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COMM5600M Dissertation and Research Methods

"Playful Activism?" How is TikTok used for the representation of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict?

A multimodal discourse analysis of the documented TikTok responses to the Israeli-Palestinian War.

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<u>Abstract</u>

This study sought to explore how the video-sharing app TikTok was utilised between April 2024 and May 2024 in response to the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict. Through a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), forty videos were analysed, ten weekly, in response to two search terms: "Free Palestine" and "Attack on Israel". Each video was analysed based on numerous criteria, with the most relevant being documented in this dissertation. This study considered to what extent certain unique affordances of the app were utilised whilst the presence of hate speech within the comment sections was also documented. In response to previous work identifying the presence of 'Playful Activism' on the app as a result of TikTok's imitation culture, this study concludes that an evident shift has been made from previously identified playful activist behaviour, to a much more serious sense of advocacy as conflict in the Middle East has intensified.

Key words:
TikTok, Playful Activism, Playful Publics, affordances, Attack on Israel, Free Palestine

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2. Introduction

The means in which the public sphere consume and respond to current affairs is ever-diversifying as modern technology continues to develop. The unique affordances of current social media platforms have led to a shift in audiences' reactions and expressions of thoughts on worldwide news (Kümpel et al, 2015, p.1). In the realm of war and conflict, the makeup of modern social media platforms has led to the creation of unique spaces in which individuals can interact and spread awareness on a given issue. This has given way to the growth of a newer form of activism which Cervi and Divon (2023) have coined as "Playful Activism" in amongst the new emergence of so-called "Playful Publics" (Divon, 2022). Those amongst the 'Playful Publics' "affectively convey their sentiment concurrently with emerging social-political events by using playful performance methods enabled by TikTok's memetic templates for content creation" (Divon, 2022, p.91).

Sites such as TikTok have allowed and encouraged those sectors of society that typically remain at arms-length from politics and national headlines to become situated at the heart of it (Mitchell and Page, 2013). Through the methods of playful trends, dances, makeup tutorials and much more, engagement and participation in the spread of vital current affairs information has been made increasingly more attractive to those that would typically remain uninterested (Mitchell and Page, 2013). However, as social media sites continue to diversify, a growth in the presence of offensive language and content is inevitable, thus creating a necessity for a better equipped community guidelines policy. If legacy media is policed by regulating bodies such as Ofcom, it could be argued that a similar framework must be applied to social media platforms to mitigate for the spread of hatespeech.

On 7 October 2023, militant group Hamas invaded Israel, resulting in the deaths of 1,200 people and 240 being taken as hostages (BBC, 2024). Whilst the invasion kick-started one of the most devastating conflicts in recent years, it also signified a shift in how youth cultures in particular interact with international conflict.

From 28 April 2024 to 19 May 2024, I collected 40 videos: 20 each under the search terms "Attack on Israel" and "Free Palestine". Videos were analysed under a rigid set of criteria such as like count, shares, captions, audio and comments. Content was viewed under the lens of 'Playful Activism', and it was considered to what extent a shift, if any, had been made as the state of conflict between Israel and Hamas continues to become bleaker. The types of unique app features found on TikTok, hereby referred to as its affordances, were also considered via how they were endorsed by creators. Additionally, the presence of hate speech amongst comment sections was also documented.

It is necessary to consider whether this identified shift towards 'Playful Activism' by scholars is shifting once more as conflict in the Middle East intensifies. TikTok's systematic makeup on an algorithmic basis allows for fruitful analysis in the realm of war and conflict. It is essential to discuss how and why creators, particularly young people, are using apps such as these for advocacy purposes rather than for entertainment. Furthermore, the potential for the application of studies such as these to other international conflicts should also be discussed.

I will begin by exploring the relevant academic literature which surrounds my subject matter, streamlining from a brief history of the decades-spanning Israel and Palestinian conflict, then to the presentation of the conflict in traditional legacy media. Finally, the literature will focus on the affordances of TikTok itself which have allowed for such a type of activism to be borne. Following this, I will detail my methodological choices for the project, supported by key

academics within the field. Next, I will detail my findings and analysis which will be accompanied with an in-depth discussion which considers why such a shift towards sombre advocacy amongst the originally identified Playful Publics, is now evident. Finally, I will conclude on how creators have used the app's affordances for advocacy purposes and the relevance of this study to earlier and future academic critiques.

3. Literature Review

The growth of the video-sharing platform TikTok has given way to the development of so-called *'Playful Activism'*. Succinctly defined by Cervi and Divon (2023) as "an affordance-based form of performance empowering the participation of ordinary users in emerging socio-political events through adaptable memetic templates of content creation" (p.2), 'Playful Activism' holds the ability to transform "...users' ritualized performances into powerful political instruments on TikTok and makes democratic participation more relatable, tangible, and accessible to various audiences" (p.1). TikTok is a fascinating and multifaceted social media platform which entices those who often would not engage in politics or sociocultural movements ordinarily to do so. In the context of political dissent and apathy amongst young people, such social media platforms have been able to reignite, at least, a rudimentary interest in current affairs. The following peer-reviewed literature has been consulted with the overarching research question for my project firmly in mind; "''Playful Activism''? How is TikTok utilised for the representation of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict?" While much of the scholarly literature relevant to TikTok as a platform is in its infancy, the wider subject of the Israel-Palestine conflict has been discussed extensively. Given the context of my research project, it is necessary to work through the existing literature systematically. This literature review will thus be subdivided into three key sections. The first section will focus on the overarching history of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and, more specifically, how this conflict has been presented in the British news media. Secondly, I will narrow my focus towards TikTok cultures and subsequent TikTok activism that has been informed by such trends. Finally, I will be reviewing literature surrounding the more niche area of Palestinian and Israeli TikTok and exploring the subsequent presence of hate speech amongst these posts.

3.1 History of the Israel-Palestine conflict and its presentation in legacy media

In this section, I will look at a modern history of the Israel-Palestine conflict and how the conflict has been traditionally presented in British news media, a necessary facet to identify how modern media such as TikTok has now become a youth-centric, central hub for news-sharing. Tensions between the two communities have been present for much longer than print media has reported on it. However, I will be working on literature that synthesises trends and occurrences from the 14 May 1948 when the State of Israel was created, prompting the first Arab-Israeli War. Mock et al. (2014) state the Jewish side was founded on the ideology of Zionism, something they describe as "Jewish national self-determination" (p.1246). They further describe the Palestinian side as believing themselves as "the indigenous inhabitants of the territory which the Jewish state occupies" (Mock et al., 2014, p.1246). Their work continues to push the importance of external international players in the conflict itself, suggesting powers such as the United Kingdom and the United States are integral to the current state of the war. Sanz Sabido (2015) indeed examines key progressions in the reporting of the conflict; however, she does so primarily through focusing on Britain's role as a "postcolonial power" (Sanz Sibido, 2015, p.199). Through a Postcolonial Critical Discourse Analysis of four British national newspapers: The *Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Sun* and *The Daily Mirror*, Sanz Sabido's work considers the representation of the conflict in the British press at four separate points: 1948, 1967, 1987 and 2009. Results of the investigation indicated "the classification of Palestine, Palestinians, Israel, Israelis, Jews, Zionists and Arabs as agents of political violence evolved over time, as violent acts and agents were perceived differently according to the dominant political discourse during each period" (Sanz Sabido, 2015, p.199). It was found that during 1948, mainstream British discourse was "positioned against Zionism because British authorities in Palestine were the target of Zionist

violence" (Sanz Sabido, 2015, p.207), whereas in 1967, Israel proceeded to be reported on as the morally correct side within the conflict. The years of both 1987 and later 2009 detailed similar results; however increased Palestinian visibility was far from positive. Studies such as this are demonstrative of how shifting political contexts shape how traditional media perceives each actor in the conflict. This is a key marker for my own project which considers how modern media such as TikTok reacts to current affairs in differing ways.

Considering the concept of media framing in both national and international print publications is vital in discerning how conflict, in this case the Israel-Palestine conflict, is reported on. Shahzad et al. (2023), analyse the framing of the conflict in the leading international broadcast media. Specifically, they examined "slants and thematic frames" present amongst a systematic sample of 100 news stories from each outlet from July 2019-July 2022 (Shahzad, 2023, p.1). The study found the RT and Al-Jazeera "gave more coverage to the Pro-Palestine frame whereas BBC and CNN gave more Pro-Israel Coverage" (Shahzad et al. 2023, p.1). Furthermore, it was found that the human-interest frame was reported on more by the RT and Al-Jazeera whilst the conflict frame was reported on more by the BBC and CNN (Shahzad et al. 2023, p.1). Pro-Palestinian and Pro-Israeli slants differed in wavering levels amongst each outlet, however it was found that, akin to existing literature, the BBC and CNN "gave more favourable coverage to Israel" (Shahzad et al. pp.11-12). As with Sanz Sibido (2015), my key takeaway here is the discernment of the relationship between political discourse and media framing.

Media framing is again in Thomas (2011), which corroborates Shahzad (2023). Thomas (2011) observes that Israeli war efforts are covered far more in the British and worldwide press in comparison with the Palestinian. The Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in August 2005 was widely covered, but as suggested by Thomas (2011) through the textual analysis of BBC1 and

Channel 4 News coverage of the time, most reporting framed the event as "intra-Israeli trauma" (Thomas, 2011, p.522) and thus disregarded the plight and undeniable trauma of the Palestinian side. It was found that "the Israeli narrative predominated accounting for 87 percent of all BBC1's and 76 percent of Channel 4's quotation time" (Thomas, 2011, p.536). These findings are homogenous with much of the literature consulted: Israeli war efforts are certainly given more "on airtime" in British news media. Subsequent consulted studies on social media and hate speech will further inform how the conflict is reported on modern social media platforms such as TikTok.

I have thus far given a brief background on the modern history of the Israeli Palestine conflict and considered how both sides have been presented in the British press. I will now narrow my discussion further to focus on the unique affordances of TikTok as a social media platform and how its features have lent itself to so-called 'Playful Activism'.

3.2 TikTok cultures and TikTok activism

As a platform, TikTok has unique affordances, differentiating it from other social media. With features such as stitches, duets, voiceovers, filters and audio, the video-sharing platform has dramatically risen in popularity in the last five years. Arguably catalysed by the Covid-19 pandemic and an increase in people staying home, TikTok trends became commonplace for young people to follow and engage with. Such trends remain popular; however, the platform also now presents itself as a centralised arena for reporting and sharing relevant current affairs. Most importantly, the algorithmic makeup of TikTok enables a tailored and personalised 'For You Page' (FYP), whereby only users' most interacted and relevant content will be instantaneously available on their feeds. As previously discussed, scholarly literature surrounding TikTok is

currently in its infancy, but relevant discussion regards immediate TikTok affordances, cultures and subsequent activism trends.

Lee and Abidin (2023) consider how the social media sphere and pop culture "have served as a vehicle for mobilizing and engaging in social movements for social (in)justice and politics in the era of social media" (p.1). Their work suggests TikTok is a valuable tool for social advocacy and political messages through "practices like hashtagging, commenting, sharing and interactive creation of contents enabled by functions like duets, scattered voices become connected" (Lee and Abidin, 2023, p.3). By this, it is suggested that the "scattered" individual is rendered a community member within the app due to its mimetic culture memetic behaviours. Such a discussion is supported by Şot (2022) who considers two core reasons why users post on the platform: (1) "individuals choose TikTok to foster intimacies" (p.1490) and (2) "users connect seemingly contradictory concepts of intimacy and algorithms in their choices of TikTok" (p.1490). What is particularly interesting here is the unlikely intertwining of algorithms and intimacy felt by TikTok users. The research also concluded that despite users who felt less inclined to capitalise on intimacy, "the reassuring feeling of home and emotional honesty are derivative of invisible recommendation systems which can bring together like-minded individuals" (Şot, 2022, p.1504). Castillo et al. (2023) highlighted TikTok's capacity as a tool for civic engagement and suggested how recent studies have observed social media allowing the "creation of alternative narratives to hegemonic discourses as well as access to algorithmic visibility for members of marginalised groups, such as migrants" (p.6).

As a platform, TikTok is predicated on both mimetic and memetic culture. Zulli and Zulli (2022) have discussed how TikTok's imitation culture, or *mimesis,* has perpetuated the growth of a new community known as Imitation Publics. Mimetic attitude refers to replicative and imitative

behaviour, a notion which Zulli and Zulli (2022) regard as "the basis of sociality" (p.1873) on TikTok. Where mimetic behaviour is based on imitation, *memetic* behaviour on TikTok can be seen as a by-product of this. Memes are "multimodal online artefacts that are circulated through imitation, competition, and transformation" (Zeng et al. 2020, p.3217). Thus, memetic behaviour refers to the more specific endorsement of these artefacts. Memetic theory "explains the development of culture through the imitation of things: ideas, behaviours, and styles that are encoded as *memes* so they can be easily imitated" (Mimetic Theory, 2024). This can be done through engaging with wider-app trends, challenges or role play.

Darvin (2022) considers the endorsement of mimetic cultures on TikTok, and the fundamental lack of identity that the app fosters, focusing on the virality of select videos rather than encouraging interaction with the content creators themselves. Through a multimodal discourse analysis of popular Hong Kong TikTokers, Darvin (2022) assesses their ability to override TikTok's mimetic culture and retain their Hong Kong identity. Such a finding emphasises an affinity amongst users that were able to formulate a community together. Although discussing the community that has been fostered by an unwillingness to succumb to TikTok's mimetic culture, Darvin (2022) also observes the systematic makeup of the platform itself. He claims that "Rather than encouraging users to connect with others or share lived experiences, TikTok prioritizes the consumption of content that is conducive for imitation and links replication to user profitability, made possible through the acquisition of followers and video likes" (Darvin, 2022, p.2). Darvin (2022) suggests the interplay of the platform's affordances to be understood as a "negotiation of designs", a notion he explains as "the platform design which indexes the sociotechnical purposes of app developers and software engineers and

the user design which involves the assembly of semiotic resources that enable users to achieve their own intentions" (p.1).

Perhaps most valuable to this review of relevant literature is the work of Tom Divon. His work offers a key insight into the concept of a community he calls "Playful Publics" at work in the sphere of 'Playful Activism'. In his chapter in "Critical Meme Reader", Divon demonstrates and analyses the practical basis of Playful Publics, more specifically their visibility on Israeli-Palestinian TikTok. Divon (2022) suggests the affordances and features of TikTok "enable users to become activists, politically engaged 'in a format that is entertaining, educational, and palatable among their peers.' In other words, it is TikTok's memetic architecture that renders networked crowds into Playful Publics" (p.91). Divon (2022) observes that duet challenges, where users react or reply to an original video where both versions can be viewed in conjunction, create "fellowship by allowing users to negotiate modes of play" (p.93). Given the multi-modal makeup of the app, Divon (2022) observes users utilising what he describes as TikTok's "play tools" (p.94). In the videos analysed, many users utilised the green screen feature to position themselves in relevant holy sites, such as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, or expressing outcry by positioning themselves at refugee camps in Gaza (Divon, 2022, pp.94-95). Divon (2022) observes that duets such as these demonstrate the ability of 'Playful Publics' on the platform to "identify the 'meme-worthiness' of content while turning it into an available 'cultural repertoire of vernacular video'" (p.96). Furthermore, Divon (2022) highlights the replicability and mutability of these memetic challenges as opening "possibilities for play, subversion, the personalization of politics, and collective affect" (p.102). Fundamentally, as echoed by Divon (2022), TikTok's multi-modal format and unique affordances facilitate possibilities for activism and social change.

The growth and endorsement of social media platforms such as TikTok have facilitated with it an emergence and growth of, as Hautea et al. (2021) define, an "affective public" (p.1). First coined by Papacharissi (2015), an affective public is "networked publics that are mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment" (p. 311). Hautea et al. (2021) discuss, through an exploratory multimodal discourse analysis of a sample of climate change related TikTok videos, "...how affordances of visibility, editability, and association facilitate the formation of affective publics on TikTok" (p.1). The research suggests a popular opinion: social media activism, despite being a less focused way of promoting activism, can provide spaces for fruitful discussion and awareness of respective political or social plights that, ordinarily, would not be discussed to such an extent. While Hautea et al. (2021) considers climate change, it is certainly relevant to similar activist efforts present in the Israel-Palestine war. Hautea et al. (2021) appears to work against the views of Darvin (2022); they claim that despite the mimetic themes that present themselves on the platform, users on TikTok are still able to maintain their own individualistic identities. Furthermore, they suggest TikTok to be fostering a unique type of activism that helps "non-expert users intervene in a discussion that generally takes place among scientists and journalists" (Hautea et al. 2021, p.1).

The systematic makeup of TikTok has evidently influenced the platform's ability for mobilising social activism. A particularly interesting finding lies within Issar (2023), which focuses on the somewhat unique affordance of TikTok's algorithmic setup. The article analyses 100 TikTok videos and "evaluates how variations in TikTok users' levels of "algorithm awareness" affect their understanding of the platform's algorithm" (Issar, 2023, p.1). Fundamentally, Issar (2023) provides key insight into the internal workings of the app itself, proving that the content engaged with the most by a user, will be the content that will continue to

reappear on their FYP. Such a statement is evidenced again by Zhao and Abidin (2023) who studied the "Fox Eye" challenge on TikTok; a trend that encouraged users to wear specific styles of makeup to achieve almond-shaped eyes, or "fox eyes" often accompanied with a "migraine pose". Zhao and Abidin (2023) coin "gesticular activism" to describe a focusing "on the generation of visibility and virality as awareness-building and consciousness-raising tactics" (p.1). Fundamentally, they note the "aestheticization of audiovisual narratives are foundational for meme production, trend sustenance, and the circulation (and contestation) of activist discourse on TikTok" (Zhao and Abidin, 2023, p.12).

In considering TikTok cultures as a way of mobilising activism, it is essential to recognise its limitations, ones that can often be problematic. Due to its accessible nature, the affordances of TikTok allow for both journalists and unqualified users to coexist in the same space, arguably making all users subject to becoming citizen journalists. Indeed, a notion that can be viewed positively as contributive to a fruitful current affairs sphere, it can also be seen as indicative of the spread of misinformation. Negreira et al. (2022) look at the increasing blurring of boundaries between journalists and TikTok influencers; their study considers the rising self-branding rhetoric as something potentially problematic. They observe journalists adapting "their presence to the TikTok social media logic, seeking a space of influence on a platform that is the natural habitat of younger generations" (Negreira et al. 2022, p.146). As the qualified and unqualified coexist together in one sphere with access to equal affordances as the other, the spread of misinformation is possible. Such a notion is explored by Sidorenko Bautista et. al (2021) who insist on an improvement in media literacy and civic responsibility to help combat future misinformation. Their study views TikTok as presenting high levels of potential for

combating misinformation, but an improvement on current verification agencies on the platform should accompany this.

3.3 Palestine and Israeli TikTok

The review of the literature will now proceed to focus on more specific studies in relation to Palestine Israel TikTok and the subsequent spread of hate speech that has emerged as a result. Building on the concept of 'Playful Activism', examples of TikTok trends endorsed by either side in the conflict will be particularly valuable to discerning how the platform's affordances are used to their respective advantages. Through analysing a sample of hashtagged #freepalestine videos on TikTok, Cervi and Marín-Lladó's (2022) article, focuses on how the youth of Palestine in particular "...use this network to construct their narratives through playful performances…" (Cervi and Marín-Lladó, 2022, p.414). The work looks at the pro-Palestinian anthem "*Dammi Felestini*", as central to much of #freepalestine TikTok which utilises the lip-syncing affordance of the platform, something which they argue, is representative of a search for visibility. Fundamentally, in their view, the specific coproduction nature of TikTok "has transformed both Palestinians and their (already existing or new) sympathizers, into concurrent storytellers and story receivers, able to "consume" and "transport" their narratives, discourses and ideologies through the digitally connected space…" (Cervi and Marín-Lladó, 2022, p.428).

Similar to this, Cervi and Divon's (2023) multimodal analysis of 500 TikTok videos posted with the hashtag #gazaunderattack during the escalation of violence in May 2021 found three memetic templates, or "challenges"; "(1) lip-syncing, (2) duets, and (3) point-of-view" (Cervi and Divon, 2023, p.1). Again, facilitated by the app's culture of mimesis and imitation, the study discusses how "users are liberated to play with their "civic imagination" finding

alternatives to their socio-political hardships like the act of smiling instead of being overcome by fear, the possibility to crop out the authority figure from their meme…" (Cervi and Divon, 2023, p.10). Fundamentally, according to Cervi and Divon (2023), such challenges prove TikTok's ability to normalise the notion that "political engagement can be an everyday activity or even a play, allowing ordinary users novel forms of dialogue around emerging current events by harnessing memetic templates as their political instruments" (p.10).

Much of the consulted literature, like Yarchi and Boxman-Shabtai (2023), found that videos shared for both the Israeli side and the Palestinian, echoed different themes, with victimisation being commonplace on the Israeli side, and the endorsement of personal narratives being more common on the Palestinian side. Despite this, their found that pro-Palestine activists were far more successful in gaining civic engagement on their posts in comparison to the strategic pro-Israeli users (Yarchi and Boxman-Shabtai, 2023). This study in particular highlights that despite access to the same affordances on the app, civic engagement wavers considerably with regards to the type of affordances that are chosen by a given user.

Alternatively, the spread of hate speech and racism is unfortunately commonplace on all modern social media platforms, some academics suggest racism to be facilitated by the TikTok's inherent structure. Divon and Ebbrecht-Hartmann (2022) considers the memeification of antisemitism on TikTok and the app's willingness or unwillingness to block offensive content on its platform. The authors highlight the capability of hate speech being able to be spread particularly quickly on the platform, something they attribute to TikTok's infrastructure which "encourages trending audiovisual memes or videos that are "geared toward imitation and replication" (Divon and Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2022, p.49). The chapter also suggests TikTok as a

platform encourages its users to "memeify antisemitism utilising the platform's trends and aesthetics" (Divon and Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2022, p.47).

The growth of antisemitism amongst social media spheres since to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is undeniable (Yale Insights, 2023). Islamophobia too has risen as a result of the conflict (Al-Jazeera, 2023). However, some literature suggests that racist ideology is embedded within the TikTok algorithm. Weimann and Masri (2021) analyses data collected from 2020-2021 and found videos were alarmingly high in antisemitic content. A study by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) in 2021, found that in 78 antisemitic comments sent directly to Jewish users, TikTok "failed to act against 76% of antisemitic abuse" (Weimann and Masri, 2021, p.701). When TikTok did become proactive, the platform only tended to remove individual abusive comments rather than banning users themselves. Weimann and Masri (2021) describe these findings as indicating the need of "an empirical, systematic, and objective study of TikTok's use for antisemitic propaganda, incitement, and hate" (p.701). Like such findings, the research conducted by González-Esteban et al. (2023) analysed through data extracted from TikTok videos to what extent young audiences are informed about the complex information arising from the Israel-Palestine conflict during the month of October 2023. Looking at videos with at least 60 likes, the researchers considered whether hate speech was present in the video and whether there was a position evident for the conflict (pro-Palestinian, pro-Israel, or neutral). It was found that "One-third of the comments analysed (34.1%) had xenophobic speech and were significantly Islamophobic (27.5%) and, to a lesser extent, anti-Semitic (6.9%)" (González-Esteban et al. 2023, p.10). Results such as these provide evidence for the presence of both Islamophobic and Antisemitic hate speech on the platform. Ultimately, whilst each consulted source holds differing levels of value for my overriding research question, the wide range of

literature points to new areas of research which I will aim to answer during the course of my

project.

4. Methodology

My project seeks to answer the following primary research question:

1. *"Playful Activism?" How is TikTok utilised for the representation of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict?'*

In conjunction with the following sub-questions:

1.1 "Which unique affordances were utilised within the platform?"

1.2 "To what extent was hate speech identified within the comments sections?"

Fundamentally, my research aims to discern the relationship between mimetic culture on the video-sharing app TikTok through the lens of 'Playful Activism' with regards to the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict. Furthermore, my work aims to identify trends which occur underneath given search terms and observe which of the app's affordances are endorsed by creators. Here, I will outline the basis and reasons behind my research design, and the process in which data was coded and collected. Perpetuated from research designs of relevant scholars in the discussed literature in the review, my research methodology framework is inspired by a range of previous literature. Additionally, intertwined throughout this chapter are essential methodology scholarly critiques. The final subsection of this chapter will detail the potential limitations of my chosen methodology and will focus on the ethical considerations of my research.

4.1 Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA)

Qualitative research frameworks focus on "*meaning*, both as an object of study and as an explanatory concept" (Jensen, 2012, p.266). Machin (2013) has identified "discourses, patterns and wider trends can be communicated through a wide range of entertainment media in the social

and material culture of day-to-day life" (p.347). Thus, when considering platforms such as TikTok which demonstrate a multitude of semiotic and lexical discourses and meanings, methods which take on a multimodal intention can facilitate a wider breadth of analysis and discussion. Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) is a conglomerate of wider studies which "offers the promise of showing exactly what features of language, what language choices, have been used to accomplish particular kinds of communicative aims" (Hansen and Machin, 2019, p.116). It is important to highlight the separation between much earlier Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) and the newer MCDA. Where critical discourse analysis allows for "a more systematic analysis of texts and language" (Hansen and Machin, 2019, p.116) than a research method based exclusively in the quantitative sector, MCDA requires analysis to demonstrate how "different semiotic resources are deployed to communicate values and identities" (Machin, 2013, p.348). As a result, MCDA as a research framework works with an ever-diversifying media sphere.

As "promotional culture itself has become more sophisticated" (Machin, 2013, p.348), the need for the development of tools which can better discuss non-linguistic forms of communication and identities, has arisen. The work of Kress and Van Leeuwen has identified a shift in analysis amongst the field of linguistics and communications from monomodality whereby identified modes often worked individually, to multimodality, where the analysis of lexical trends takes a more holistic approach (Machin, 2013). TikTok's makeup as a multimodally rich video-sharing app predicated on an algorithmic foundation demonstrates many unique affordances which the earlier literature review has detailed, and the findings chapters will go on to discuss. Thus, MCDA is able to facilitate data sampling and analysis which can then

fully discern the value of these affordances as well as identify the non-linguistic markers and messages these features lend themselves to.

4.2 Data sampling and analysis

My study will take on the form of MCDA which focuses on users' endorsement of the unique affordances on the video-sharing app TikTok in response to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The research framework and data sampling involved the qualitative analysis of 40 videos which followed from the application of search terms "Attack on Israel" and "Free Palestine" to the TikTok search engine. Identical filters were also applied to both search terms which included videos being sorted by relevance, under all video categories and content which was posted within the previous seven days (see appendix). For four weeks on a Sunday from 28 April to 19 May 2024, a sample of the ten most relevant videos were documented weekly, five under each search term. In addition to video sampling, the top three comments on each video were also documented to search for the presence or lack of hate speech. It was theorised that through this method, any identifiable mimetic trends and patterns would be more up to date and occur more in-line with the development of the ongoing conflict.

As discussed in the literature review, Cervi and Divon (2023) is particularly pertinent to my own research. They define their methodology as a multimodal content analysis which "focused on layers of spoken and written language, still and moving images, sound, gesture, body posture, movement" (Cervi and Divon, 2023, p.5). Inspired by Shifman's (2014) idea of "memes as interconnected micro-units of knowledge that illuminate macro-narratives of social groups" (Cervi and Divon, 2023, p.5), this study is triumphant in both lexical and visual semiotic analysis. Whilst Cervi and Divon's study grounds their framework in a content analysis, my

qualitative research seeks to discern the types of affordances endorsed by TikTok users as well as trends amongst comment sections. Fundamentally, MCDA will facilitate the discernment of how video-sharing platforms such as TikTok are utilised to represent conflict, but to also understand trends in the spread of hate speech online.

My research also takes inspiration from Cervi and Divon (2023) with regards to how my data will be organised pre-analysis. In their study, following the search term #gazaunderattack, Cervi and Divon (2023) categorised their content by "video ID, date of posting, duration, background music, captioned hashtags, types of features used, comments, views, shares, and likes" (p.5). Similarly, my data will be organised under the following sectors: unique video ID code, link to original video, date video was searched, sensitivity warning, length of video, like count, comment numbers, shares, audio, caption, and top three comments. Video ID codes were organised based on the search terms, with FP standing for "Free Palestine" and AI standing for "Attack on Israel", then detailing the video number for the content searched thus far, for example, FP1. Full video spreadsheets will also be available in the appendices.

Like Cervi and Divon's study, the work of Hautea et al. (2021), although predicated upon a far different subject matter, employs a similar methodology. Through an exploratory multimodal discourse analysis of popular climate change hashtagged TikTok videos, the study examines "how affordances of visibility, editability, and association facilitate the formation of affective publics on TikTok" (Hautea et al. 2021, p.1). The study credits such a multimodal approach as being exclusively focused on "complex meaning making processes achievable only through close attention to the interaction among the combination of communicative affordances available through the TikTok platform" (Hautea et al. 2021, p.4). My research intends on observing something similar; it is through a multimodal approach that can facilitate

such a breadth and depth of critical observation of both visual and verbal discourses.

4.3 Limitations of the methodology

Ledin and Machin (2017) have identified that multimodality studies do not employ terms consistently. This limitation is conducive to the "expansion of new terminology which remains largely isolated and untested rather than developing and refining clear, defendable concepts" (Ledin and Machin, 2017, pp.62-63). The risk of conducting research under a modern framework can bring about a transitional space whereby terminology is not necessarily fixed in its earliest iterations, which can lead to uncertainty and confusion when analysing content multimodally. It should be recommended for future studies to be made in the field of multimodality to tackle this limitation.

4.4 Ethical considerations

Despite my research being carried out exclusively on content already based in the public domain, there are still essential ethical issues that need to be mitigated for. Firstly, the creators whose videos I intend to analyse have not consented to be researched on, thus it is essential to anonymise the usernames of relevant videos. I intend on anonymising content in a similar fashion to the method carried out by Cervi and Divon (2023). In their study, when photographic evidence of the sampled videos was included in the main body of the paper, any identifiable features were blacked out. My own process of anonymisation takes a similar path whereby I will also be blacking out creator's usernames and profile pictures. Additionally, I will be blacking out creator's eyes when evidence of the users themselves are included in the paper to help mitigate the risks of other identifiable features. My research data will be safely stored in a password

protected One Drive where each screen recorded video that has influenced my study will be

given a unique video code.

5. Findings, Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Video organisation and search terms

Each of the 40 TikTok videos analysed were found as a result of identical search terms (see appendix), whereby results were sorted by relevance, under all video categories and limited to content that was posted in the previous seven days. Twenty videos were collected using the search term "Free Palestine" and another 20 were collected using the search term "Attack on Israel". To mitigate the risk of missing potentially valuable pieces of content, these wider search terms were used. The content was sought between the dates of 28 April 2024 and 19 May 2024. Five videos under each search term, ten total, were collected weekly on a Sunday to generate the most relevant videos for that week. Each of the forty videos were organised under the following categories:

    i.   Unique Video ID
    ii.   Hyperlink to original video
    iii.   Date Searched
    iv.   Date of original video
    v.   Sensitivity warning?
    vi.   Length of Video
    vii.   Likes
    viii.   Comments
    ix.   Shares
    x.   Sound
    xi.   Caption
    xii.   Top 3 comments

(See appendix for full spreadsheet breakdown and results)

5.2 Wider events and context during content collection

The videos generated under the "Free Palestine" search term were varied. The results suggest a significant shift from the originally identified 'Playful Activism', to much less trend-based content. In this study, the specific affordances unique to the app itself were utilised much less;

rather, creators simply posting current affairs content hoped to gain enough traction for their respective videos to go viral.

Many of the videos found under the ascribed search terms related to protests occurring on university campuses. Walkouts at Columbia University, UCLA and Virginia Tech were all documented, with creators demanding for the executives at their respective institutions to cut ties with Israeli companies and institutions because of the ongoing massacres along the Gaza strip. As of 3 May 2024, more than 2,000 demonstrators across 130 colleges and universities in the US had been arrested as a result of these protests (BBC, 2024). The timeline of content collection also worked concurrently with Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's decision to begin a military offensive in the city of Rafah on 6th May 2024. Indeed, the events of 7 October 2023 were far from the beginning of the Israel/Hamas conflict, the progression of the conflict into 2024 demonstrated the rise of a social media resistance which thus gave the conflict more publicity than ever.

Also held during the timeline of content collection was the annual Met Gala in New York City, on the 6 May 2024. Much of the collected content depicted protestors demonstrating against the fundamental ignorance of the "elite" attending the Gala, without raising awareness for the tragic state of the Middle East (video FP14, see appendix). Specifically, many creators expressed that Gala attendees were well positioned to increase awareness of the conflict, spread vital information, and provide financial aid thereby assisting in lobbying for a ceasefire. May 2024 also marked the finale of the annual Eurovision Song Contest. Significant controversy arose from executives' decisions to allow Israel to take part in the contest, particularly as Russia had been denied entry in both 2021 and 2022, first for violating the European Broadcasting Union's press freedom rules, and later, due to their invasion of Ukraine (ABC, 2024). Events

such as the Met Gala and the Eurovision Song Contest provide an insightful wider backdrop in assessing the range of videos, more specifically in the realm of the "elite" making little effort to combat Israel's actions.

5.3 "Attack on Israel"

<u>Utilised affordances of the app</u>

Twenty of the documented videos followed from applying the term "Attack on Israel" to the TikTok search engine. While both the Palestinian search term and the Israeli search term aimed to create two sets in the type of content, results for the Israeli search terms were still overwhelmingly pro-Palestinian. Akin to the Free Palestine videos, the most relevant Israeli results strayed away from endorsing mainstream trends. Instead, they generally provided facts much more directly. This finding set out a new trend whereby users deliberately relied on factual content to ensure their videos gained traction over trends or challenges. Most activist content tended to be in the style of factual reporting. For example, video AI1 comprises of a set of images from the Israeli counterattack in Iran on 21 April 2024 in addition to a voiceover detailing Israeli military tactics. Video AI1 held a like count of 2,806, a considerably small amount in comparison to other videos that were documented. This is evidently a testament to TikTok's search engine makeup whereby the filter "most relevant" can be applied to searches, thus showing videos most applicable to search terms.
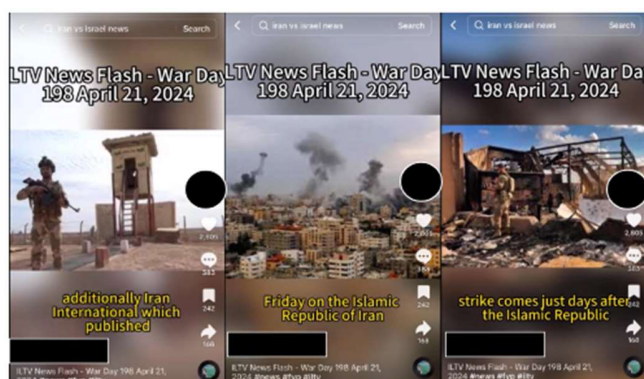
Figure 1: A news-flash style video utilising concurrent video collages to report on the Israeli counterattack on Iran on 21 April 2024 (See AI1 in appendix).

As was typical across results, many of the videos were shares from previous reports by traditional news outlets such as CNN, Channel 4 and Al-Jazeera in the recent days. This finding suggests that TikTok's search engine indeed generates international content to a degree, however the majority of results across both search terms were Westernised with a hieghtened preence of American-centric content. As an app, TikTok identifies a user's location through their IP address, thus automatically setting an account's region (GigaFact, 2023).

With regards to the utilised affordances of the app, several videos endorsed some of the unique and exclusive characteristics of TikTok's makeup. Most popular in the "Attack on Israel" videos were stitches, whereby creators would first share a snippet of another creator's video and then proceed to respond to it. Stitches proved especially popular when discussing Israel's move into Rafah on 6 May 2024. Where stitches allow for a sequential move between an original video into the stitched content, duets allow for both videos to be played simultaneously through a side-by-side view on screen. Videos AI4 and AI14 both stitch and duet with other creators' videos which discuss the potential catastrophic reality if Israel invaded Rafah. Whilst video AI14 does

indeed utilise the duet feature, the user does not respond to the original creator's video. A result such as this indicates the stitch feature to be comparable to traditional reposting tools.
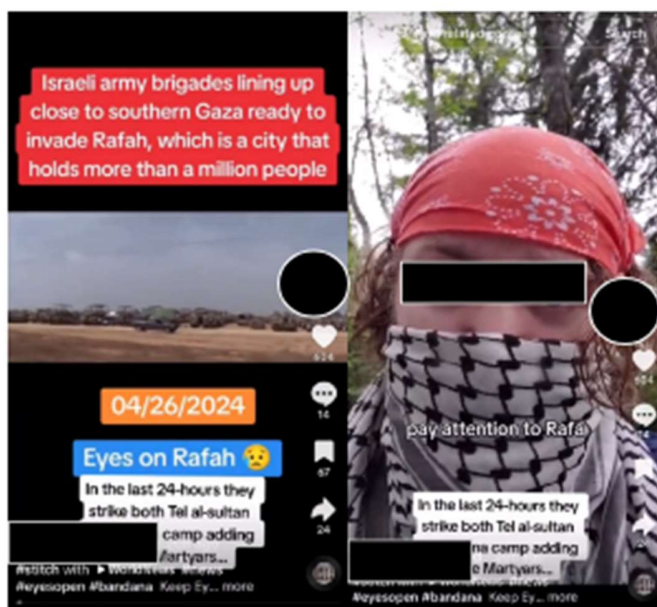

Figure 2: A creator using the stitch feature to respond to a previous post regarding Israeli military preparations to invade Rafah; the creator urges people to "pay attention to Rafah". (See AI4 in appendix).
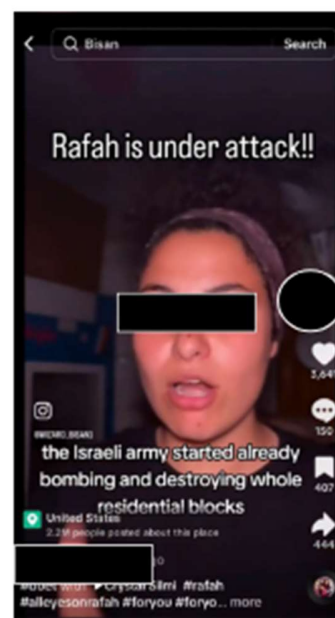
Figure 3: A creator uses the duet feature in a reposting style to share a previous creator's video which urges people to recognise the dangers of Israel's invasion into Rafah (See AI14 in appendix).

As illustrated above, stitches and duets allow for a coherent flow between one video to another; a stitch acts as a "response" whereby a creator could potentially further enforce, share or publicly disagree with another creator's content. In this case, AI4 demonstrates a stitch with footage showing Israeli Army brigades lining up near southern Gaza preparing to invade Rafah. AI4 also includes subtitles, where the creator stitching urges those watching to maintain "all eyes on Rafah" as well as paying continuing attention to Palestine.

The green screen feature is another utilised affordance of the app. As the feature name suggests, the green screen allows for a photo or video to act as a backdrop for a creator's video. As the subject matter is made visible on screen, aesthetically, the feature can often boost the emotive nuances of a video. For example, videos AI2, AI9 and AI15 each used the green screen feature. The creator displayed in video AI2 speaks in front of a green screen showing a selection of major news headlines from outlets such as the New York Post and CNN, one of which being titled "Tensions are so high at Columbia ahead of Passover that all classes will be virtual today" and another claiming "Jewish New Yorkers blindsided by Iran's attack on Israel: 'I'm scared for my family'" (AI2). The creator in AI2 opens the video with these green screen headlines and proceeds to insist that Jewish Americans should be outraged that U.S. mainstream media are portraying their communities as weak and fearful rather than generating pride in their community. Furthermore, the video continues to insist a widespread opinion that current genocide is being done in the name of "The Zionist", rendering the ordinary Jew complicit in genocide by default.
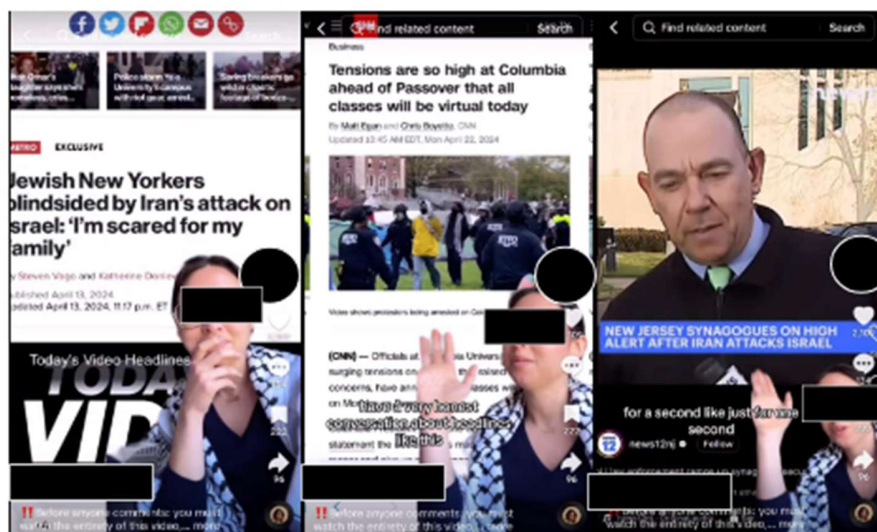

Figure 4: A creator uses the green screen feature to show three major news headlines which suggest Jewish American communities to be weak and fearful (See AI2 in appendix).

Videos AI9 and AI15 also utilise the green screen feature to add emotive nuances to their content. Video AI9 uses a screenshot from an image posted on X (formerly known as Twitter) as a green screen which displays the beginning of the Israeli military offensive in Rafah under the Netanyahu government, whereby the city is already burning. Video AI15's use of the green screen displays a map which shows the difficulty of humanitarian aid being able to access Gaza since the crossing was seized by the Israeli military. The green screen feature is particularly useful in contexts such as these to depict geographical locations, war efforts and the catastrophic effects of widespread conflict. Photojournalism during international conflict can illicit affective responses from those that observe it (Aiello and Parry, 2020). Through displaying images of war, it has been suggested that three modes of spectatorship can be highlighted (Aiello and Parry, 2020). Mortensen and Trenz (2016) identify the presence of the emotional observer, the critical observer and the reflexive spectator as a result of visual icons on social media (Aiello and Parry, 2020). Whilst the creator in AI2 embodies the characteristics of the reflexive spectator "who acts as a meta-observer scrutinizing the media coverage and other users' comments" (Aiello and Parry, 2020, p.213), the creators in AI9 and AI15 are critical observers who link "their emotional reaction to questions of justice and political responsibility" (Aiello and Parry, 2020, p.213). Ultimately, green screen usage can deploy a wide emotional response through a reliance on visual semiotics.
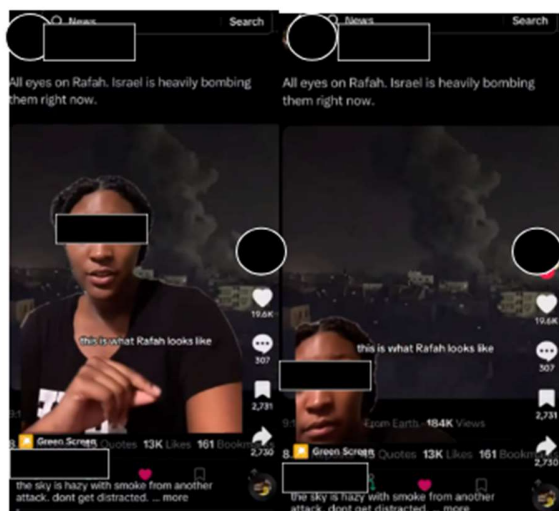
Figure 5: A creator uses the green screen feature to display an X post showing the devastation caused by the beginning of the Israeli military offensive in Rafah (See AI9 in appendix).
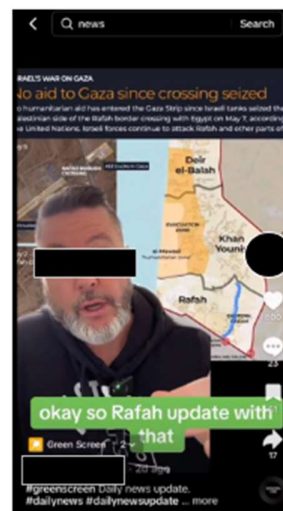
Figure 6: A creator uses the green screen feature to show a map which illustrates the lack of humanitarian aid being able to reach Gaza since the crossing was seized by Israeli military officials (See AI15 in appendix).

Comments and presence of hate speech

The algorithmic makeup of TikTok also feeds into comment sections. Comments on TikTok are not organised chronologically. Rather, they are sorted based on the amount of interaction a given comment receives. This can be done based on the comment's number of replies, likes or its general relevance. The higher the number of comments on a given video, the more likely it is that TikTok's algorithm will begin recommending it to other users on their FYPs (Issar, 2023; Arora, 2024). The comment section can often be a compelling and fruitful space for users to discuss certain topics. Particularly in the realm of politics and current affairs, higher levels of comments have become a key indicator as to whether a video is worth engaging with due its popularity.

Whilst comments sections can be utilised for debate and education, hate speech and abuse are extremely common (Siegel, 2020). Despite TikTok claiming its software can identify and

remove comments which violate their community guidelines (TikTok Safety Centre, 2024), this is often not the case in the collected data. Comapared to the "Free Palestine" videos, levels of hate speech increased significantly under the "Attack on Israel" videos, despite the search term being an effort in attempting to find support for both communities. Most commonly, the term Zionist was used both in video captions and comment sections to describe Jewish student protestors, Jewish celebrities and when referring to Israeli military officials. Defined as an "international movement originally for the establishment of a Jewish national or religious community in Palestine and later for the support of modern Israel" (Merriam Webster, 2024), Zionism can often be conflated with the ordinary Jewish man. For example, video AI11 details a Channel 4 News interview with the EU's foreign affairs chief, Josep Borrell, in response to Israel's decision to launch strikes on Rafah. Borrell expresses the bleak reality that such an attack will now lead to a new humanitarian aid crisis in Gaza. One of the top comments on video AI11 reads as follows:

> "USA & UK are terrorist nations led by Zionists that supports the war mongering apartheid criminal terrorist regime of Israel" (comment on video AI11, see appendix).

Fundamentally, Zionism has become a flexible phrase used to describe any individual showing support in any degree to the Netanyahu government. As such, the view on the regular Jewish man is arguably worsened as a result of an umbrella term being applied to an entire community, Jewish or not, or if they even support the Israeli government:

> "Jews, Israel is attacking Rafah! Jews continue to commit atrocities and genocide Palestine" (comment on video AI13, see appendix).
>
> "Every Zionist is a nut job" (comment on video AI16, see appendix).

Comment abuse levels were also unsurprisingly higher in the Israeli content. Video AI10 displays an interview with Jewish-American comedian, Jerry Seinfeld, who discusses a recent

trip to Tel-Aviv. During the interview, Seinfeld talks about the increased levels of antisemitism leading to his decision to visit Israel, which subsequently resulted in him being in the face of a multi-missile attack from Gaza. Whilst some comments thanked Seinfeld for his honesty regarding the current difficulties current Jews are facing, other berated him. One commenter referred to Seinfeld as:

> *"Jerry the genocidal mad dog degenerate low life scumbag lover of mass murder"* (comment on video AI10, see appendix).

Hate speech levels were undeniably high on the Israel-centred videos. However, the vast majority of videos were not about Israelis. Whether this finding was due to a fundamental lack of pro-Israeli content, or TikTok's search engine providing the most interacted with videos, is unknown. Comments on a large majority of videos aligned with comments from the Palestinian content I will go onto discuss:

> *"Horrific all eyes on Rafah. Thank you for sharing this"* (comment on video AI9, see appendix).
>
> *"All eyes on Rafah! free Palestine!!"* - (comment on video AI12, see appendix).
>
> *"All eyes on Rafah! Everyone do all the things on the video to amplify!"* (comment on video AI14, see appendix).

The Israeli centric results challenge an existing narrative which notes TikTok users' engagement in self-censorship to override TikTok's community guideline features. Social media users claim that their posts with certain hashtags such as #FreePalestine or #IStandWith Palestine, censored and/or shadowbanned by TikTok itself (Al-Jazeera, 2023). Shadowbans "block users or individual pieces of content without letting the offending user know they've been blocked" (Builtin, 2023). Where words such as genocide, murder and other sets of profanity were used in the given results comment sections, TikTok did not seem to hide the video itself. This finding

could also be attributed to the brief time frame of seven days since the video was posted, suggesting TikTok's welfare detecting software to be timeframe dependent. Similarly, out of all "Attack on Israel" videos, there were no sensitivity warnings present, an affordance which TikTok allegedly employ to protect the wider user community (TikTok, 2024). Although this is a responsibility of the creators themselves to employ on their own videos, it is however a compelling finding that TikTok itself did not flag any of the videos as sensitive content.

5.4 "Free Palestine"

Utilised affordances of the app

The twenty other documented videos were collected from applying the term "Free Palestine" to the TikTok search engine. The term has become a popular choice for pro-Palestinian activists protesting the ongoing conflict, thus suggesting the most relevant videos would be visible because of this slogan. Results were indeed varied, however across a large majority of the results, it was apparent that videos tended to endorse more "traditional" affordances of social media; meaning that the endorsement of the unique features more exclusive to TikTok were superseded by tools such as audio, written captions and hashtags which generally are more applicable to older social media platforms (Bucher and Helmond, 2018).

The content from pro-Palestinian creators tended to centre around students at various universities and colleges, predominately in the U.S. As aforementioned, college and university sit-ins advocating for citizens in Gaza became increasingly more commonplace during the content collection period and my results evidently worked in conjunction with these wider events. Results demonstrated that young adults, particularly those affiliated with higher education institutions, tended to be the most invested in campaigning for Palestinian freedom. A

particularly common video style under these results were clips of creators at graduation ceremonies walking across the stage with a Palestinian flag in hand to collect their degree certificates. I argue that videos such as these gained so much traction due to their utmost defiance of university graduation policies, thus contributing to popular rebellion rhetoric on TikTok. For example, video FP16 shows a student walking across the graduation stage holding a Palestinian flag; on screen the words "The use of signs, posters and flags is prohibited. This will be strictly enforced.", can be seen. This statement is followed by the words "We will not be silenced". This creator demonstrates the necessity for challenging those in positions of power to spread the vital message of Palestinian freedom. Video FP16 demonstrates something similar, whereby a student uses her graduation as a moment to show affinity to the Palestinian people by wearing a Palestinian flag as she walks across the stage to collect her degree.
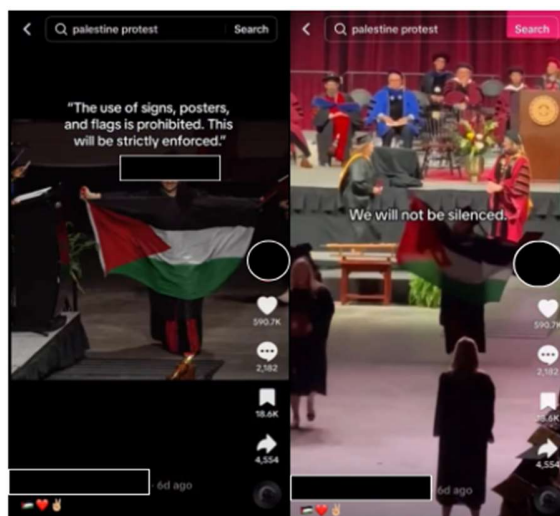

Figure 7: A student utilising concurrent video collages to show refusal to adhere to graduation policies by holding a Palestinian flag as she crosses the stage to collect her degree (See FP16 in appendix).
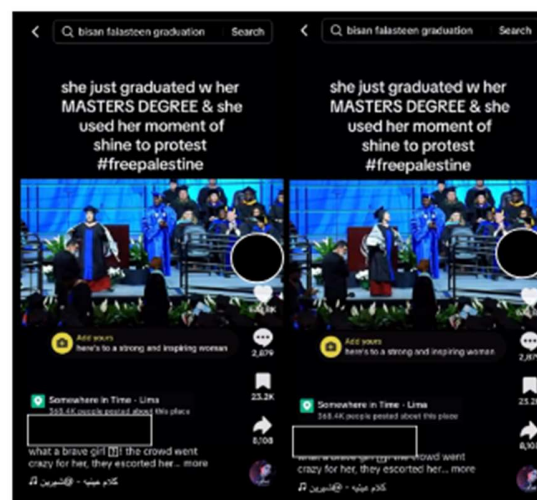
Figure 8: A student using her graduation as a moment to show affinity to the Palestinian people by wearing a Palestinian flag as she walks across the stage to collect her degree (See FP6 in appendix).

In this essence, TikTok's affordances are relatively disregarded in the face of actual activism and protest. There is neither utilisation of the earlier discussed memetic features of the app, nor is playfulness much of a feature amongst the vast majority of users. Similarly, a large proportion of the collected content showed clips of various student protests across U.S. college and university campuses. Students at Columbia University and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) held some particularly high-profile protests and sit-ins which demonstrated against the ongoing Israeli military offensive into Rafah and the wider conflict. Corroborating the finding of less trend-based content being utilised on the app, videos such as FP2, FP3 and FP9 lean towards a more traditional news-style reporting strategy rather than endorsing the visual and audio effects TikTok is originally known for.
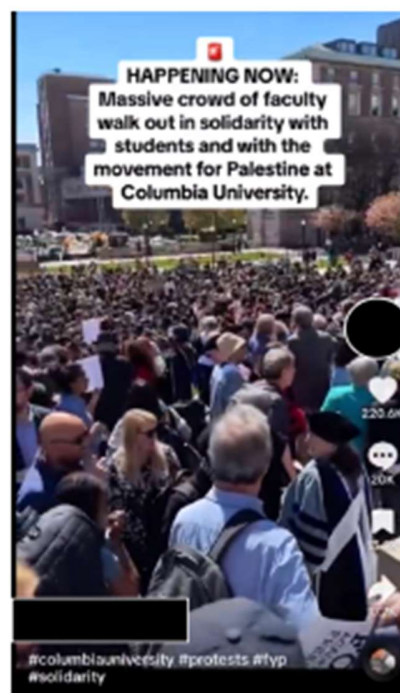

Figure 9: A creator captures the moment a crowd of faculty staff walk out in solidarity with pro-Palestinian protesters at Columbia University (See FP2 in appendix).

Figure 10: A creator utilises both the concurrent video and photo collage features on TikTok to depict UCLA health staff walking out in solidarity with pro-Palestinian student protestors and to document various protestor signs on campus which call for the end of "genocide funding" (See FP3 in appendix).

Figure 11: A creator documents the widespread UCLA community protesting for the freedom of the Palestinian people in Gaza (See FP9 in appendix).

This more direct strategy of video-sharing suggests activist activity to be much less playful in its delivery. Although not directly endorsing typical TikTok trends, a key finding amongst the content generated by the "Free Palestine" search term were creators choosing to trend certain audios, thus making similar content appear on user's For You Pages (FYP's). Video FP18 demonstrates such a finding. The French creator uses a mere fifteen-second audio, in this case the rapper Macklemore 's song "Hind's Hall", to boost and trend the content which focuses on Palestinian freedom. "Hind's Hall", a rap song released in May 2024, was written in response to the student movement in the U.S. following the Israeli attack on Gaza. The rap demonstrates Macklemore's solidarity not only with the Palestinian people but also with the students protesting

for their freedom; the piece has become a popular anthem for Palestinian content on TikTok and other social media platforms. In the case of video FP18, the on-screen caption is in French, however translated into English it reads as follows:

"If you are not able to take 15 seconds to make a tiktok in private while you have been scrolling for 1 hour, question yourself 🍉Free Palestine🍉" (Video FP18, see appendix)

Figure 12: A creator uses the backing audio of Macklemore's pro-Palestinian rap "Hind's Hall" to ask users why they would not do the same to both trend the audio and to spread awareness of the Palestinian's plight (See FP18 in appendix).

As can be seen above, the creator not only utilises relevant audio to promote their content, but also makes a direct criticism on those who consume it, questioning why other users do not do the same as her if they are able to. Results such as these demonstrate the value of platforms such as TikTok to raise the necessity of group unity and its potential to pressure others into joining them.

Indeed, much of the content demonstrates a movement away from typical TikTok trends; however, it is undeniable that more traditional features of the app, such as dances or makeup tutorials, still exist. As explored by Cervi and Divon (2023) in the literature review, video FP20 shows a popular video style whereby a creator applies makeup looks which depict Palestinian solidarity. In FP20, the audio used is "Tajuk Lagu" written by Nynabukater, a popular audio choice for many of the documented videos.

Figure 13: Creator uses lighting sequentially to mimic the Palestinian flag and to demonstrate makeup styles to visually show affinity to Palestinians (See FP20 in appendix).

The choice of audio is an essential affordance to TikTok's foundational makeup. As can be seen on the bottom right corner of figure 13, users can click on a video's audio and then proceeding, all creators who used that sound on their own posts are made visible:
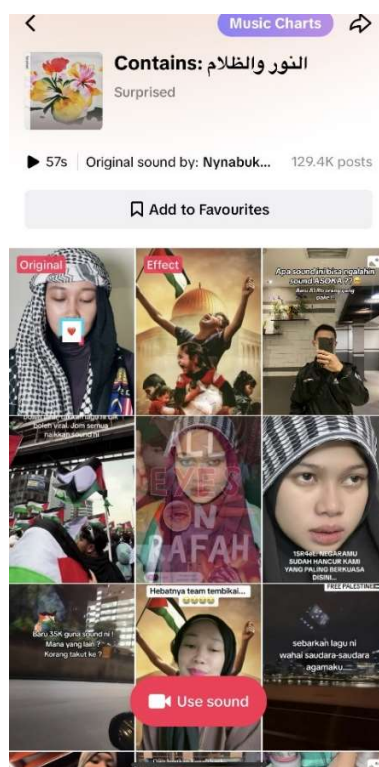
Figure 14: Screenshot of TikTok audio page.

As illustrated above, on clicking the audio on video FP20, "Tajuk Lagu" which is a popular anthem in campaigning for Palestinian resistance, all content posted in conjunction with that audio is made available. Additionally, an option to "use sound" is also made available at the bottom of the screen, furthering previous literature which notes TikTok as an inherently mimetic platform predicated on imitation and trends.

Although FP20 is somewhat indicative of the original memetic and playful nature of the platform; however, the undertones remain sombre and serious. The creator's facial expressions remain stern, and the makeup looks he creates do not mimic the more playful roleplay trends and routines found in earlier videos studied by academics such as Cervi and Divon (2023).

A common theme amongst the pro-Palestinian content found the utilisation of TikTok's video collage feature to spread affinity for Palestinians. Video FP15 is a particularly powerful piece of content, which also held the highest number of likes and shares at 6.2 million and 327,000 respectively at the time of content collection. The video engagingly utilises the feature to make a stark comparison between the opulence of the Met Gala in New York and the real time devastation occurring in Gaza. On screen, the caption "same planet, different worlds" is used to emphasise the apparent ignorance of the Western world to the destruction of the Middle East. By showing the drastically opposing content on screen, the comparative impact of both lifestyles is more compelling.

Figure 15: The video collage feature (read left to right) is utilised by a creator who uses content from celebrities on the red carpet at the MET Gala in New York in conjunction with clips from various news outlets and social media platforms which display the devastation caused by the conflict in Gaza. (See FP15 in appendix).

Fundamentally, the videos collected under the Free Palestine search term appear to represent a deviation from trend-based content explored by academics in the earlier literature

review; content produced now seems to echo the notion that less reliance on unique app affordances is more telling of the subject a creator wants to advocate for. Instead of complex and multimodal videos which endorse many of TikTok's defining features, content tended to air on the end of citizen-journalism based content which remained much more sombre and serious in its delivery.

 Comments and presence of hate speech

The comment sections on the pro-Palestinian videos were overwhelmingly supportive and levels of hate speech were much lower. The use of emojis were much more frequent on these videos and comments generally tended to be much shorter in comparison to the Israeli videos due to their lack of controversy. Typically collected comments often read as follows:

> *"free Palestine in shah Allah Palestine* 😭🙏😭😭😭😭PS🍉🍉🍉🍉*" (comment on video FP5, see in appendix).*
>
> *"from the river to the sea" (comment on video FP19, see appendix).*
>
> *"All eyes on Rafah* 🍉 🍉 🍉 *" (comment on video FP19, see appendix).*
>
> *"boost heart chain* ❤️ ❤️*" (comment on video FP19, see appendix).*

Whilst "All Eyes on Rafah" insisted at the time for people to pay close attention to the city prior to Israel's invasion of it, "From the River to the Sea" is slightly more complex in meaning and its conjoining connotations. It has been suggested that the phrase should be viewed as a violent and exterminationist anti-Israeli threat by ex-UK Home Secretary, Suella Braverman (Al Jazeera, 2023). Originating from the Palestinian Liberation Organization in 1964, the phrase was used as a call for the establishment of "a single state that extended from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea to encompass its historic territories" (Al-Jazeera, 2023). In the context of video FP19 where a creator is trying to trend a certain audio, the phrase should not be considered

threatening in the way other forms of hate speech were identified under the "Attack on Israel" videos.

Levels of hate speech were only ever noted when a video was made in either direct relation to Israeli wrongdoing or Western actors allowing Israel to participate in international events. For example, video FP12 details a crowd at the Eurovision Song Content in May 2024, booing the Israel contestants before the competition had even commenced. The comment section on FP12 was thus much higher in hate speech compared to others:

> *"Where is the safety for Palestinians???? I was a fan before 2024 but now Eurovision can go to hell along with Israel" - (comment on video FP12, see appendix).*

It has been suggested that "when the real-life impact of anti-Zionism results in cries advocating for the killing of Jews, then it can only be understood as antisemitism" (Rutland, 2024). Willing Israel to hell aligns with hate speech of Israel that often conflates it with Jewish people by default.

The comments on video FP18 demonstrate how individuals can utilise the algorithmic makeup of the app itself. Filtered by most relevant, the top three comments on each analysed video demonstrated an ever-growing popularity for users to comment things completely unrelated the video content. The intention of comments such as these is to boost the video algorithmically by filling the comment section, thus placing the video on more user's FYPs. Whilst the video itself focuses on trending an audio for Palestinian freedom, the top comment simply asks:

> *"what time is it?" (comment on video FP18, see appendix).*

whilst the second reads:

> *"22:36" (comment on video FP18, see appendix).*

In general, the use of emojis on the Palestinian videos were much higher in comparison to the Israeli oriented content. This can be attributed to a much lower level of positive comments on the AI videos; where emojis were used it was only ever in the context of pro-Palestinian resistance. The use of emojis can be indicative of "expression of emotion, conveying stances, and negotiating interpersonal alignments" (Logi and Zappavigna, 2023, pp.3222-3223). As TikTok's affordances can lend themselves to non-linguistic semiotics, the use of emojis can be markers and signifiers of wider cultural trends without the need for written language.

In comparison to work carried out by earlier scholars such as Cervi and Divon (2023) and Cervi and Marín-Lladó (2022), pro-Palestinian content veered greatly from the playful network found in earlier studies. Videos focused much less on dance routines and light-hearted trends, instead placing heightened emphasis on making important issues go viral in more traditional ways such as boosting comments and likes.

5.5 Discussion: A shift amongst Playful Publics?

The overarching research question for the study asked how the video-sharing app TikTok was used for the representation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with sub-questions focusing on the levels of hate speech amongst the comment sections and which affordances of the app itself were generally utilised for videos. In summary, my results have detailed an undeniable shift in how users react and respond to conflict and current affairs. Despite using two search terms in the hope of finding widespread opinions, results generally tended to remain overwhelmingly pro-Palestinian, and the unique affordances of the app were not used in the playful manner recognised in earlier studies. In comparison to the transnational results found by Cervi and Divon (2023) in their study, my results were overwhelmingly US dominated by user's geographical

location. Content was less focused on entertainment, rather it was predicated upon civil engagement and genuine activism in the face of conflict in the Middle East.

The findings generated from my study are indicative of a widespread shift from the 'Playful Publics' identified by Cervi and Divon (2023) towards a much more serious realm of activism. The affordances of TikTok as a multimodal platform has been previously identified as a way of young people entering the political sphere through the gentle methods of roleplay and the production of other trend-based content such as challenges and dance. A shift towards more serious forms of activism could be suggestive of numerous causes. Firstly, the research carried out by Cervi and Divon (2023) in their 2023 published study focused on the playful acts of resistance demonstrated by Palestinian TikTok users in the response to the escalation of violence between Israelis and Palestinians beginning on 10 May 2021, often referred to as the Unity Intifada, which ultimately led to a ceasefire on 21 May 2021 (Cervi and Divon, 2023). My own results, which were collected between April and May 2024, were generally part of a larger social media resistance which has been intensifying since 7 October 2023 when Hamas launched a coordinated attack from the Gaza strip onto Southern Israel, the first attack on Israeli land since 1948. Fundamentally, social media responses, particularly on sites such as TikTok, had been relatively mild and much shorter lived during the time of Cervi and Divon's (2023) content collection, with much opinion being predicated on playful trends. However, despite being allegedly closer than ever to a ceasefire, the escalation of conflict since 7 October 2023 is ongoing as of August 2024. Although much of the documented user responses can be attributed to TikTok's overall app affordances, it is undeniable that time itself has facilitated such a breadth and diversity of content as well as enabling an intensification of activist content that was not as possible during Cervi and Divon (2023).

The identified shift could also be attributed to other wider sets of contexts during content collection. As explored previously, many of the results originated from students affiliated to various U.S. universities and colleges, thus removing the need for playful forms of activism when genuine streams of civil advocacy were occurring directly. This could also be an explanation for the levels of U.S. dominance found amongst user's geographical locations. Furthermore, whilst Cervi and Divon (2023) generally focused on Palestinian creators, my results generally originated from Westerners with no ability to permeate geographically into the conflict zone. Thus, it was inevitable that the types of creators documented would be displaying efforts of advocacy and activism in their places of education, work or at home.

Previous studies such as Lee and Abidin (2023) recognised sites such as TikTok and wider pop culture as being vehicles for "mobilizing and engaging in social movements for social (in)justice and politics in the era of social media" (p.1). Furthermore, Castillo et al (2023) suggests TikTok's capacity for civil engagement has enabled an algorithmic visibility for marginalized groups (p.6). Though my results were mostly U.S. dominated due to the applied search engine filters, the mass who reported on the Middle East conflict on the documented posts thus made way for the visibility for the marginalized groups in Gaza.

The comment sections on the collected videos also allowed for numerous interpretations. Fundamentally, and as expected, levels of hate speech were at their highest amongst the "Attack on Israel" videos, or when the "Free Palestine" content spoke about Israeli wrongdoing or other Western support for Israel. Previously consulted studies have attributed TikTok's overarching infrastructure, which encourages the reproduction and imitation of audiovisual memes, to the facilitation of the spread of hate speech across the platform (Divon and Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2022). Such studies have also considered the memification of antisemitism on the platform and

noticed the app's unwillingness to block offensive content on its platform. Whilst my results generally did not display extreme levels of profanity, offensive language was certainly identified which begs questions surrounding the reliability and authenticity of TikTok's community guidelines and comment sections. My results and analyses of relevant comments have further supported the notion that TikTok is a centralised arena and overall hub for current affairs communications and reporting whereby users can reply and repost videos of relevance to share to other users FYPs.

My results indicate evidence of more diverse and engaging ways of discussing current affairs and war reporting; it should also be celebrated that young people utilise apps as multimodally rich as TikTok for advocacy purposes rather than remaining amongst the 'Playful Publics' identified by earlier studies. The documented content is also indicative of the emotive quality of online videos; videos which utilised the multi-video or photograph collage feature on TikTok generally held much higher like counts and interactions. There is thus an undeniable link between the visual emotion and wider reposts and shares.

The results are representative of an ever-changing global youth culture sphere, whereby the methods in which young people receive and respond to global current affairs is consistently fluid. As a platform, TikTok holds inordinate potential for influencing wider groups of young people, however it is the users themselves who ultimately hold the power to charge this influence into action. Given much of the collected data originated from news outlet reports and interviews, results such as these thus also demonstrate a shift amongst traditional legacy news outlets as they continue to adapt to newer ways of news consumption. Indeed, it is also necessary to consider the influence of the filters applied to the search terms with thus showed the most relevant content posted that week, rather than the most liked or interacted with.

The implications of results such as these demonstrate the necessity of working in conjunction with an ever-changing and continuously diversifying sphere whereby news receptacles are working with newer forms of media. Furthermore, the documented videos demonstrate an intensifying level of defiance, particularly amongst young people, to positions of authority in the face of inequality and humanitarian crises. As TikTok is a newer social media form, it is thus underexplored in academic literature. Research such as my own sheds light on how TikTok users interact with key global affairs such as war. TikTok can be used as a vital tool of popular protest, holding potential to affect public opinon but also changing how much information people can receive, and by whom. In the field of media and communications, my research has demonstrated newer mediums of social media as being potentially responsible for affecting how young people in particular interact with global politics, as well as reigniting passion for aiding to humanitarian crises.

6. Conclusion

This study has considered how TikTok has been utilised by creators in response to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Additional sub-questions focused on the levels of hate speech amongst the comment sections as well as which affordances were utilised on videos within the platform. Through a MCDA of forty TikTok videos following two separate search terms: "Attack on Israel" and "Free Palestine", a widespread shift has been identified from previously studied 'playful publics' (Divon, 2022) and subsequent 'Playful Activism' (Cervi and Divon, 2023), to much more direct and serious forms of advocacy.

Due to wider context during the time of content collection and the increasing intensity of conflict in the Middle East, users veered away from endorsing the traditional playful network for which TikTok is known. Rather, creators chose affordances such as duets and stitches to share and repost news content relating to ongoing struggles in Gaza. The playful challenges and trends observed by Cervi and Divon (2023) are much less commonly found because of this. A much greater presence of hate speech was identified amongst comment sections in videos under the "Attack on Israel" search term or where the "Free Palestine" content referred to Israeli wrongdoing or Western governments defending the Netanyahu government. Generally, offensive language was filtered out to a degree through TikTok's community guidelines policy, however its presence indicates to a weakness in the platforms overall ability to tackle hate speech. Fundamentally, this study has proven the utmost necessity for the continued use of platforms such as TikTok in the realm of activism. Whilst my results do signify an alteration within the online activism sphere with regards to how users react and respond to conflict, this is not a weakness. The diversification of the original 'Playful Publics' is indicative of an ever-richer, ever-expanding group which utilise the "play tools" (Divon, 2022) at their disposal for advocacy

purposes in the face of conflict and humanitarian crises. Sites such as TikTok are evidently a centralised hub for the reporting of current affairs.

From the observation of the overall research process, other potential methods for improvement should be recognised for the integrity of the overarching project. Firstly, given the algorithmic systematic makeup of TikTok, although search filters were applied to negate the algorithm as much as possible and to tailor results which gave the broadest sets of data, the algorithm simply cannot be avoided entirely. A new user account with no previous interactions may have produced more "default" data rather than a personal account with substantial history. Additionally, altering my search parameters amongst the terms inputted into the TikTok search engine could have brought about a differing set of data for analysis as well as a more distinct set of videos, rather than demonstrating so many overlaps between data within the two search terms.

Akin to the issues that can arise when carrying out academic research on social media platforms as noted in the literature review, research on trends and generalisations could certainly be an applied limitation to my research. The research and content collection I have carried out might not be necessarily representative of the typical TikTok user, given as the collected videos were only found from applying the most relevant filters. Furthermore, the replicability of a similar TikTok study will always prove complex and limited due to TikTok's overarching algorithm that ensures the tailoring and individualisation of a user's FYP and search results.

Ethically, from the outset of my project there were undoubted risks of anonymity for creators who had not consented to be researched on. This risk was mitigated through the anonymisation of video screenshots and the removal of identifiable usernames in both the screenshots and in the appendices. Although links to the original videos are provided within the

appendices, they are done so purely on the basis of my supervisor's instructions and to prove the existence of a given video.

It should be recommended for further studies and analyses to consider how this shift in the utilisations of TikTok's widespread affordances has been permeated into the context of other international conflicts, for example the ongoing Russia Ukraine war. The demonstrative and fundamentally playful nature of TikTok's makeup is conducive to the exploration of widespread current affairs, and the involvement of the typically uninvolved in politics and current affairs is a notion that should be embraced as a result of this.

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