporters by creating media content that can be made into campaign advertisements as well as distributed to supporting news outlets. There is even evidence that Trump attending his usual in-person rallies just a month after he contracted Covid-19 serve the specific purpose of assuring his base of his health and vitality while also arguing that his opponent, Joe Biden, is not in such good health (Pettypiece, 2020). Trump's Tulsa rally—the first rally since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic— held the greatest significance in his 2020 presidential campaign. Trump needed this particular rally to *say* something to the world: America is well and it's time to move forward. Trump ultimately hoped this rally would reignite support for his reelection.

To understand why there was such outrage over Trump's Tulsa rally, we must further investigate the context of the location date and in which it was originally set to be held. First, the racial history of Tulsa, Oklahoma, must be understood. In 1921, the Greenwood community of Tulsa, Oklahoma, was one of the wealthiest African-American neighborhoods in the state and was known as Black Wall Street. In 1921, Greenwood "was victim to one of the deadliest and most destructive riots in American history" (Messer, Shriver, Adams, 2018). Dick Rowland, a 19-year-old African American man, was accused of assaulting Sarah Page, a 17-year-old white woman. When a rumor that the white townspeople planned to lynch Rowland spread, a group of Black men armed themselves to ensure protection for Rowland. Groups of armed Black and white townspeople gathered where Rowland was being held. The African Americans were outnumbered, and reports about what sparked the attack vary. What is clear is that after a single gunshot was fired, a riot broke out which lasted 24 hours wherein 35 blocks of the Greenwood community were burned and looted by white rioters. Historians believe 800 people were treated for injuries and as many as 300 people died (1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, 2020). Tulsa is a site of painful history—a history that was either intentionally, apathetically, or ignorantly overlooked by the Trump campaign.

The significance of the scheduled date of the rally and the political climate in the summer of 2020 must also be addressed. June 19th is a holiday most known by the name of Juneteenth, Freedom Day, or Emancipation Day. Juneteenth is a day of celebration for those who were finally emancipated from slavery in the United States, two and a half years after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. This day holds great significance to African American communities and became a nationally recognized holiday in 2021. In the tumultuous summer of 2020, non-Black Americans were forced to confront systemic racism and violence to Black communities.

The country was in a state of civil unrest following the recent police killings of Breonna Taylor on March 13th and George Floyd on May 25th. George Floyd's murder in particular appears to have been the tipping point, as the Black Lives Matter movement quickly gained speed and nearly every social media platform, news outlet, and corner of the internet exploded with racial justice content shortly thereafter. Though George Floyd was not the first or last Black man to be murdered by a police officer, his death sparked response and activism that had not been seen in quite some time. The Black community and their allies took a stand to address systemic racism and police brutality. Juneteenth needed to be celebrated in 2020.

Call-To-Action Case Study

With full context in mind, it is easy to see how, in the wake of George Floyd's murder and the subsequent national debate surrounding racism and police brutality, Donald Trump's rally on Juneteenth in Tulsa could be seen as a flagrant disregard for Black lives and, perhaps, a conscious nod to white supremacists. Senator Kamala Harris, now Vice President, went a step further when she tweeted, "This isn't just a wink to white supremacists—he's throwing them a welcome home party" (Harris, 2020). As noted earlier in this chapter, the pandemic led many people to join TikTok and they quickly found it was a new space to express their disapproval of the state of the nation. TikTok users brought conversation surrounding the Tulsa rally to mainstream media, and although not all media sources would name the Tulsa rally call-to-action as a form of 'activism,' I argue that once mainstream outlets circulated the story, TikTok gained legitimacy as a space for more than just dance trends, but as a space for digital activism.

The following TikTok video by @maryjo.laupp will be referenced in the remainder of this chapter. In Laupp's video, she informs viewers that Trump's campaign website allowed

interested attendees to register for two tickets to the Tulsa Rally by *only* submitting their cell phone number. She ended her video by cementing her call-to-action and goal, "I recommend all of those of us that want to see this 19,000-seat auditorium barely filled or completely empty go reserve tickets now, and leave him standing there alone on the stage, what do you say?" The call-to-action quickly gained traction, garnering more than 700,000 likes and two million views on TikTok by June 21st, 2020 (Lorenz, et al., 2020). The campaign also spread to other platforms like Facebook and Twitter, where K-Pop stans—a community of Twitter users who gather around their shared interest in Korean Pop music—joined forces with TikTok users (Lorenz, et al, 2020). Participating TikTok activists utilized the duet feature, whereby a user can create a side-by-side video with the original video displayed on the right side and the new content on the left, and green screen filter, a tool in which the user can display another video or photo as the background to their video similar to a green screen used during a weather report, to reply to Mary Jo Laupp and spread the call-to-action to other users.

Figure 10: Tulsa Rally Call to Action, @maryjo.laupp

The users who followed Laupp's call to action added their own goals and intentions to their

TikTok video replies. User @pastaboii used the green screen feature to show Trump's website

registration landing page while she detailed the minimal steps required to register for the event.

@pastaboii touches on a few important dynamics of this case. The first is the added goal of

preventing truly interested attendees from gaining access to tickets. The second is the ease of the

registration process and, by extension, the ease of the digital attack on the Trump rally. Using

subversive language, a common method of avoiding moderation as mentioned in Chapter 2,

@pastaboii said:

Guys, Donald Trump is having a rally next week and it's free! All you have to do is give your phone number and get 2 tickets so I got 2 tickets, but I totally forgot that I have to pick every individual piece of lint off my room floor and then sort them by size so I can't make it for Friday… oh well, I already got the tickets. And I accidentally just verified it too so that means there's gonna be at least 2 empty spots. Guys, that's awful. You should be really careful going to do this, you know, just in case, you know, you can't make it. You know, you don't want a bunch of empty seats. And another thing guys, if you are doing it, make sure you're using the right zip codes just so that they know you are in the area. @pastaboii's video was captioned: be careful we don't want to accidentally get all the tickets and have an empty rally :(

Figure 11: [Tulsa rally green screen response](), @pastaboii

The focus on the relative ease of the task is key. To participate in this form of protest, all a person had to do was complete an online registration form that included a phone number. The

simplicity of this action could classify this campaign as "slacktivism" to some scholars (Tufekci, 16), a portmanteau of the words "slacker" and "activism" used to describe the idea that digital activism is a "frivolous and powerless" method of activism (Tufekci, 16). As you can gather from the inclusion of "slacker," online activism comes with the baggage of being a lazy and fruitless form of activism. Marginalized people, including children, are often presented with an array of barriers when they try to get involved in activism. They're discriminated against for a myriad of derogatory reasons: they're not educated *enough*, they don't have enough or the *right* life experience, they don't have the *right* class or race identifiers, etc. When access to political expression is denied, they have to find another outlet to show their political power. The assertion that this form of activism—the form available to counterpublics who have been alienated from more ordinary political involvement—is unproductive is another attempt to diminish these voices and their efforts. This is not a refutation of critiques to digital activism, but an assertion that digital activism is not without immense value.[37]

One notable concern that scholars have raised is that digital activism can distract people from participating in more productive forms of activism or keep them from becoming connected to offline activist movements altogether (Tufekci, 16). Tufekci notes in *Twitter and Teargas* that this argument is a simplification: most people become activists through interactions with *both* their online and offline networks, and the framing of digital activism as wholly ineffective shows a misunderstanding of the relationship people who have grown up with integrated communication technologies have with the internet (Tufekci, 16-17). To activists in the 21st century, "digital tools and street protests are part of the same reality" (Tufekci, 112). Human nature fundamentally carries a deep desire for human connections, community, and meaning-

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[37] See also, for example, the *Pitfalls of Participation* subheading in Chapter 3.

making. When participation in traditional political action is denied to certain populations, they turn to spaces with less gatekeeping and lower barriers of entry, i.e. the internet. In this case: pre-voting age youth turned to the prominent technology of their time, TikTok, as a tool to express their political power in the context of the rally in Tulsa.

Scholar Evgeney Morozov asserts that digital activism is less valuable because clicking around on an online campaign does not involve personal risk (Howard et al., 59) As discussed at length in Chapter 3 with the Minneapolis protest TikTok example and in the creator interviews in Chapter 4, this is simply false. Activists can be subject to government and law-enforcement surveillance by carrying out online campaigns. They also open themselves up to severe mental health risks by viewing, sharing, and speaking out about state mandated violence and racial injustice. Participating in conversations about serious issues like racial injustice and police violence in public and on accessible platforms like TikTok means that anyone can join the discussion—including users who engage in hate speech, send death threats, or cyber-bully. This stream of racism and discrimination is a health issue in and of itself since "experiences of racial discrimination are an important type of psychosocial stressor that can lead to adverse changes in health status and altered behavioral patterns that increase health risk" (Williams & Mohammed, 2013). Risk and harm do not apply to the physical body,; they can also threaten the mind and spirit.

Despite these critiques, many scholars see online activism as a reputable and useful method of creating social movements, garnering attention to lesser-seen issues, and mobilizing protests where even the smallest moves of support can result in real-world action (Vie, 2014). TikTok users who discovered the Tulsa rally call-to-action and engaged in this move of support by sharing their activism on their own accounts, making activism a part of their online identity and

recruiting peers in their social networks to get involved. A study by Zizi Papacharissi published in *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites* found that those who use social networking sites for campaign information tend to use it for social purposes; they want to find out who their friends are voting for and what political issues matter in their social circles (Papacharissi, 2010 pg. 201). Further, Papacharissi found that "reliance on YouTube and social networks predicted civic political behaviors, namely offline political activity (e.g., helping a political candidate, attending political meetings, and persuading others to support a candidate), online political activity (e.g., contacting candidates online, sending and receiving campaign emails, and making online contributions), and getting information about the campaign through face-to-face communication" (Papacharissi, 2010 pg. 201). Since Gen-Z is largely attributed as the main participants in this TikTok campaign, it is important to consider how adolescents are taught about modern civic engagement in school to better understand the critiques to youth participation in digital activism.

Digital civics in pedagogy "encompasses an understanding of the defined informational environment from relevant philosophical framework, as well as expectations (rights and responsibilities) which contribute to human behavior" (Clements, 2017 p. 6). In other words, teaching digital civics will inform and prepare students to express their civic power online responsibly and ethically. Many schools have restricted the use of technologies to maintain a "segregated space" away from the "real world" (Clements, 2017, p. 8). This causes frustration in parents, community members, and the students themselves because the pedagogy does not engage with the technologies integrated into nearly everyone's lives. Since ethical online practices in the civic sphere aren't taught at school, most adolescents learn about democratic participation on the internet *from* the internet—from their friends or peers online (Papacharissi,

2010). A lack of digital literacy can result in misguided efforts and movements that are instant

verticals, or quick discussions or acts of democratic participation that dissipate rapidly and

maintain no common narrative—a critique shared by TikTok user @segyrella in Chapter 4.

Clicking "like" on a Facebook post, purchasing a bracelet for a cause, or following a TikTok

link and entering your phone number to register for rally tickets, are all low-stakes ways to

participate in a movement and perform your identity politics, or "the implementation of political

strategies meant to improve the condition of a social group that is considered oppressed"

(Dittmer & Bows, 99). When pre-voting age people, like many of Gen Z, cannot express their

political power at the voting booth, they must turn to the tools that are available and relevant to

them. TikTok happened to be the technology of Gen Z's time; it makes perfect sense that this

sort of collective action would occur there.

The lack of "skin in the game" or potential for bodily consequence is also seen as a pitfall of

online activism. However, there is plenty of evidence that the internet is a powerful collective

and its opinions, even if lighthearted, can have real-world consequences. The TikTok call to

action to disrupt Trump's 2020 Tulsa Rally is an example of this in practice. Similar instances

can also be seen in the context of Black Twitter in the examples of #JurorB37 (Garrett-Stodghill,

2013) and the peculiar case of Rachel Dolezal (Walker, 2017). This is all to say that the ease of

the act should not completely diminish the result.

Impact and Aftermath

For TikTok users, this campaign was accepted as a victory. When considering the impact of

this call-to-action, we must question how success in this area can even be measured. The

research that has been done in an attempt to determine if online activism is effective is largely

contentious, with several studies pointing to online activism positively affecting protester turnout, and other studies arguing that online activism reduces an individual's likelihood of in in-person action (James, 27). What cannot be denied is that the internet is successful at increasing the visibility of counterpublic issues in the mainstream public sphere (Jackson, et al., xxvii). TikTok is full of young and energetic people, most of whom are not yet eligible to vote. In the case of the Tulsa Rally, the platform provided access to entry-level democracy, giving them an opportunity to become politically active in a legal and low-effort way. The lure for young people to show their strength and embarrass a world leader was too enticing to pass up. TikTok activists and K-Pop stans did their part by registering for tickets and circulating the call-to-action feverishly online while news outlets helped bring Mary Jo Laupp's vision to fruition: a humiliated Donald Trump.

In the days leading up to the rally, both CNN and Fox News reported that then Vice President Pence was investigating the need for overflow seating due to an "overwhelming response for tickets" and quoted Trump saying, "I think we're going to have a great time. We expect to have—you know, it's like a record-setting crowd. We've never had an empty seat" (Nobles, 2020b; Steinhauser, 2020). Brad Parscale, Trump's Campaign Manager at the time, tweeted that the rally had received over one million ticket requests (Parscale, 2020). The venue, Tulsa's indoor BOK Center, only held around 20,000 people. This evidence leads us to believe the Trump campaign found the ticket requests credible and did not yet suspect that the requests were coming from uninterested parties.

When the event finally arrived, it was evident that the Trump campaign's concern over lack of adequate seating was ill-founded. In the venue with a 20,000-person capacity, there was a grand total of 6,200 people in attendance according to the Tulsa Fire Department (Perper, 2020).

It is impossible to know if TikTok users were solely responsible for the low-turnout. I argue that it's safe to assume they weren't *completely* responsible. There are numerous variables that affected the attendance numbers of this event—most notably the fact that it occurred during a global pandemic which was (and still is, as I write this) of great concern. Large crowds or "super spreader events" like political rallies were a likely place to catch COVID-19, and this fact surely prevented people from attending.

Surprisingly—and just how Mary Jo Laupp hoped—many media outlets gave credit and responsibility for the disastrous turnout to "TikTok Teens."[38] Nearly every major news outlet reported on this activist campaign and TikTok and Twitter were alive with rumbles about the embarrassment Trump must have felt. New York Representative Alexandria-Ocasio-Cortez and many news reports attributed the TikTok Tulsa campaign to Gen Z specifically, disregarding the wide range of demographics of users who were involved—including the campaign's initiator, 51-year-old Mary Jo Laupp.[39]

Trump and his campaign manager vehemently denied the allegation that TikTokers were responsible. Brad Parscale made a statement on June 21, 2020, referring to TikTokers as 'online trolls':

> *"Leftists and online trolls doing a victory lap, thinking they somehow impacted rally attendance, don't know what they're talking about or how our rallies work. Reporters who wrote gleefully about TikTok and K-Pop [Korean pop music] fans -- without contacting the campaign for comment -- behaved unprofessionally and were willing dupes to the charade"* (Lorenz, et al., 2020).

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[38] See Law (https://time.com/5856720/rumps-tulsa-rally-teens-tiktok-kpop/), O'Sullivan (https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/21/politics/tiktok-trump-tulsa-rally/index.html), and Rosenblatt (https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/after-trump-rally-falls-flat-tiktok-teens-take-victory-lap-n1231675), for example.
[39] See: Lorenz et al. (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/style/tiktok-trump-rally-tulsa.html), O'Sullivan (https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/21/politics/tiktok-trump-tulsa-rally/index.html)

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez took to Twitter in direct response to publicly mock Trump, further legitimizing TikTok's impact on his rally attendance.

Figure 12: Photo, Tweet by AOC re: Tulsa rally, @AOC

Shortly after this story erupted, TikTok was in the news once more. On Friday, July 31, 2020, Trump told a group of reporters that he planned to ban the app due to the national security concerns about the platform harvesting data from U.S. users. From a personal and anecdotal perspective, the activist side of TikTok (and all those who participated in this particular form of activism who are not typically on activist-Tok) were up in arms about the threat. With their perceived victory over President Trump, they believed this was in direct response to their efforts

with the Tulsa rally. This threat was also perceived by TikTok users as additional supporting evidence that the TikTok call-to-action was successful. While the timing is conspicuous, and it is hard to separate the forcefulness of Trump's stance on TikTok from its role in embarrassing his campaign, as discussed in the introduction of this thesis, national security concerns had been circulating within think tanks and between government officials for the better part of a year. In other words, there were several factors at play for Trump's re-invigorated campaign to ban TikTok.

Conclusion

This chapter illustrated TikTok activism in practice and served to tie together some of the key points explored in this thesis. The video response to the original call-to-action provided an example of coded language or double speak, an affordance and method of subversion discussed in Chapter 2. The affective loop mentioned in Chapter 3 was also clearly seen here, as users observed Laupp's disgust and anger at Trump, had the opportunity to emotionally respond, and then distributed their statements from their TikTok accounts. This affective loop resulted in collective effervescence; users felt compelled to join the cause against Trump's affront to the Black community, which prompted nearly a million people to register for rally tickets. This chapter also more fully addressed the concerns about the effectiveness and impact of digital activism.

This example of organized TikTok activism was enough to warrant the vehement refusal of its impact from President Trump's campaign manager in spite of the international attention it had gained. It matters not if TikTok activists were *actually* responsible for reducing the numbers of attendees at the rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma. What does matter is that TikTok users clearly did

enough to blindside a world leader, make a public mockery of his brand, and impact his image at a critical point in his political campaign. According to much of the internet, TikTok ruined Trump's rally and with it his pride and desired reputation as a strong leader. I argue that this association between TikTok and political impact alone lends validity to the call-to-action as a legitimate form of protest and to TikTok as a viable tool for activists, but the limitations of the platform must also be acknowledged.

Online activism has dramatically changed the way protest organizers find supporters and disseminate information. A protest can be put together in a matter of minutes with the use of TikTok as opposed to the weeks of organizing that was required for protests in the pre-internet age. However, this ability can be detrimental to activism, creating movements that quickly gain traction and participation but then just as quickly die down due to the lack of leadership and resources. This call-to-action was created with relative ease; the features of TikTok afforded Mary Jo Laupp an easy interface to create her affective TikTok video and distribute it to a wide and diverse audience without leaving the platform. However, while it was easy for the message to spread on the platform, there are justified concerns regarding its ability to extend beyond the platform and beyond this single event.

Although I have shown that this call-to-action was impactful, in truth it *was* a single-event movement; it did not reorganize or shift goals to continue to address Trump's racism. However, to say that the Tulsa rally call-to-action was a form of 'slacktivism' and wholly ineffective only seeks to diminish and delegitimize counterpublic issues. I argue there is value in these moments because activism requires a culmination of actions to effect change; the Tulsa rally call-to-action worked toward that change, even if in a small way. Despite the aforementioned critiques of digital activism, I celebrate the real impact of this TikTok campaign

as a success and share this case study evidence that TikTok is a tool that should be taken

seriously with respect to activism.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

I have spent a great deal of time reflecting on my research and the shocking amount of my life I've spent on TikTok over the past two years. My path to finding this project would not have presented itself if it were not for the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting lockdowns. I'm surprised to find that I feel quite a bit of nostalgia for the TikTok of March-September of 2020, a time period that is known by what some TikTokers call 'quarantine TikTok' or 'the first lockdown.' The experience of feeling as though you're sharing a digital space with the entire world, connecting through music, interests, shared goals—laughing together and grieving together—is difficult to synthesize. The isolation that resulted from the 2-week-mission to stay home and slow the spread of Covid-19 that morphed into a stay-at-home order with no expiration date made the human connection you could find on TikTok feel like a life raft. I share my experience because not only has it informed every facet of this thesis, but it also speaks to how TikTok can be experienced more broadly by all users who significantly engage with the platform.

The truth is that TikTok is where I, and many U.S. citizens, lived and socialized for much of 2020. Other than the overwhelming anxiety I recall feeling during my first in-person trip to the grocery store in April 2020, the sadness and helplessness I felt while trying to make home-schooling fun for my daughter, and the sense of camaraderie and fear I felt attending protests, most of the memories I have from this period involve time spent on TikTok—and those memories are intertwined with the fleeting trends therein. The ephemeral nature of the app combined with the highly affective content provides a marker of time. TikTok can offer a window to the past that is accessed more literally by treating the app as a digital archive but also

abstractly as a sort of time machine—where aspects of trends, like sounds, aid in memory recall. The very mention of whipped coffee or the sound of "Supalonely" by BENEE or "This is America" by Childish Gambino fling me back to those early days of lockdown and the summer that followed.

I entered this research with the understanding that this platform may not be designed *for* activists, but that activists had weaponized features of the app and made TikTok function as a space for activism nonetheless. The activist creator interviews in Chapter 4 confirmed this notion but also revealed surprising challenges. The truth is that there is no perfect platform for activists. No platform will want to assist in building movements against injustices as this goes against the very core of what a platform's goal is: to be unimaginably large, so large they essentially create their own economies focused on growing and making money, with advertisers usually at the center. There is no space for human-rights decision making there, nor will there ever be. The catch-22 is that a platform needs to be large for digital activists to make an impact, but when platforms get to the TikTok, Facebook, or Twitter-level, activists have to work *against* platforms as much as they have to try to work *with* them. By working with them I do not mean a symbiotic relationship; I mean intentionally using them as a resource—in whatever ways they can—to accomplish their goals. Future research should focus on conducting additional interviews with TikTok activist creators to gain a better understanding of the vast possibility of experiences that can be had there and how those experiences shift with TikTok's changing landscape. I shared many examples of how TikTok creators manipulate the platform's features to communicate with their viewers and subvert algorithmic moderation in Chapter 2. There is no doubt that TikTok will present new hurdles for users as it institutes policy and algorithm changes, and I expect users will always generate ingenious ways to make the platform work to their benefit.

In an attempt to create a time capsule of sorts from this era, I kept a small journal in which I wrote down musings and ideas from TikTok that I found interesting and worthy of further exploration in the future. As my journal became more and more focused on activism in the summer of 2020, I felt almost obligated not to allow the things I witnessed to fade away into the void of this fast-paced platform. At times, this research felt like a bit of a moving target. There is a certain evanescent quality inherent in platform studies, making it imperative to choose a somewhat narrow collection period to try to pinpoint phenomena as they fly past.

TikTok's landscape and the cultural trends there undergo rapid shifts, which make it incredibly difficult to keep up. Therefore, this thesis has provided a snapshot—a fraction of a moment, really—into the experiences of TikTok racial justice activists. It is not a complete representation of TikTok, or even of the activist community therein. Rather, this thesis acts as an introductory roadmap into the relationship between TikTok, affect, and activism. The project began with TikTok's functions and its participatory culture to provide a basic understanding of the platform. Key features were identified that led to the efficiency with which affect can be identified, amplified, and distributed on TikTok by closely studying the Minneapolis protest video example. This example focused on the potential result of these affectively powerful tools as they can serve as a recruitment device for activist movements by energizing community involvement and stirring the human desire to belong to something larger than themselves. Where Chapter 3 focused on the viewer experience, Chapter 4 focused on the creator's experience. These creator interviews were designed to gain deeper understanding of the thought process behind their creative choices, how they strategized to overcome platform suppression, and the impact of being on TikTok in the thick of one of the most active protest periods in recent history had on their mental health. Finally, the Tulsa rally case study showed TikTok community

organizing can be successful and is a valid form of activism despite the pitfalls and concerns of slacktivism. Activism requires chipping away tirelessly at injustice; impactful small digital acts like the Tulsa rally do some of that work of chipping away. The intent in supplying this roadmap was to provide a better understanding of this moment that sparked questions about the ethics and effectiveness of digital activism in novel spaces like TikTok. My hope is that this understanding will help frame digital activism as both viable and valuable, but I also understand that this thesis may have limited use in a rapidly changing world and with an ever-changing platform.

Focusing on TikTok more generally in early 2020 and then specifically the activism in the late spring through that summer allowed me to leave some of the implications of new features and TikTok policies on the table for future study. For example, over the course of writing this thesis TikTok adjusted their moderation protocols, creating an automatic content removal tool to immediately delete videos that might violate community guidelines.[40] In response, creators seem to have doubled down on their subversion methods, ensuring they commit to misspelling words that could be seen as controversial and relying more heavily on self-censorship, doublespeak, and coded language than ever before. TikTok users don't appear to be giving up the fight against moderation or algorithmic suppression, but it does seem they have to fight harder and more creatively now.

This observation leads me to ponder the insight learned from the interview with @segyrella in Chapter 4: that she believes the time for TikTok to be a space for activism has passed. From my observations, it seems as though it is more difficult now than it was during the summer of 2020 for activist content to become viral on TikTok. However, I believe in the perseverance of activists and in the persistence of Gen Z creators: TikTok has proven itself a

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[40] See: Sarwar (https://screenrant.com/tiktok-automatic-content-moderation-removal-changes-creator-effects-explained/)

viable space for activism and has the potential to become an activist hub again when its creators

use its algorithm to their advantage and in the interest of social justice.

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VITA

Brittany Haslem (she/her) | bhasl002@odu.edu | Old Dominion University Institute for the Humanities | 3041 Batten Arts & Letters | Norfolk, VA 23529

EDUCATION

M.A Humanities, Old Dominion University, 2022. Thesis: "TikTok As A Digital Activism Space: Social Justice Under Algorithmic Control"

B.A. Sociology, Concentration: Criminology, University of Tennessee, 2011
Coursework toward A.A. in Sociology, College of Southern Nevada, 2009

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

Graduate Assistant | Institute for the Humanities, ODU | Aug 2021-May 2022
Responsibilities: Conduct interviews with faculty, students, alumni & other university community members, produce compelling articles from interviews, communications: promote news and events on social media, design a monthly newsletter.

Graduate Research Assistant | Social Science Research Center, ODU | Aug 2020-Aug 2021
Responsibilities: Assisted with participant interviews and focus groups, transcription, conducted &supervised telephone surveys, assisted with the compilation of survey data, technical reports, and literature reviews

GUEST LECTURES

Presented a lecture for Dr. Yvette Pearson titled "Informed Consent" for her Phil 345: Bioethics course, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, 28 September 2021.

Presented a lecture for Dr. Yvette Pearson titled "Octomom: Reproductive Ethics" for her Phil 345: Bioethics course, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, 26 October 2021.

MERITS & CERTS.

- Social & Behavior Research Certification | Sep 2020 | Citi Program
- Humanities Responsible Conduct of Research Certification | Aug 2020 | Citi Program
- Foundations of User Experience Design | May 2021 | Google
- IEEE International Symposium on Technology and Society review committee member | Oct. 2021
- Susan (Merendino) Rowell Graduate Scholarship in Humanities recipient | AY 2021-2022