Research Article

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TikTok Intifada: Analyzing Social Media Activism Among Youth

https://doi.org/10.1515/omgc-2022-0014
Received February 2, 2022; accepted May 8, 2022; published online June 8, 2022

Abstract

Purpose: This study uses TikTok as a novel medium to extend the literature on online activism. It adds to the emergent body of knowledge about playful political participation among youth. It also explores how creative micro-videos can be a force to create momentum and shape opinions around social and political topics.

Design/methodology/approach: A content analysis of 203 TikTok videos reflecting the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict that took place in Sheikh Jarrah in 2021, was used to understand the extent to which TikTok’s platform’s affordances were used and examine the message frames that emerged when online users disseminated messages of affect and solidarity with the Palestinians during the Sheikh Jarrah incident.

Findings: The study showed that TikTok affordances encourage virality and creative crafting of direct and indirect political content, making the platform a space for political expression, mobilization, and online activism. The affordances used during the TikTok Intifada were visibility, editability, association, and persistence. The two most prominent frames were the use of hashtags to promote the cause, followed by direct political content.

Practical implications: Researchers are given guidance on how TikTok design elements are now allowing a very young segment of users to become producers of

Article Note: This article underwent single-blind peer review.

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political content in a way where messages are creatively crafted using the platform’s affordances.

**Social implications:** This study captured social media activism among a young segment of users on a playful platform. Youth are now able to raise awareness and call to action by capitalizing on platform affordances to create and spread content about a cause.

**Originality/value:** Using the connective-collective approach, this work adds a unique dimension to the literature on how TikTok is becoming a novel space for the emergence of grassroots movements among a very young segment of users and how hard political content has been adapted to fit the playful nature of this dynamic platform. The work also takes lead into studying the Palestinian Intifada in a virtual context, where an unusual activism frame emerged due to the nature of TikTok as a micro-video and innovative platform.

**Keywords:** TikTok, content analysis, online activism, Palestine and Israel

## 1 TikTok Intifada: Analyzing Social Media Activism Among Youth

In April 2021, Israeli forces evicted Palestinian families from their households in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood. In response, Palestinians used the power of social media, especially TikTok, to support a call for action on the hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah (Pace 2013). The content on TikTok, however, being viral and free from limitation, inspired the emergence of a new term, “TikTok Intifada”, using the Arabic term for previous Palestinian uprisings (Ward 2021). TikTok, previously called Musical.ly, is a trendy short-video streaming application, which enables users to generate and publish 15 s videos on various topics (Geyser 2021).

While this was not the first time that Palestinians attempted to have their voices heard (Pace 2013), it was the first time that they spread a pro-Palestinian narrative without restrictions, inequality, or change in truth (Ward 2021). Not only that, other TikTok users, who later became affective publics in solidarity with Palestinians, exploded with social, political, and cultural content to express their connective-collective action through the creation of these short videos (Ward 2021). This is an example of connective action, when a series of digital technologies allows for the creation of virtually-networked societies, which are self-organized and engage online on public matters (See Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Social media has been associated with political protests in various parts of the world where people are able to access real-time content of people protesting. Protest movements have been distinguished by specific hashtags, such as #Jan25 in Egypt and #OWS for Occupy Wall Street.
Hashtags give access to both content and users (See Jost et al. 2018). Jost and colleagues (2018) suggest three major aspects about social media platforms during political protests: (1) they provide information, which eases mobilization of political activities, (2) they spread emotional messages, with or against the political activities taking place, (3) they are crucial in information dissemination since social networks have a distinct structure through which the spread of online messages can contribute to the success or failure of political activities. The current study proposes to explore the role of social media in facilitating a sense of “shared reality” that may lead to offline political action. Specifically we aim to study online activism in the context of TikTok as a micro-video and innovative platform.

The current research is based on a content analysis of the top 203 TikTok videos with the three most viral hashtags (#SaveSheikhJarrah, #SavePalestine, #FreePalestine). Data were retrieved from the standard search portal on TikTok from 1 May 2021 to 15 June 2021 – the duration of the Sheikh Jarrah incident. This data corpus provided the basis for investigating how TikTok affordances were used on activism around the Sheikh Jarrah dispute.

The phenomenon of playful political participation among a segment of young users in a virtual context is reshaping the digital activism paradigm and is worthy of research. The TikTok Intifada is therefore an important example, which helps explore the online experience of youth on the platform and presents an unprecedented shift in the narrative of the Palestinian conflict among a segment of very young users. By understanding TikTok’s platform’s affordances, the current study adds a unique dimension to the growing literature on social media activism, namely how young users advocate for change.

1.1 TikTok and Social Movements

TikTok, the novel micro-video platform, is particularly designed for youths and according to Robehmed (2017), most users range from 13 to 21 years old. Users are able to share short, edited videos, such as lip-syncing content with songs or any other audio (Highfield and Leaver 2016). As for its development, TikTok is growing exponentially and has achieved 205 million downloads in the second quarter of 2021 (Statista 2021a).

TikTok has had a major impact on youth as they use the freedom of this platform to express their point of view, using the application as a backchannel. The term “back-channeling” is used to describe the conversations, movements, and trends that take place on digital spaces (Seglem and Haling 2018). According to Vijay and Gekker (2021), “the non-serious nature of TikTok further obscures its actions as a playfield for political persuasion” (p. 714). This playful political engagement, whether through satire, parody, or the use of memes democratizes
politics and engages different audiences who were, in other circumstances, almost impossible to reach (Hartley 2010). Furthermore, Hautea et al. (2021) concluded that TikTok’s short videos have been perceived as a way to communicate emotions and express one’s identity. Patel and Binjola (2020) also assert that TikTok is a tool to showcase talents, opinions on various topics, express affect and solidarity free from national boundaries and or any other barriers.

The virality of content is a crucial factor in the success of social and political online movements. The essence of TikTok is that the platform facilitates replication and ‘spreadability’ through the design elements, where each created video has the potential to trigger the creation of another (Jenkins et al. 2013). While TikTok features will be systematically discussed in an upcoming section, we now emphasize that the combination of several factors has made the application a free space for youth activism.

Today youth are using social media to create new ways to resist and call the world to action for hopeful social change (Dwonch 2021). In the past Israel-Gaza wars, Youtube, Facebook and Twitter were used to report and tell the events in real time (Ward 2021). One of the first viral videos on YouTube was on Nabi Saleh village in the West Bank and the rise of Ahed Tamimi as an online symbol of the Palestinian youth resistance against the occupation (Dwonch 2021). However, with the emergence of TikTok, audiences became engaged with what the platform affords, namely “playful ways of doing politics”, giving the chance for new forms of participatory action to emerge (Vijay and Gekker 2021, p. 714).

According to Chon and Park (2020), activism refers to “a series of contentious performances by which ordinary people strive to change social issues through collective action” (p. 74). The digital revolution has redefined activism since the Internet has no geographic boundaries (Mutsvario 2016). Through communicative action on digital media, anti-government protests and uprisings such as the Arab Spring and Black Lives Matter (Cox 2017) were possible, as social media facilitated communication, planning and assembly (Eltantawy and Wiest 2011). Through the use of hashtags and frames, activists have been able to call for action, by reflecting the ongoing conversation, motivating and orienting people towards specific action, referencing victims who were affected by the incident, mobilizing individuals for demonstrations, and disseminating information to increase visibility and outreach (Pramana et al. 2020). Currently, a growing body of literature exists around ‘hashtag activism’, which refers to an action-oriented tool to support a cause and initiate frame-related conversations in a virtual space (Tombleson and Wolf 2017). According to Hon (2016), online activism through the use of hashtags is an effective tool to shape public opinion around significant issues.

TikTok users are becoming producers of playful and personalized political content (Vijay and Gekker 2021), and we intend to explore how the TikTok platform features were used to mobilize publics towards a pro-Palestinian narrative.
1.2 Connective Action and Message Frames

In the literature, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) outline three types of collective action, (1) organizationally brokered collective action, where formal organizations are responsible to coordinate action, (2) organizationally enabled connective action, where organizations are still central to the process but publics become engaged as well, and (3) crowd-enabled connective action, where communication is decentralized and coordinated by the public. Both the logics of connective action and collective action impact the process of interaction and networking among individuals. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue that the difference between both logics is that collective action is governed by strict organizational control, stronger affiliation, as well as collective identity. Conventional social movements are led by key actors and have organized goals (Leong et al. 2018; Li et al. 2020). On the other hand, the logic of connective action is a consequence of digital technologies, which has allowed for the emergence of virtually-networked societies. These networks are connected together by weak ties and are self-organized (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). In connective action, individuals act according to their own personal views and express themselves through memes, hashtags, and customize their own online profiles to reflect their stances (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Li et al. 2020). Even though offline assembly in the form of meetings still exists, both individuals and organizations are increasingly using virtual platforms to connect, plan activities, and express their opinions.

Connective action is a framework that accounts for the various forms of public engagement in the digital age. In connective action, networks allow individuals to express their personal opinions and access the views of others via the messages they disseminate and in turn discuss their own perspectives on these messages (Benkler 2006; Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Connective action builds information from messages disseminated publicly by individuals, which increases visibility, helping more people to protest and mobilize (Shumate and Lipp 2008). Consequently, this technology-enabled networking is crucial for connective action to take place (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). More recently, several authors have argued that digital technologies are a double-edged weapon when it comes to public mobilization (Servaes and Hoyng 2017; Tufekci 2019). These authors argue that the logic of connective action lacks sustainability, which in turn threatens the possibility for change to actually happen.

Given the aforementioned, this study focuses on how affordances of TikTok facilitated the connective action, which scholars have argued about its success in mobilizing individuals on activism and social movements (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Nekmat et al. 2015). Bennett and Segerberg (2012) identify connective-
collective activities into four major categories: (1) commenting, (2) relaying information, (3) uploading materials, and (4) affiliating (i.e., “following” and “liking”). In this paper, we explore social media activism among youth and how mobilization is encouraged by TikTok, a medium that facilitates the expression of ideas about a contentious, political issue, and enables a wide audience to view and interact with content via its affordances.

Veil et al. (2015) argue that online publics are active members who share information and consume content. In this notion, the literature suggests that publics co-create meaning during online social movements using hashtags that connect them over particular issues. Frames can emerge in this process as a result of the messages disseminated among these publics (Himelboim et al. 2014; Smith 2010; Xiong et al. 2019). Several researchers have previously examined frames in hashtags across various issues (e.g., Himelboim et al. 2014; Smith 2010). However, Xiong et al. (2019) argue that most social media frames studies use a comparative approach across various players (i.e., organizations and news media) (e.g., van der Meer and Verhoeven 2014) with a scarcity in research on frames which emerge when publics share common meaning and hashtags to resist, mobilize, and achieve certain goals. Xiong et al. (2019) incorporated six message frames of activism: direct or indirect relation to movement, reference to victims, related issues, action oriented, activist roles, and event specific. Building on this previous work, our study begins with the following research question:

**RQ 1:** What were the most prominent message frames that emerged in the TikTok Intifada videos during the Sheikh Jarrah incident?

### 1.3 Social Media Affordances

“An affordance is a relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determines just how the object could possibly be used” (Norman 1988, p. 11). These affordances are embedded in social media and provide users with a range of features through design and structural elements that permit various actions (Hautea et al. 2021; Treem and Leonardi 2012). Affordances not only facilitate the interplay between the structure and agency outside of physical spaces, but also impact how people interact on the digital structure itself (Bosetta 2018; Papacharissi 2009).

Previous research has explored social media affordances in relation to political communication and hate speech (Bosetta 2018; Kargar and Rauchfleisch 2019; Pearce 2015). For instance, Kargar and Rauchfleisch (2019) explored how Instagram affordances are used by repressive political systems to reach specific
objectives and how online harassment was used to suppress free speech on the platform. The authors concluded that social media affords various methods of repressing in ways which were not possible before the digital era. Similarly, Pearce (2015) concluded that social media is an inexpensive, easy tool for authoritarian regimes to indirectly harass opposition, allowing more control for those regimes.

According to Bosetta (2018), “the digital architecture’s heuristic drills into how a platform’s specific design features affect particular communication practices” (p. 474). He outlines four different components in a digital platform that impact political communication; (1) network structure, which allows users to identify and connect with one another, hence build communities (2) functionality, pertaining to how content is disseminated and how it spreads on the platform (3) algorithmic filtering, includes how the developers of these platforms place prioritize the arrangement of online content, and (4) datafication, which includes monetization of data and resource allocation for online campaigns.

Another body of literature has also focused on how affordances facilitate self-expression, social media activism and online mobilization (Hautea et al. 2021; Literat and Vilenchik 2019; Thorson et al. 2016; Xiong et al. 2019). According to Papacharissi (2015), the focus on how online engagement translates into offline activism needs to be complemented with research on the affective processes that catalyze social media activism and collective action. Online publics become “affective” on social media when they are exposed to high, real-time news on various platforms amid a problematic incident (Lünenborg 2019). Papacharissi (2015) has also defined affective publics as “networked publics that are mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment” (p. 5). These publics express solidarity either by sharing online content or organizing offline action. In the context of an online social movement, Hautea et al. (2021) discuss how the formation of affective publics is made possible through the affective activities facilitated by social media platforms, enabling interactivity and participation. In their study, they also conclude that visibility, association, and editability affordances on TikTok were the highest in facilitating this process on social media. Similarly, Evans et al. (2017) argue that features such as anonymity, persistence, and visibility facilitate communication on online platforms. Sharing functions of social media also diffuse information in a network, reaching individuals who were not seeking this information (Chon and Park 2020).

Among the main affordances facilitating grassroot movements is the hashtag (#), as it enables collective political expression by easing visibility, coordination, and connection on existing topics (Literat and Vilenchik 2019; Thorson et al. 2016). The spontaneity through which hashtags emerge, become viral, and connect users of multiple orientations is a key component for its success in advocating for change (Segerberg and Bennett 2011). Another affordance is editability which means that
individuals can take their time in producing and reproducing their communication messages before publishing it to others (Walther 1993). In this sense, editability allows for ‘rehearsability’, where users craft messages carefully and are able to review their content before posting. In addition, the association affordance is of particular importance to collective actions since it enables connection to other people and content (Treem and Leonardi 2012). Association refers to the ability to combine old and new content relevant to the topic in discussion. Hautea et al. (2021) concluded that TikTok’s duet and stitch functions allow users to combine already existing video or audio and craft new content, such as lip-syncing and dancing challenges.

Guinaudeau et al. (2021) outline three specific affordances that make TikTok distinct from other social media platforms as follows: (1) televisual medium, (2) algorithmic recommendation, providing users with highly personalized and relevant content, and (3) mobile-only interface, fully immersing the user with their smartphone’s camera. The authors compare TikTok videos with political You- tubers and conclude that TikTok video views are more viral and have higher viewership, irrespective of the number of followers that the TikTok account has (Guinaudeau et al. 2021). Their findings therefore point to how the TikTok incentivizes its users by encouraging them to create videos that will go viral to stranger audiences.

Literat and Vilenchik (2019), argue that online political expression is specific to the context of each platform, which enables different forms of expression through what its affordances allow. Accordingly, unpacking social media through analyzing its affordances becomes imperative, because these design elements shape how users interact with the platform and engage in political action (Bimber et al. 2020; Maia and Rezende 2016). In light of the above, playing politics is possible through what contemporary media affords, whether GIFs, lip-synced videos, or parodies (Vijay and Gekker 2021). This triangulation of media, technology, and play has provided citizens with both the space and the tools to become proactive participants immersed in issues of public concern (Glas et al. 2019).

Building on the current literature by Treem and Leonardi (2012), who explored social media affordances, and based on the work of Hautea et al. (2021), who identified the three TikTok affordances of visibility, editability, and association used, we propose the following research questions:

**RQ 2:** To what extent were the affordances of visibility, editability, and association, featured in TikTok Intifada videos?

**RQ 3:** How were the affordances on TikTok used to express solidarity with Palestinians during the Sheikh Jarrah incident?
1.4 Context: The Sheikh Jarrah Incident

Palestinian families were forced by the Israeli military to leave their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah district in April 2021. This enforced eviction continued for a couple of months as more Palestinians evacuated their properties (Vanessa 2021). In response, protesters in Sheikh Jarrah clashed with police and far-right Israeli groups.

Social media posts exploded on various platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Instagram, and TikTok, reflecting what was happening in the Sheikh Jarrah area. As a result, hashtags, such as #SaveSheikhJarrah and #FreePalestine went viral (2021, June 6. #SheikhJarrah still a hot topic on social media as struggle continues. TRT World. https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/sheikhjarrah-still-a-hot-topic-on-social-media-as-struggle-continues-47289 (accessed 20 November 2021)). Later, some hashtags, such as #AlAqsaMosque were systematically blocked and were claimed to have caused problems on Instagram (Mac 2021).

Biddle (2021) also discusses how recently developed policies by Facebook included limiting a pro-Palestinian narrative.

However, according to Jackson (2021), when the word “Palestine” is typed on TikTok’s search, pro-Palestinian tags, such as “freepalestine” appear. Palestine videos on TikTok have over seven billion views and the “freepalestine” hashtag has over four billion. The content is a combination of protests, call to action, and challenge videos in support of Palestinians (Jackson 2021). The latter created an awareness not only about the Sheikh Jarrah incident, but about the decades-long Palestinian conflict.

Located in Jerusalem’s old city, Sheikh Jarrah is a neighborhood where 28 Palestinians have lived ever since they lost their homes back in 1948 (Zaineldine 2021). The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) along with Jordan signed an agreement in 1956, guaranteeing those families a home in Sheikh Jarrah. However, these families were prohibited ownership to the land in 1967 after a war ending with Israelis occupying East Jerusalem (Adams 2021; Zaineldine 2021). The Sheikh Jarrah incident is therefore not new. For more than half a century, peace-makers have failed to reach a peaceful and mutually acceptable resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Caplan 2020). Uprisings against the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip were known as the Intifada. The conflict is still unresolved even though there were discussions over a two-state solution. Today, “a young generation of Palestinians who had lived their whole lives under occupation stepped forward to take control of the Intifada” (Caplan 2020, p. 249). However, Palestinian youth have changed their strategy of resistance to online and offline means. Despite the cost of conflict and the tremendous struggles, young Palestinians are using technological advancements and the power of online activism to voice their struggles (Dwonch 2021).
The emergence of the young TikTok platform and its playful nature attracted youth from around the globe to engage with the Sheikh Jarrah incident. For instance, a 23-year-old online activist, poet and writer, Mohamed El-Kurd, presented his family’s eviction from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood and gained online solidarity on a global scale (Ward 2021). Other viral content included a video shared by a Palestinian family of an Israeli settler saying “If I don’t steal your home someone else will” (AJ+ 2021). A TikTok challenge also started as a result of a female Israeli soldier dancing to the song named “Jalebi” by Jason Derulo and moving her hands towards stickers that pointed to what she liked the most, including the Israeli flag (Jackson 2021). This video backfired and people adopted its song and format, but used different stickers to include the Palestinian flag. The intensified sharing of these videos and challenges took part in the virality of the hashtags on TikTok.

In sum, TikTok was widely available during the Sheikh Jarrah dispute, allowing for a free Palestinian narrative to be shared without barriers. This study focuses primarily on the message frames that emerged on this platform at this time. It is also concerned with how TikTok design elements have allowed audiences to engage, create content, and stand in solidarity with the Palestinians through hashtags of the conflict in Sheikh Jarrah.

2 Method

2.1 Data Collection and Sampling

A content analysis was used to systematically analyze TikTok videos on the Palestinian Intifada. Based on Literat and Vilenchik (2019) and Jackson and Foucault-Welles (2015), we relied on the hashtag as a methodological tool for data selection – which is commonly used in online research. According to Literat and Vilenchik (2019), TikTok does not enable filtration or sorting of videos; therefore, analyzing the entire hashtag is a meticulous way to ensure that “full inclusion” is achieved (p. 4). We first started by identifying the top TikTok hashtags related to the Sheikh Jarrah incident (#SavePalestine, #PrayforPalestine, #GazaUnderAttack, #SaveSheikhJarrah, #PrayforPalestine, #Palestine) (Literat and Vilenchik 2019). Taking the number of views into consideration as evidence, we selected the three most viral hashtags: #SavePalestine (1.5 billion), #FreePalestine (8.5 billion), and #SaveSheikhJarrah (907.9 million). From the three most viral hashtags, the “top”, most viral videos were chosen. This feature is provided by TikTok, allowing users to directly access the most viewed collection of videos related to a specific keyword or hashtag.
The videos were chosen following a purposive non-random sampling method, allowing researchers to select videos fitting within a specific set of criteria for the objective of the study (Wimmer and Dominick 2011). We selected videos that included the following: (1) date between 1st of May to 15th of June, the leading duration in the Sheikh Jarrah incident, (2) language is either English or Arabic to ensure accuracy and ease in analysis, (3) video had at least 557,000 views because according to Statista (2021b), this is the average number of views of a viral TikTok video.

The extraction of videos was done chronologically, according to what appeared first on TikTok’s discovery page. One coder extracted a total of 203 videos, which included 92 videos in Arabic and 111 videos in English. Before the coding process, the researchers agreed on specific operational definitions for each

### Table 1a: Operational definitions of message frames based on Xiong et al. (2019).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Operational definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct political content</td>
<td>Video includes one or more of the following: protests and marches, live coverage of news, Israeli attacks, victims of the war or the conflict, Palestinian activists’ resistance, presenting factual information about Palestine and Israel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call to action</td>
<td>Video includes a call to action through direct text or speech in one or more of the following forms: boycotting brands, boycotting celebrities, call to joining a protest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to victims</td>
<td>Video features one or more of the following: children, women, youth, and other Palestinians affected by the conflict and war in Palestine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentioning the role of activists</td>
<td>Video includes any activist or influencer doing one or more of the following activities: challenging others to speak up, raising awareness about the conflict, or presenting an anti-Palestinian narrative or view.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 1b: Operational definitions of affordances based on Hautea et al. (2021).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affordance</th>
<th>Operational definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visibility</td>
<td>Features that make content easily perceivable locatable by other users (i.e., hashtags, shares, comments, likes). Videos include multiple hashtags other than the ones we are originally analyzing. For instance: #GazaUnderAttack, #Boost, #Share.. etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editability</td>
<td>Features that allow content to be repeatedly created and modified before being shared with others (i.e., music, icons, text in video, text in caption)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association</td>
<td>The content follows a pattern that is easily recognizable and developed, allowing for ‘joint content creation’ on the same topic. Shared soundtracks and premade video templates circulating through duet and stitch functions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
frame and affordance as shown in Tables 1a and 1b in order to ensure that a fixed, unified definition for each item exists.

### 2.2 The Coding Process

All 203 videos were coded, where the unit of analysis was a single TikTok video. To explore the most prominent message frames present in the videos, we were guided by the frames concluded by Xiong et al. (2019). To analyze how the TikTok design features (i.e., affordances) were deployed in the context of the online Intifada and explain how this deployment facilitated social media activism in the Sheikh Jarrah dispute, we borrowed from Hautea et al. (2021). Specifically, the coding was based on the following five frames and six affordances variables:

#### Frames:
- Frame (1) was selected as yes if the TikTok video features direct political content, such as protests, live coverage of news, or factual information about Palestine and/or Israel. Frame (2) was selected as yes if the TikTok video features a direct call to action through text or speech. Frame (3) was selected as yes if the TikTok video was accompanied with other extra hashtags (given that these hashtags have to be different than the ones which we were already coding). Frame (4) was selected as yes when explicit reference is made to the victims, such as children or females and how they are affected. Frame (5) was selected as yes if the video features an activist doing one of the following activities, challenging others to carry out advocative behaviors, raising awareness on the issue by spreading information, or opposing the movement.

#### Affordances:
- (1) Hashtags were selected if the video included more than one hashtag. (2) Text in caption was selected if the video included text in its caption. (3) Text in video was selected if the video included text inserted inside the video itself. (4) Music was selected if the video included a soundtrack (whether an original soundtrack or mashup). (5) Icons was selected if the video included either emojis, stickers, or filter effects inserted. (6) ‘Duet’ was selected if the video included two or more individuals simultaneously in the same video but not physically together, ‘Stitch’ was selected if the video included a soundtrack or premade video template, and ‘None’ was selected if the video included neither a duet nor a stitch.

### 2.3 Intercoder Reliability

One of the researchers completed the coding of the 203 videos. To assess intercoder reliability, a second researcher randomly coded a selected subset of 10 percent of the entire sample (21 videos). For all the affordance’s variables and frames, the rate
of agreement by chance was acceptable using Scott’s Pi (see Scott 1955). Specifically, for music, the rate of agreement was 0.82. For text in caption, the agreement was 1. For the text in video, the agreement was 1. For the icons, the agreement was 0.76. For the hashtag, the agreement was 1. For the duet/stitch the agreement was 0.79. For Frame one, the agreement was 0.73. For Frame two, the agreement was 0.80. For Frame three, the agreement was 0.85. Finally, for Frame four, the agreement was 0.80.

Once the coding was finalized, we used SPSS to calculate frequencies, which served as a starting point to understand which of the TikTok platform features were mostly used and what were the most prominent frames in our sample. We then conducted a second and final stage of analysis through several rounds of individual interpretation and group discussions to understand how creators of the videos expressed solidarity, affect, or discontent.

3 Results

This study aimed at explaining how young TikTok users used the platform’s affordances to spread pro-Palestinian content around three hashtags (#SavePalestine, #SaveSheikhJarrah, #FreePalestine). Research question one asked about the most prominent message frames that emerged in the TikTok Intifada videos during the Sheikh Jarrah incident. Guided by the literature (Xiong et al. 2019), we noted that the content on TikTok included either direct or indirect political content. However, the frames examined were intertwined in the sense that the TikTok videos could belong to one or more frames. The five frames as shown in Table 2, are explained below. They are organized from the most prominent to least prominent.

Direct political content. This frame included videos featuring international pro-Palestinian protests and street marches, live coverage of news, and presenting factual information about Palestine and Israel. Direct political content was evident in 135 videos, which is 66.5% of our sample. Among the most common content in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>% of total videos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct political content</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>66.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calls to action</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentioning the role of activists</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to victims</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges and other artistic expressions</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
this frame were videos calling for action and raising awareness across the global community through street marches in Washington, London, Sydney, Chicago, and other cities as shown in Figure 1. The content also featured young activists desecrating the Israeli flag amid the protests. This frame also included live coverage of news from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood with captions, such as “Breaking News”. One video depicted a Palestinian family filming an Israeli soldier forcing them out of their apartment. The audio in this video was a family member’s original voice reporting what was happening live. This powerful, instant conveying of messages with no intermediaries is a credible way to deliver real, unedited footage.

**Call to action.** This frame included content that calls to action through direct text or speech. Our sample included 120 videos of people calling to action, which represents

![Figure 1: An example of international protests and marches shown in different countries in solidarity with Palestine in TikTok Intifada videos. These videos indicate that the platform has been used to record live footage of protests and marches in support of the Sheikh Jarrah dispute. The videos included an extensive use of the Palestinian flag and red hearts as symbols of expressing affect and solidarity towards the cause as well as soundtracks, such as “Stand up” or “My blood is Palestinians”. The editing options on the platform helped deliver the message in a visually aesthetically pleasing manner.](https://www.tiktok.com/@hanbvby/video/6961457110030896390?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id7024592657709434374)

Source hanbvby, TikTok: @hanbvby. May 12, 2021.

https://www.tiktok.com/@hanbvby/video/6961457110030896390?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id7024592657709434374

Source Fatima, TikTok: @fitsbyfatima. May 13, 2021.

https://www.tiktok.com/@fitsbyfatima/video/6961599839666785542?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id7024592657709434374

Source MustafaAl, TikTok: @mustafa_aj. May 12, 2021.

https://www.tiktok.com/@mustafa_aj/video/6961228707918875909?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id7024592657709434374

Source Yaman, TikTok: @yamanzdh. May 19, 2021.

https://www.tiktok.com/@yamanzdh/video/6963860668390853894?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id7024592657709434374
59.1% of the sample. This finding indicates that people used TikTok to mobilize others towards taking collective action. This has been witnessed in videos advocating for boycotting brands that support Israel, labeling pro/anti-Palestinian celebrities, and encouraging others to support Palestine by sharing online content. Call to action videos included captions such as “Boycott this brand”, deploying red cross emojis beside the Israeli flag to spread the message of staying away from certain products. Placing celebrity affiliation has been evident through the use of pictures and flag emojis. Encouraging others included motivational captions, such as “Share the truth”.

Mentioning the role of activists. This frame featured any activist or TikTok influencer doing one or more of the following activities, challenging others to speak up, raising awareness about the conflict, or presenting an anti-Palestinian narrative or view. We found 98 videos in this frame, accounting for 48.2% of our sample. Common videos in this frame included Palestinian and international activists, such as Omaya Zein (1.8 M followers), a Palestinian influencer who lives abroad. She starts a video by saying “Let’s talk about what’s happening in Palestine” and then presents information of the timeline and historical facts by writing her full audio script as text on the video.

Reference to victims. This frame included reference to victims, featuring children, women, youth, and other Palestinians affected by the conflict. This content was captured in 56 videos, which is 27.5% of the sample. According to these findings, the average number of views per video in this frame was four million. Common videos in this frame included child and activist victims presented in a back-to-back collage with sentimental Palestinian songs, such as ‘Bring Back Our Childhood’ or ‘Hey World, My Land is Destructed’.

Challenges and other artistic expressions. Videos in this frame were considered as indirect political content. Forty-three challenge and artistic expressions were found in our sample, which is 21.1% of the sample. Common content in this frame included, dance challenges, lip-syncing songs, makeup and art drawings, and cooking videos. This content is consistent with the platform’s nature. The most frequent was the “Jalebi” challenge (14 out of 43 videos), using a song by Tesher, the Canadian-Punjabi star. In this challenge, users embedded the Jalebi audio and a premade video template. The screen was divided into two parts, one with the Palestinian flag and the other with the Israeli flag, as shown in Figure 2. TikTokers would then perform a commonly shared dance and move towards either of the parts according to the side they favor.

Research question two asked about the extent to which TikTok affordances were used in the context of the Sheikh Jarrah dispute. To answer this question, we obtained simple frequencies for each feature in the three affordances: visibility,
editability, and association as shown in Tables 3–5 respectively. The tables indicate the frequency by which each feature was used, organized from most to least used.

**Table 3:** Average number per hashtag of the following visibility affordances (shares, likes, comments, and views) indicating the virality of the content in TikTok Intifada videos (n = 203).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hashtag</th>
<th>Shares</th>
<th>Likes</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Views</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#SaveSheikhJarrah</td>
<td>13,605</td>
<td>272,170</td>
<td>13,085</td>
<td>2,228,041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#SavePalestine</td>
<td>10,500</td>
<td>262,733</td>
<td>5593</td>
<td>1,852,841</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#FreePalestine</td>
<td>12,638</td>
<td>567,464</td>
<td>13,311</td>
<td>5,613,735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td>12,248</td>
<td>367,456</td>
<td>10,663</td>
<td>3,231,536</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One hundred ninty eight out of 203 videos in the sample used multiple hashtags.
The most prominently observed feature across the full data corpus was the use of multiple hashtags to enhance visibility. In terms of editability features, the most prominently used was music followed by text in caption. The stitch function was the most prominently used in the association affordance, including the repetitive use of frame-related songs. Finally, during the analysis, a fourth affordance was revealed, namely persistence—which we believe has contributed to the spread and permanency of the content in this activism phenomenon. Persistence affordance allows for each hashtag to gain more views over time; hence, allowing more audience to view the content even after the original poster of the video has logged out of the platform.

Research question three asked about how those affordances were used to express solidarity with the Palestinian people during the Sheikh Jarrah incident. The following details how each affordance was used and what this meant in the context of the dispute.

**Visibility**: This affordance was deployed to maximize virality and attention to content on the Sheikh Jarrah incident. Features in this affordance included sharing, liking, commenting on the videos as well as the use of multiple hashtags. A total of 198 videos in our sample used hashtags to promote content, accounting for 97.5% of our sample. See Table 3 for the virality of the videos as reflected in the number of views. This virality is a result of features that pave the way for content visibility. In this regard, the most shared hashtag was #SaveSheikhJarrah. This finding is consistent with current literature regarding the hashtag “Sheikh Jarrah”, which was reported to have

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**Table 4**: Frequency by which editability affordances (music, text in caption, text in video, and icon) were used in TikTok Intifada videos ($n = 203$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affordance</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Editability</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Text in caption</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Text in video</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Icon</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5**: Frequency by which association features (stitch and duet) were used in TikTok Intifada videos ($n = 203$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affordance</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Association</td>
<td>Stitch</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>None</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Duet</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---
started the movement – as it gained momentum not only in Palestine, but globally (Sheikh and Zainah 2021). We were also able to classify hashtag names into several categories as follows: event-specific hashtags (i.e., #GazaUnderAttack, #PalestinianLivesMatter), platform-specific hashtags (i.e., #ForYouPage, #FYP, #PalestineTikTok, #TikTokarab), call to action hashtags (#SavePalestine, #SaveSheikhJarrah), reference to activists’ hashtags (i.e., #MiriamAfifi, #MoeZein), and solidarity hashtags (#WeStandwithPalestine) (Xiong et al. 2019).

Editability: This affordance includes editing features through the following options: text in video, text in caption, inserting soundtracks, icons (i.e., emojis, stickers, and special effects). Music was found in 161 of videos analyzed, allowing users to enrich their content with a feature that facilitates emotional response. TikTok editing options were used to overcome language barriers through in-text translations in multiple languages, allowing for consumption of content across a wider range of users. The latter was achieved through the use of text in caption \( (n = 159) \) and text in video \( (n = 132) \) features, as indicated in Table 4. Our data corpus also revealed extensive use of emojis, mostly flags of Palestine and Israel and other special effects \( (n = 111) \). This feature was a trendy and easy method to visually express affection and support the Palestinians.

Association: This affordance includes duet and stitch functions, as shown in Table 5. These features allow users to participate in challenges, whereby they reuse soundtracks, pre-made video templates, and icons. Duet and stitch features allowed users to embed songs in their original format or use editing features to insert the audio and sing their own lyrics as shown in Figure 3. A total of 133 videos featured duets and stitches promoting parody or mimicking, which appeals to a young segment of users.

Persistence: As users logout of the platform, their content persists on the medium, giving no space for time or geographical boundaries to hinder visibility or virality of content. This has been explained earlier as a feature of mobile applications, in which content persists, independent of the poster. The latter has been referred to as “recordability” (Hancock et al. 2007) or “permanence” (Whittaker 2003). Consistent with this literature, TikTok affords its users the ability to review posts with no limitations of time, space, or the availability of the original poster. As shown in Table 6, the average number of views on the hashtags increased over time, indicating that as content persists on the platform, more people were able to access it.

4 Discussion

Focusing on the online Palestinian Intifada in a virtual context, this study examined TikTok as a novel medium to extend the literature on online activism and add to the emergent body of knowledge about playful political participation among
youth. TikTok Intifada was an online movement that called for support of Palestine through event-specific hashtags. We analyzed the most three viral hashtags: #SaveSheikhJarrah (907.9 million views), #SavePalestine (1.5 billion views), and #FreePalestine (8.5 billion views) reflecting the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict that took place in Sheikh Jarrah in 2021. We explored the most prominent messages frames in the movement to understand how TikTok affordances were used by platform users to mobilize the public towards a pro-Palestinian narrative. Overall, our findings indicate that the messages frames that emerged during the Sheikh

### Table 6: The average number of views on the hashtags (#SavePalestine, #FreePalestine, #SaveSheikhJarrah) over time in TikTok Intifada videos (n = 203).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Average number of views</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st – 15th May</td>
<td>2,926,987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16th – 20th May</td>
<td>2,597,188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21st – 30th May</td>
<td>3,953,273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total number of views</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,159,149</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3:** An example of deploying duet functions to express solidarity with Palestinians in TikTok Intifada videos.
Jarrah incident were not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the videos belonged to multiple messages frames simultaneously. This can be explained by the nature of the platform, whereby direct political content can still be present in a challenge-based TikTok video.

The frame analysis showed that while frequencies between messages frames varied, the frames intertwined in the sense that the unit of analysis (a single video) belonged to one or more frames simultaneously. However, we found that the full data corpus was divided into two main categories: direct political content and indirect political content. Direct political content included live coverage of news, factual information about Palestine and Israel, international protests, and victims of war, including children, women, youth, and other activists. Indirect political content emerged during the analysis in the form of challenges and other artistic expressions. In our initial analysis we drew from the results of Xiong et al. (2019), who studied activism on Twitter. Therefore, the emergence of the challenges frame could potentially be explained by the platform differences. TikTok bases its design elements on the creation of micro-videos, thus providing users with platform-specific affordances that facilitate playful production of content (Vijay and Gekker 2021).

In accordance with the logic of connective-collective action, a global audience who are self-organized on TikTok, used the technologies and features afforded by the platform to interact and became networked over the Sheikh Jarrah incident. The findings here revealed that while the hashtags became viral, movements and street marches took place in different parts of the world. Our findings also demonstrated how digitally literate youths deployed TikTok affordances to produce and circulate messages on the platform. These viral messages are trendy, easily relatable, and speak to an international audience, who no longer seek traditional media for news. Consistent with Papacharissi (2015) and Lünenborg (2019), when audiences are extensively exposed to real-time and authentic news coverage, they become emotionally connected with a cause. The widely disseminated TikTok videos expressed solidarity in many forms. They aimed to raise awareness and call to action through international protests and infotainment, or event-specific trendy challenges.

Today, TikTok is starting to accommodate political conversations (Vijay and Gekker 2021). Our findings showed that the first most prominent frame was direct political content. More than half of our sample approached the issue with a political lens that is directly and bluntly hard, serious content, therefore suggesting that the nature of the platform has shifted to accommodate political content. In these videos, TikTokers relied extensively on historical narrative and flag representation in protests or as an emoji option to project nationalism, solidarity, and discontent. This international sense of empathy likely increased awareness among
the global community, advocating for a pro-Palestinian narrative through a bottom-up approach, where social listening and dialogue were apparent both online and offline.

The second most prominent frame was the reference to victims, whereby children were featured in a standard format, usually scared, beaten and severely injured or terribly in shock. We suggest that this use and integration of TikTok’s features in victim videos could potentially trigger emotional response and evoke powerful messages that causes audiences to connect and respond as affective publics. This finding is consistent with Berger and Milkman (2013), who affirm that emotional appeals in content maximizes engagement and virality.

Our data has further shown that influencers used the platform by taking advantage of their huge fan base to mobilize the public towards supporting Palestinians. Their power was evident on TikTok even in cases where the individual was not originally a politician or someone who normally posts political content. Influencers adapted hard political content and converged it into artistic expressions, hence making the content acceptable and relatable by the young generation on TikTok. This playful crafting of these videos is a novel phenomenon in the online activism paradigm. Case in point, the most viral video in our sample was Moe Zein, a Lebanese singer who replies to an Israeli soldier singing “I’m gonna stand up, take my people with me”. He replies in a stitch by saying “Oh yes please stand up, take your people with you, leave the children happy away from all tragedies”. The latter is an evident use of stitch functions that allowed Zein to combine a premade video and insert his own voice and lyrics to show opposition and discontent in a trendy and digital format.

Further, our analysis showed that other than the three main hashtags (#SaveSheikhJarrah, #SavePalestine, #FreePalestine), 97.5 percent of the TikTok videos employed other hashtags (e.g., #GazaUnderAttack, #TikTokArab, #FYP) in order to spread content. This extends previous literature concluding that among the main affordances facilitating grassroot movements is the hashtag, as it enables collective political expression by easing visibility, coordination, and connection on existing topics (Hautea et al. 2021; Treem and Leonardi 2012; Xiong et al. 2019). This finding is also consistent with TikTok’s business team, who argued that hashtags were originally created as a tool for people to find common interests about a topic (TikTok for Business 2021). Our work thus serves as a starting point to understand the platform-specific hashtags (i.e., #ForYouPage, #FYP, #PalestineTikTok, #TikTokArab), which facilitates viewership by pushing content on the landing page. On TikTok, users have the option to create their own hashtag, select popular existing tags or add platform-specific tags to ensure virality and control algorithm on the default page. Therefore, #FYP users on the Sheikh Jarrah incident were trying to push the pro-Palestinian content to ensure global visibility,
revealing a direct way to raise awareness on the topic and promote parody or imitation to appeal to a larger audience.

Moreover, the findings here showed how TikTok platform affordances helped the users to mobilize towards the Sheikh Jarrah dispute. The Jalebi challenge (Figure 2) is an example of the latter. Consistent with the findings of Hautea and colleagues (2021), Zulli and Zulli (2020), and Treem and Leonardi (2012), the Jalebi challenge indicates that TikTok association features encourage “joint content creation” through stitches Hautea et al. (2021, p. 6), an affordance that is beyond mere social communication on networking sites. Though seemingly TikTok challenges are not directly political, they are youthful political expressions and a playful way to express political resistance.

Our content analysis further demonstrated that the producers of these videos, whether hard political news or popular challenges were youth inspired by the idea of self-representation and freedom of expression. This suggests that the young generation is aware of their potential to mobilize others towards a cause. The frequencies by which TikTok affordances were used indicate that in order to reach a massive audience, TikTokers needed to linguistically adapt political content and hard news to fit an agile, dynamic and creative platform, hence innovative users. Emojis are a coping strategy by which a TikToker implicitly and explicitly takes sides and expresses emotions. The authenticity and dynamism of TikTok editing and distribution mechanisms turned its young audience into active video producers on contentious, controversial topics, such as the Sheikh Jarrah incident. Therefore, the platform is no longer simply about dances or trendy challenges, but is beginning to find capacity and space for the production and consumption of political content.

Overall, our study extends the literature on connective-action and provides an understanding of how individuals create and disseminate online messages, which reflect their own views and engage to advocate for change in an online context. It also lays a foundation for how newly introduced social media design elements facilitate a bottom-up approach for initiating social and political movements in a playful manner. The existence of these elements have allowed individuals to become a socially-networked community over specific hashtags. The latter is imperative in understanding what youth experience in a virtual context and what motivates their self-expression and mobilization. This study also takes lead into exploring a contentious topic on the trending platform TikTok, which enriches our understanding of the factors shaping their online experience on the application.

This research, therefore, represents a starting point to expand the knowledge beyond the patterns of activism that have been studied earlier and to deeply explore how innovativeness facilitates playful politics and empowers youth to act towards a cause, independent of any linguistic or geographical boundaries.
TikTok, as our medium of analysis and as a platform primarily for entertainment, revealed that easily spreadable micro-videos are a force to create momentum towards a political and humanitarian cause as the case with the Intifada, shaping opinions around social and political issues.

5 Limitations and Future Research

This study is local and specific to its context. The work explored youth activism in the context of the Palestinian conflict on hashtags that promote a pro-Palestinian narrative; thereby making the findings only relevant in a similar political event. Future research arenas should consider analyzing TikTok online activism on topics of different nature. The researchers are also only fluent in English and Arabic and therefore had to exclude videos of other languages, which might have included additional information relevant to the study at hand. Cross-cultural comparisons between micro-videos of different languages to understand how socio-cultural and political factors influence patterns of consumption on the platform are also recommended. Future studies should additionally examine videos’ comments to assess affective publics formation and mobilization for the call to action content; the high number of shares and likes of the videos analyzed here may have acted as collaterals to our argument. In addition, further research should look into some qualitative background of these TikTokers as they are influencers—and not necessarily politicians—who get involved in advocacy for the Palestinians and their narrative. Finally, online activism regarding the Palestinian conflict is worthy of study; therefore, it is imperative that other social media applications be analyzed in comparative research to understand the communicative actions of people on spaces that afford different options.

6 Concluding Remarks

During the TikTok Intifada, connective-action took place among users, who utilized the platform to its full potential in an attempt to stand in solidarity with the Palestinians and advocate for a pro-Palestinian narrative. This was facilitated by platform affordances, such as visibility, editability, association, and persistence. These features have been found to simplify communication through a micro-content production. We generally conclude that micro-videos encourage virality and creative crafting of direct and indirect political content, making TikTok a space for political expression, mobilization, and online activism.
References


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