Creative Political Participation on TikTok during the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

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In this article, I study creative forms of youth political participation on the social media platform TikTok during the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election. I examine the collective expression found in videos employing four distinct sounds in a memetic manner, taking advantage of the particularities of the platform interface in a novel way. Within the framework of the actualizing citizenship model (Bennett 2007; 2008; Bennett et al. 2010; 2011) that emphasizes the importance of self-expression in civic engagement, I consider three different forms that creative political participation takes on the platform: 1) performing political identity, 2) creating community by debating, and 3) trolling as protest. Creative self-expression serves as a way for young people to construct and affirm their identity and their social networks, which in itself is an important political activity for the actualizing citizen. However, these forms do not necessarily contradict more traditional ways of civic engagement, as being socialized in a political space with like-minded peers increases social learning and political awareness, which encourages civic engagement in offline spaces as well (Jenkins et al. 2016; Kim and Ellison 2021).

Introduction

In 2020, the social media platform TikTok—known for its 15-second lip-syncing videos—was the most popular non-gaming application in the world, particularly among people under twenty (Iqbal

2021). TikTok was also at the center of many scandals and viral moments during the 2020 U.S. presidential election, from the infamous empty seats shown at the Trump rally in Tulsa after a boycott was organized on the platform (Lorenz et al. 2020) to political disputes over China's influence (Swanson et al. 2020). Although unsuccessful, the Trump administration even attempted to ban the application in the United States, reportedly due to heightened security concerns (Allyn 2020). In this article, I explore collective forms of political participation that developed on the platform, particularly among teens and young adults. I consider what new information TikTok can offer about the creative political engagement of Generation Z, the generation that was born after the year 1996 according to the definition by Pew Research Center (Dimock 2019). Much remains unknown about the political participation of Generation Z, a generation still coming of voting age. As one of the most popular forms of social media among this generation, TikTok is an important resource for understanding that participation.

For decades, one of the main concerns for scholars studying youth political participation has been how to explain the apparent lack of interest by young people toward traditional party politics and actions such as voting. Some argue that a breakdown of communities and an enhanced sense of individualization have led to young people disengaging from politics altogether (Putnam 2000; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999). Others argue that individualization and a fragmentation of social hierarchies have led to the creation of a risk society, where young people fail to see structural problems as collective and have instead internalized a sense of individualized responsibility about the future, leading them to not see the value in traditional politics or even in democracy itself (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). In this risk society, Bennett (2007; 2008) and Bennett et al. (2010; 2011) argue that beliefs about what constitutes good citizenship have also shifted over the generations, causing a change in civic models, from traditional, dutiful citizenship to an actualizing citizenship. In essence, citizens used to participate within established institutions on the basis of the information they had received from various sources of public authority (Bennett et al. 2011, 839).

After the turn of the century, people began to rely more on crowd-sourced information to participate in "personally expressive cause-oriented politics" that happened in informal networks, where civic engagement became more tied to identity (Bennett et al. 2011, 839). Building upon this, particularly scholars of social media rejected the notion that youth political participation is in decline, arguing rather that political engagement by young people looks categorically different

(Banaji et al. 2013; Collin 2015; della Porta 2019; Earl et al. 2017; Jenkins et al. 2016; Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat 2018; Vromen et al. 2016). They argued that online political participation is a particularly important part of civic engagement, where creative forms of self-expression "can be seen by the self-actualizing citizen as more meaningful than voting" (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat 2018, 79). For the actualized citizen, personal social networks and a desire to belong to a community are drivers of political participation rather than a sense of duty toward public service, while the way they choose to participate—and, importantly, what they themselves find meaningful—reflects that.

Through a novel approach, I examine a sample of 150 video clips that I have collected using the sound search function of TikTok as the tracking tool. I focus on four distinct sounds that have been employed and disseminated in a manner that resembles political memes. Considering the framework of actualized citizenship together with the findings of Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat (2018) on creative personal expression, I determine that creative political participation can manifest itself in at least three different ways on the platform. First, I consider how *performing political identity* is central to the way young people express themselves politically on the platform. Second, I analyze how TikTok users are *creating community by debating.* The platform affordances allow for vibrant debates between users, and these debates can become a way for users to construct networks with peers through the sharing of information informed by values. In my last example, *trolling as protest*, I consider how internet culture such as trolling, often portrayed as negative and deviant, can become a productive way for the actualized citizen to disrupt and resist political ideologies and cultures they find discordant with their values.

Methodology and the Responsibilities of Researching TikTok

The forms that youth political participation can take specifically on TikTok have not been widely researched due to the fairly recent global popularity of the platform. In their research of Musical.ly (the previous version of TikTok before it was bought by the Chinese technological company ByteDance), Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik discovered that young people, regardless of their ideological beliefs, used the platform to combine popular music with dancing to convey a political message tailored to like-minded audiences (2019, 2003). TikTok differs from other social media platforms in that its central feed is not built around the people users follow but an algorithm that determines what types of content viewers want to see and engage with (Kumar 2022). Literat and

Kligler-Vilenchik argue that this has made TikTok far more appealing to young people wishing to express themselves politically, as context collapse is less likely on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, where it is much more difficult to control one's audiences (2019, 1990). Likewise, in a study of politically active youth on TikTok, Serrano et al. (2020, 8) claim that the audiovisual "playing" of one's politics results in a far more interactive experience than on any other platform. As such, I argue that while it is decidedly not made for such purposes, unique features of the TikTok interface make it particularly suited to the forms of civic engagement common among the youngest generation.

Thus, at its best, TikTok is a vast, still mostly uncharted repository offering a gateway for researchers to explore the everyday lives of young people, down to uncannily minute details packaged in short clips of image and audio. Millions of young people around the world have invited viewers into their most intimate spaces, whether it be their bedrooms, their family dinner tables, or even the voting booth. In these glimpses lie the possibilities of TikTok but, importantly, therein lie its dangers as well. When it comes to opening one's life to complete strangers, it could be asked how informed these decisions actually are. There are a number of ethical concerns that need to be taken into consideration when stepping into these spaces as a researcher. For one, the users of TikTok overwhelmingly tend to be young. The age limit specified by TikTok itself is 13, and research shows that the largest user demographic in TikTok is comprised of teens (Tankovska 2021). While TikTok does not prohibit using the content produced by its users for research purposes, and only explicitly denies scraping the data on the application for commercial purposes (Terms of Service 2019), it is important to note that ethical considerations surrounding research extend far beyond what is allowed by the platform itself.

Indeed, due to the myriad of ethical issues relating to the use of data for purposes that the subject may not realize they have consented to, Williams et al. emphasize that scholars need to carefully consider "user expectations, safety, and privacy rights" before embarking on any social media research (2017, 27). In addition, researchers based in the European Union need to be aware of the more rigorous ethical standards and legal standards set by the EU in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) directive (EU 2016/679). As clarified by Kotsios et al. (2019, 6), "any research-based processing of social network data that not only directly identifies but also possibly may identify (by the same researchers or third parties) individuals will be regulated under the GDPR." According to the GDPR, collecting sensitive personal data, such as political opinions, requires

appropriate safeguards to be implemented, such as anonymization and pseudonymization, so that it cannot be identified by anyone. This includes ensuring that in the process of replicating the results, researchers separate the identifiable data from the content analyzed in a way that cannot be easily discovered by a simple web search (Kotsios et al. 2019, 21). Therefore, in order to protect the right to privacy of the users of TikTok, I will not include any information that could be used to identify the creators. This is a method also used by other researchers of TikTok to protect the privacy of young creators (Khattab 2020; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik 2019).

For my study, I use the sound search function of TikTok instead of the hashtag search tool to track a cluster of videos on a particular topic to be further analyzed, as has been done with previous quantitative, big data studies of TikTok (Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik 2019; Serrano et al. 2020). I employ this method in an effort to collect forms of creative expression that have been propagated in the platform in a memetic way, that is, videos that are structurally similar imitations of each other (see, e.g., Shifman 2014, 41). There are a number of benefits to collecting the videos according to their background sound. First, the audiovisual experience is what makes TikTok so different from other social media platforms, and it is the primary way for content creators to engage with others and to build community together with their peers on the platform. The sound used can be a popular song, an original piece of music, or a speech from a public figure such as Donald Trump. Sound acts as the frame of reference upon which to build content, which can then be recreated by other users in a meme-like fashion. TikTok facilitates this memetic way of producing content—users who wish to upload videos to the platform are presented with a wide variety of trending songs and viral “challenges” to take part in when they are adding sound to the content they are creating. Indeed, part of what makes TikTok so popular is how easy it is to create new content on the platform. Users do not necessarily need to know or do much to start creating their own content, as the application automatically offers trending topics, sounds, filters, and effects upon which to build the video.

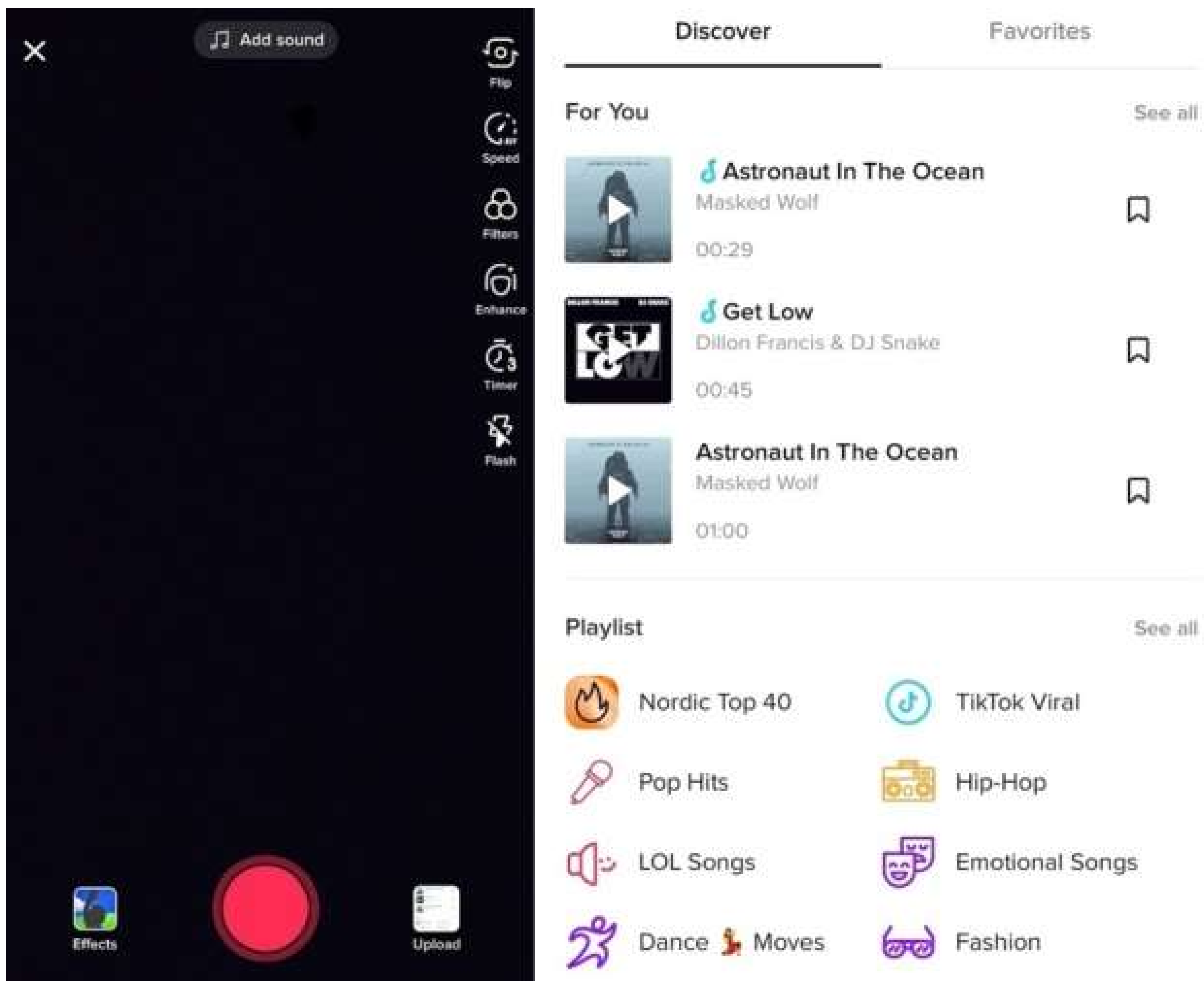

Figure 1. Screenshots of the TikTok interface. On the left, an image of the features that can be added when creating a video. On the right, an image of the options provided when pressing “add sound.”

In addition to providing a new avenue for researchers to locate collective expressions on TikTok, the sound search function also provides information about the specific number of videos that have used the same sound clip as well as information about the number of views a particular video has. However, there are difficulties with collecting videos through the sound search function as well. There will inevitably be clusters of videos where a piece of sound has been used in ways that are completely unrelated to each other. It also excludes all the videos that use a specific sound that has not been appropriated by other users in a memetic way—videos that contain personal experiences too specific to replicate, both serious and funny, videos that have not gone viral, and videos that use sounds used by everyone for all purposes. As I used the search sound function to determine virality and collect material that I could then study in-depth with a qualitative

approach, these difficulties do not impact the integrity of my results, even as it is important to be transparent about them.

To form the data of this study, I identified four popular memetic sounds used by creators in TikTok during the 2020 presidential election. I used the hashtag tool to locate the popular sounds by exploring the first 100 search results of each hashtag #election2020, #biden2020, #trump2020, #voteblue, and #votered. From a sample of 500 videos found through the hashtag, I chose sounds on the basis of how widespread their memetic use had become. I considered the sound to operate in a memetic fashion if 30 of the first 300 most popular videos found through the search sound function (different from the search hashtag function) were structured in the same manner. In this way, I identified four viral political sounds and divided them into three categories according to the function they played, with two sounds considered in the "performing political identity" category to represent both "liberal" and "conservative" TikTok. Liberal and conservative are used as hashtags by the users themselves to provide signals to the algorithm so that the videos appear in the "for you" pages (the central feed of TikTok) of likeminded people, that is, in the community space it was intended for (see TikTok Newsroom 2020 for more on how the algorithm works). Here, 30 examples of each four memetic sounds were chosen, and as one of the sounds had been used in two different memetic ways, 30 examples of both were included. This resulted in a data set of 150 videos.

My data represents a randomized sample of TikTok videos. This is by no means an exhaustive collection of the memetic sounds used for political purpose that circulated during the election. All of the searches were conducted during February 2021, and the results and analysis reflect that timeframe. Furthermore, collecting a representative sample without scraping the app with an automated web crawler is exceedingly difficult when any given search can produce well over 100,000 videos and the search function does not offer any other way to modify the search than keywords. Also unclear is the rationale for the order in which the videos show up in the results. The results of a search are presented in a feed that can seemingly be scrolled down indefinitely—from most popular to less popular, according to the number of views—but the further one scrolls, even that categorization stops being strictly true.

The purpose of this study is not to account for all the different variations of political participation in TikTok but to introduce the different forms of civic engagement that these viral videos can serve. Through collective performances where sound and image are synced to provide political

commentary, users can creatively express themselves, construct communities around those expressions, debate each other, and encourage peers to take political action. As an example of creative self-expression and the first of the four memetic sounds examined, I consider the ways in which users perform their political identity on TikTok.

Performance of Political Identity as Creative Self-Expression

The fact that TikTok facilitates performing to audiences of likeminded people drawn to the content by the algorithm makes the platform ideal for the model of actualizing citizenship and, as such, represents an active space for creative political participation that centers around identity. Political identity or partisan identity (i.e., the way individuals identify with parties as social groups) can be comparable to other social identities, such as religious ones, which are formed already at a young age through the cross-pressure of internal motivations and external social environments (Green et al. 2002, 23). Partisan groups can provide to individuals a sense of belonging—indeed, as partisan polarization has intensified, partisan identities have become more and more entrenched. Lilliana Mason (2018, 20) describes partisan identities in the U.S. as mega-identities, where a "single vote can now indicate a person's partisan preference as well as his or her religion, race, ethnicity, gender, neighborhood, and favorite grocery store." Parties tend to matter less to young people, as has been shown in studies before Generation Z, and this continues to be found with them (Furlong and Cartmel 2007; della Porta 2019; The Circle 2018a). However, the ideological divides that differentiate Democrats from Republicans and liberals from conservatives still clearly frame how young people see their political selves as well (Fisher 2020). For the youth in the United States, constructing a political identity does not require membership or even a sense of belonging to a political party. They do not identify with parties per se but with parties as social groups (Green et al. 2002, 26). In my study, I consider how young people identify as "liberals" and as "conservatives" and how they construct a political identity in networks that seem to best represent their political values.

Creative self-expression of any kind most commonly manifests itself on TikTok as intricate choreographies danced to the beat of popular songs. For political self-expression, the choreographies include ways to indicate the approval or disapproval of different values and policy positions in a way that is often intrinsically tied to the identity of the user. For example, examining how the song *Country Girl (Shake It For Me)* has been used in a memetic way in TikTok videos

shows how political identity can be performed by relying on both image and sound. *Country Girl (Shake It For Me)* is a hip hop-inspired country song released in 2011 by the singer Luke Bryan, who is known for subverting expectations of the country music genre. Likewise, TikTok users from rural parts of the United States riffed on the song to subvert some of the expectations other users of TikTok might have about them. As Bryan sings the first line "You know you've got everybody lookin," these TikTok creators use the opportunity to catch the attention of viewers by pointing to the caption they have added to their video. These captions include affirmations of taking part in the collective expression "I heard the left were taking over this sound" or assumptions about their audiences "prob gonna lose followers but lets make some things clear." This is then followed with assertions of their conservative upbringing or rural background and/or symbolic representations of someone from the countryside, wearing boots or a cowboy hat or performing the dance in a field next to a tractor. As the song kicks off, the TikToker moves to incorporate dance moves, some following an elaborate choreography, along with the captions of left-leaning positions they believe in, such as "black lives matter," "love is love," "defund the police," and "her body her choice." This idea is further appropriated in videos where people dress in clothes stereotypically associated with "country people" and dance to the beat of the song in order to blend in when going to vote for a Democratic candidate. The point of the joke the users make is in contradicting the concept of a partisan mega-identity—the idea that you can infer someone's political beliefs by the way they look or where they live.

These videos garnered a significant amount of responses that subverted the original message as well. In the responses, "I heard the left were taking over this sound" turned into "since all the liberals wanna claim our sound, ill claim it back," followed by captions of conservative values such as "all lives matter," "abortion is murder," "back the blue," and "come and take my guns." Some play with the reverse assumptions people have about what liberals look like, with people of color and young women adding captions like "i might lose followers but idc" followed by the abovementioned conservative values. In turn, these videos were then responded to by people who conformed in their social identity to the assumptions people have about their political identity, for example, adding a subversion in the beginning "Since Liberals are taking this sound over I thought we could take it back" and then adding "JK" with the captions of left-leaning values. The multiple different permutations represent the virality of the memetic video, as do the metrics:

over 24,000 videos on TikTok feature *Country Girl (Shake It For Me)*, and while not all of them use the song for the same purpose, the most popular videos that do have well over 600,000 views.

As seen above, performance of political identity on TikTok is often tied to people's appearances. Another example of this is offered by the videos uploaded to the tune of *Real Women Vote for Trump* (2019) performed by the Deplorable Choir (whose name appropriates the term that former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton used about Trump supporters). In the original song, three women sing about Trump supporters accepting everyone into their community: "We don't care if you're white, Don't care if you're black, We don't care if you're gay," with the chorus asserting "Real women vote for Trump, we don't need no liberal chump." The original song has been used in 3,636 TikTok videos but the variations on it edited by TikTok creators far exceed those numbers. With 23,400 videos, a popular modification, for example, includes a distorted computer voice declaring "I have a penis" after the chorus "Real women vote for Trump." The format of the meme is simple enough: the ironic statement at the end provides all the content while bored-looking teenagers stare at the camera as the song plays on. The gender of the creator is irrelevant, as the statement is only used to denote their non-support for Trump.

Of the 18 different modifications of the song with original sound, the most popular trend plays with stereotypical assumptions about what "conservatives" and "liberals" look like. In an effort to mock the idea of the "real" women who vote for Trump, the videos consist of young people giving themselves a makeover to represent a caricature of the women singing the original song. This includes an overt yellow shade of concealer, dark and sharply drawn eyebrows, bright eyeshadow, and the red MAGA (based on the Trump campaign's catchphrase Make America Great Again) hat; captions start with "Turning myself into a Trump supporter" and follow with a detailed description of the process, as is common in the make-up tutorial format. These videos have in turn garnered duets where content creators do a makeover into a "Biden girl" or "a libtard" by creating a caricature of a "goth" with white concealer, black eye make-up, and black dots and crosses drawn across their cheekbones. Responses to the "Biden girl" and "Trump girl" looks also include tutorials where the styles are recreated in a more authentic way, turning the caricatures into real people. With the view counts of the most popular videos rising well above 100,000, these TikTok creators show how a popular, non-political lifestyle format can be successfully appropriated for political commentary. The performance of political identity is tied to audiovisual experiences that rely on subverting and contradicting stereotypical assumptions about what certain ideological

beliefs look like, but also adopting and capitalizing on those same assumptions, whether they be about themselves or the "opposing side." This demonstrates the power the image of a partisan mega-identity holds, regardless of whether it holds true or not to these young TikTok users. Contesting and conforming to the ideological expectations related to one's social identity are key to the performance of political identity.

Crowdsourcing Information and Creating Community

One of the most unique technological features of TikTok is the ability for creators to respond to the content of other users through the duet function. When a TikTok video garners enough attention to "go viral," part of the memetic process is not only the way in which others adopt the same format for their own content to spread imitations and transformed content, but how the content mutates due to the duets it attracts and the duets those duets then get. At times, the popularity of the duets is far greater than that of the original video. In political TikTok videos, duets are often used to answer the political claims made by other users of the platform. Serrano et al. (2020, 8) describe such political TikTok duets as "being the closest feature on social media to an actual online public debate." An example of this online public debate can be found by following the tracks provided by an original piece of sound called *In the Mood*, which was created by a TikTok user. While a significant number of the 536,000 videos employing the sound are non-political in nature, 30 of the 300 most popular ones—with view counts ranging from 46,000 to over 600,000—utilize a very specific format, where captions of political claims are added to the beat of the song. Approximately half of the *In the Mood* videos are duets, answering claims in the original video. For example, "owning guns is a constitutional right" becomes "more gun laws = less deaths. It's proven. Your 'rights' aren't prioritized over people's lives," "healthcare isnt a 'human right'" becomes "article 25 of the declaration of human rights says healthcare IS a human right," and "'Anchor babies' should be illegal" becomes "Marco Rubio, Bruce Lee, WALT DISNEY Were all 'anchor babies.'"

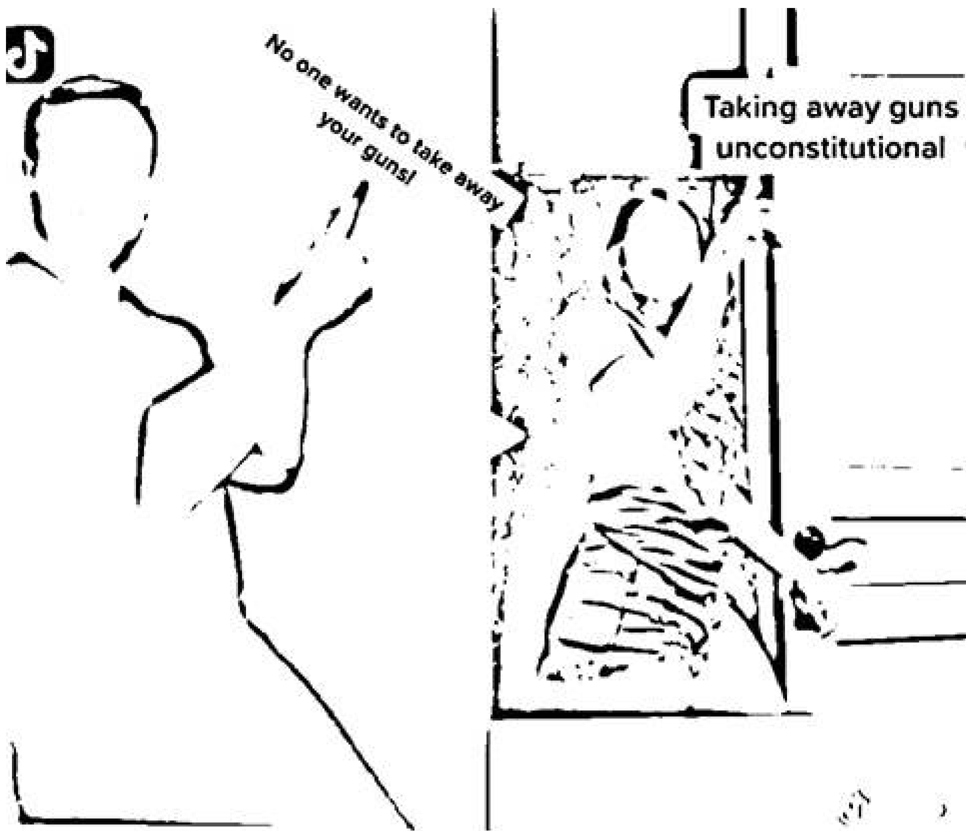

Figure 2. Modified screenshot of a political duet where claims are made by changing captions.

Duets such as these perform the function of an online public debate and show how civic information is animated by a catchy beat and choreography. Yet, as the algorithm curates feeds of users according to their preferences, the viewers of these duets still mostly consist of people who are already watching such content and, presumably, subscribing to the beliefs presented by the duet maker. In this sense, even though the content creator has had to venture across the lines from one social group to another, the "debates" end up being rather one-sided. The original piece of content only acts as the structure on top of which duet makers can affirm their own political beliefs and perform their political identity for likeminded audiences. Regardless of the goals of the actual duet maker, the function the duet serves is more of a community-building effort.

Duets with civic debates also offer information and knowledge to those engaging with the content. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center, 52% of under 30-year-old U.S. citizens regularly consume news on TikTok (Walker and Matsa 2021). It is in networks like these—where users create content and other users engage with that content by creating something of their own—that information is shared. The duet functions as a creative way for users to crowdsource information. The information often implicitly carries value statements itself and thus can be considered

trustworthy by the community members. Moreover, it is not only information, as statements about guns, abortions, and healthcare clustered together provide to the users that engage with the videos important sources of civic knowledge and ideas about how to see the world around them. Personal networks, of which online networks account for a great share, are the primary sources of fostering civic culture among the actualized citizenship (Jenkins and Shresthova 2016, 25).

When information is pooled together in discrete communities, such as the ones created by the duet function, the facts that people use to talk about the world also become divided along ideological lines. The TikTok algorithm plays a powerful part in creating spaces for identity and interest-based communities in different corners of the platform, such as "conservative TikTok," "liberal TikTok," "gay TikTok," or "straight TikTok." This facilitates more open engagement by young people, as the threat of context collapse is much smaller. However, this also means that accidentally crossing the line from one space to another, which can happen due to the quirks of the algorithm, can be a terrifying experience, with users often being subjected to a significant onslaught of hate messages if their content ends up in the feeds of viewers it was not intended for. Furthermore, while the identities of young people can be fluid and constantly in a state of being constructed, consciously moving from one space to another can be just as difficult and cause a dramatic breakdown of networks. The TikTok algorithm, for better or worse, creates "bubbles" that are not often broken by users.

Trolling as Productive Civic Action

A Trump rally in Tulsa on June 20, 2020 brought TikTok into the general news cycle in a way that forced adults previously unaware or dismissive of the platform to take its political organizing power more seriously. During the first Trump rally held in Tulsa, Oklahoma, before the primaries of the presidential election, fans of Korean pop (K-Pop) joined TikTok users to register for tickets for the event they had no intention of attending. This was done in order to overinflate the expectations of the Trump campaign and to skew the data that campaigns can collect from such events (Lorenz et al. 2020). The trick seemed to have worked, as the turnout at the Tulsa rally was (according to the Tulsa Fire Department) only around 6200 attendants instead of the million the Trump campaign had expected (News On 6 2020). Even though the Trump campaign publically disputed claims that TikTok users had been the reason for any disparity between the expected and

actual attendant numbers (News On 6 2020), internally the campaign considered the rally to have been "an embarrassing flop" (Martin and Burns 2022, 95).

The idea for the Tulsa rally ticket reservation protest reportedly came from a campaign staffer who used to work for the former Democratic presidential hopeful and current Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg (Lorenz et al. 2020). The former staffer was enraged over the implications of Trump having an in-person, maskless rally on Juneteenth, the holiday celebrating the emancipation of enslaved African Americans. While the rally was postponed a day due to the backlash the original choice caused (Baker and Haberman 2020), the idea of reserving tickets kept spreading on TikTok and among K-pop fans on Twitter. Many of the TikTok users participating in the protest removed their own videos before the rally happened in order to prevent knowledge of it from spreading to the wider public and the Trump campaign itself (Lorenz et al. 2020). Yet, by following just one original sound by a TikTok user who had not removed their content, one can still find 297 videos lip-syncing to a voice-over of the ticket reservation process and "duets" to that voice-over. The original voice-over used by the TikTok users is aptly named "DONT DO THIS ALL IT DOES IS HELP TRUMP SORRY."

The voice-over in these Tulsa rally videos is a simple declaration of reserving the tickets from the Trump campaign website, with emphasis put on the fact that they cost nothing. The joke of the video is in keeping up the appearance that one really wishes to participate but cannot due to an absurd reason: "I have to walk my gecko that day." This process is performed in front of a green screen, showing the purchase on the website. Some of the duets simply present the same feelings in front of the same green screen but add versions of their own absurd reasons, such as "I have to take my fish to the dentist" or "whoops i have a date with a tree that day!!" Some users then made further duets of these videos, leading to amalgamations of as many as seven videos playing alongside each other in duet form (see Figure 3). Others added more detailed descriptions of the process of reserving the tickets, such as how to find the website and how to fill out the form with fake phone numbers and zip codes. For most, taking part in this collective memetic expression was very much a politically conscious decision. For some, however, it was only the joke that they wanted to be a part of, as is made clear in descriptions such as "also only jokes ok not politics" in videos of people reserving tickets.

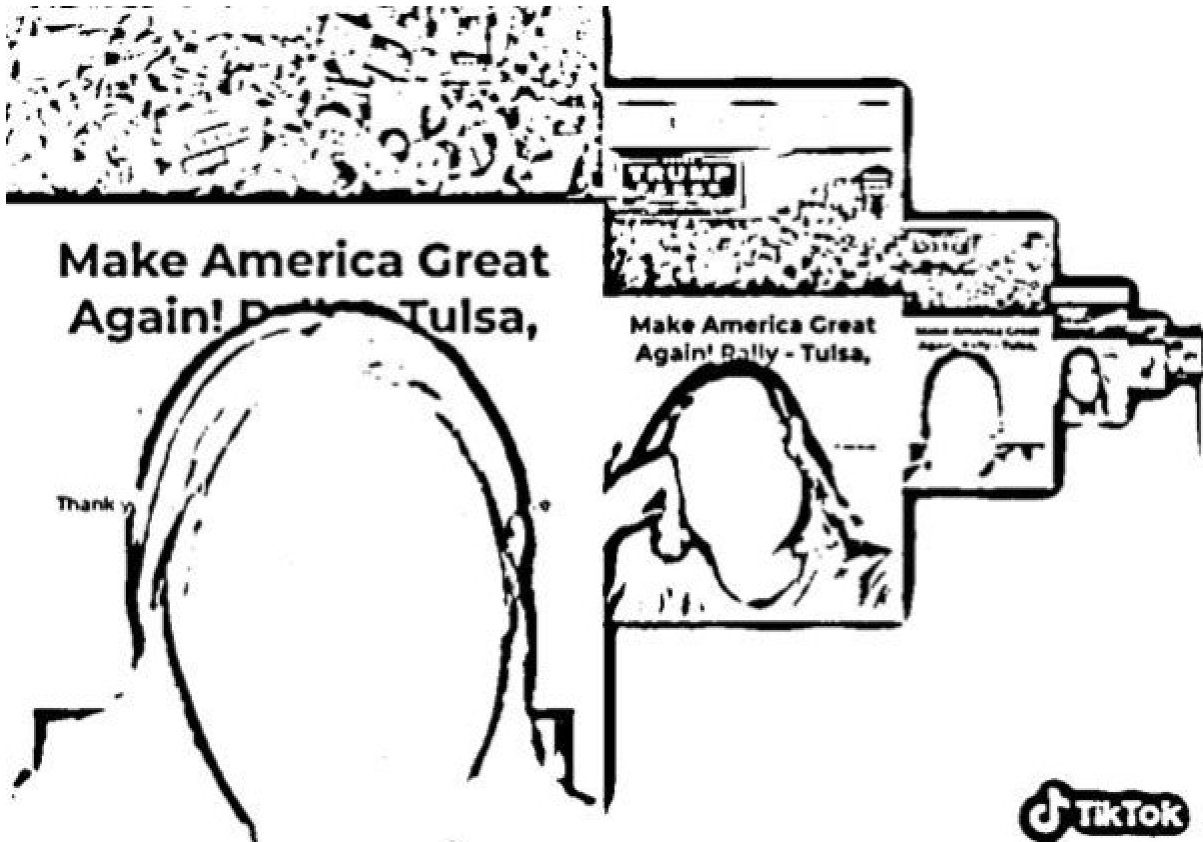

Figure 3. A modified screenshot that shows how duets consisting of as many as seven people can appear on TikTok.

Within the actualizing citizenship model, the case of the Trump Tulsa rally represents a form of civic action that is not merely a curious one-off but a natural progression of the civic styles preferred by the youngest generation. Vromen et al. (2016, 517) argue that within the changing model of citizenship, young people's social media engagement is project-oriented, ad hoc, and immediate. The Tulsa case was a project for young people that they could easily take part in, pooling their efforts together with other large communities known to take part in online-based activism such as K-pop fandom (Romano 2020). Importantly, they could also immediately see the results of taking such action. While the role social media plays in facilitating traditional political engagement (or not) is largely debated (see, e.g., Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat 2018; Morozov 2011; Vromen et al. 2016), it is clear that social media does make possible such politically oriented direct-action campaigns. As evidenced by the wide array of media stories on the event, which credited the TikTok teens and K-pop fans for the empty seats seen at the rally, this type of trolling (whether done for explicitly political purposes or as a joke) can have consequences that reach far beyond social media.

The Trump Tulsa rally case also shows how online behavior that is typically viewed as negative (i.e. trolling) can become productive when employed by self-actualized citizens in the service of a specific civic-minded goal. Most media scholars describe trolling as disruptive, abhorrent, hostile, and a transgressive practice aimed, at best, at entertaining and strengthening the ties of a close-knit community and, at worst, done for no other purpose than for the enjoyment of one person at the expense of the dignity of another (Bishop 2014; Graham 2019; Hannan 2018; Phillips 2015). Hannan (2018, 214) argues that trolling has not only gone mainstream but that "we are trolling ourselves to death." Graham (2019, 2030) points to the difficulty of defining what exactly is considered trolling but still posits that "definitions of trolling tend to agree that trolling is hostile." Certainly to the Trump campaign, the ticket-reserving videos can be seen as hostile. Some who participated in the effort explicitly made clear that they were participating for no other reason than for their own amusement. However, for many the project was a deliberate attempt to disrupt a political campaign they considered to be against their own values, and as such it is reminiscent of any traditional offline advocacy effort, such as street protests, picketing, or sit-ins. As a tactic for the actualized citizen, the Tulsa Rally protest demonstrates that trolling can be a productive way to participate in politics.

Conclusion

For the actualizing citizen, creative self-expression is one of the primary means of political participation. The examples provided by the four memetic sounds— *Country Girl (Shake It For Me)*, *Real Women Vote for Trump*, *In the Mood* and DONT DO THIS ALL IT DOES IS HELP TRUMP SORRY—showcase the different forms and functions that creative political participation can take. Whether conforming to or subverting the expectations of political identity that social identity creates in a hyper-polarized society, creating community by engaging in political debate through the duet function, or taking part in an effort to essentially troll political campaigns, the way young people participate in politics through TikTok can be a meaningful activity for the actualized citizen. If in a highly individualized society social structures are obstructed, constructing a sense of belonging in a community is vital for young people to see and believe in the collective solutions that democratic processes purport to offer. Learning to know one's political self together with likeminded peers is part of the process of understanding the value of such actions as voting (Gentry 2018). Furthermore, creative political participation and self-actualization are not

inherently discordant with taking part in traditional electoral politics, as is evidenced by the rise in youth participation in the last two U.S. national elections (The Circle 2018b; 2020).

TikTok offers a vast window onto the political participation styles adopted by Generation Z. Much of the existing research on TikTok has been quantitative in nature and dealing with big data, and scraping the application for data through hashtags has been the norm of the methods used. The novel approach of this study is to go beyond searches with the hashtag tool alone, to focus on specifically memetic sounds found through the "discover sound" function. Further research that combines both quantitative and qualitative methods in a systematic manner could undoubtedly yield more information about the creative political expression and civic engagement on the platform. Also out of scope for this study was to consider how TikTok as a uniquely sound-specific space is changing the way music and politics is intertwined in the politics of Generation Z. Young people are turning cultural products that are not explicitly political into political and political statements that are not musical into choreographed performances. For the creative political participant, not only is the personal political but the political profoundly personal.

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All links verified November 8, 2022.

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