

# TikTok as a Key Platform for Youth Political Expression: Reflecting on the Opportunities and Stakes Involved

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## Abstract

Reflecting on 6 years of our research—which began on musical.ly and transitioned into TikTok—we argue that TikTok is a vital space to study social movements due to its centrality in youth lives and its ability to give voice to youth political expression in richly creative ways. We see the political expression happening on TikTok as a harbinger of the changing nature of this phenomenon, and a necessary impetus to broaden our understandings of activism and political expression today. At the same time, we must also consider the implications of TikTok becoming such a valuable space for youth politics and activism, in terms of the kinds of expression it affords or constrains, and the power it gives the platform. In closing, we encourage scholars to maintain a balanced and constructive approach in researching the platform, and embrace the messiness and complexity inherent in this endeavor—which mirrors the messiness and complexity of the platform itself.

## Keywords

TikTok, musical.ly, youth, political expression, activism

Having begun our research on youth political expression on musical.ly in 2016 and then followed the platform throughout its transition to TikTok in 2018, we can vividly remember a time when we had to devote an entire methods section to explaining what this strange new platform was all about, or compose impassioned yet diplomatic responses to Reviewer 2, trying to convince them that yes, this platform is really worth researching, and no, “more mainstream platforms” like Facebook or Twitter would not be a better place to study youth online political expression. Today, the significance of TikTok as a platform for politics and activism is much more widely recognized in both academia and public discussion, and we are thrilled to be part of this special issue devoted entirely to TikTok and social movements.

Here, reflecting on a collaborative research agenda that examines the various roles of TikTok in youth political lives—for example, as a space for post-electoral discourse (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019), cross-cutting political talk (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021), and representations of protest and media critique (Literat et al., 2022)—we share some lessons learned and open questions for this burgeoning field. Specifically, we argue that TikTok is a valuable space for youth activism, enabling young people to experiment with their political voice in richly creative ways. And, given this significance, we ask: what are the implications of TikTok becoming such a valuable space for youth politics—in terms

of the kinds of expression it affords or constrains, and the power it gives the platform?

To us, the answer to the question “why study TikTok and social movements” is closely connected to TikTok’s prominent youth component: youth have always been at the forefront of social movements (see, for example, McAdam, 1988), and TikTok today is a central space for youth expression (while the platform is increasingly used by older participants as well, over 80% of global TikTok content creators are under the age of 25; see Statista, 2022). TikTok enables young people to engage with the issues they are most concerned about (e.g., race relations, climate change, civil rights) and do so in their unique voice (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019, 2021). Furthermore, a significant appeal of TikTok is the way it fosters a sense of relatability among youth (Kennedy, 2020; Zeng & Abidin, 2021), which is crucial when it comes to activism too. In forming their attitudes about political topics, youth care deeply about what their peers think (Lee et al., 2012)—and a main place where their

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peers are talking about politics today, often quite passionately, is TikTok.

Certainly related to its strong youth focus, we see the political expression happening on TikTok as a harbinger of the changing nature of this phenomenon, and a necessary impetus to broaden our understandings of activism and political expression today. TikTok is a vibrant space for youth activism and political engagement because it invites young people to share their views in ways that are appealing to them, that help them connect to peers, and that are deeply anchored in their interests and their cultural lives (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). “Circumscribing” or guiding creativity (Kaye et al., 2021), it enables users to self-express easily and richly, including around political topics: conveying their experience with racism through an interpretative dance, using the latest audio meme to discredit a biased media report, and creating a duet to express solidarity around trans rights. In other words, the same things that make TikTok so fun for young people to goof out on also make it a vibrant space for politics and activism. What is more, by enabling youth to deliberately connect to an assumed like-minded audience through the use of shared symbolic resources, TikTok encourages a form of political expression that is quintessentially *collective* (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019)—a vital element for the success of social movements.

By giving voice to youth political expression in such vivid, often unusual, ways, TikTok is a departure from dominant ideals of political expression. As Michael Schudson’s (1998) historical work shows, today’s dominant expectations of the “good citizen” pose the “private, rational ‘informed citizen’” as “the most cherished ideal” (p. 6). In this view, political expression should be serious. It should be focused on facts and rationality. And it should be detached and objective. In contrast, much of the political expression we find on TikTok is humoristic or cynical, colorful, often over-the-top, and infused with popular culture references. It is deeply emotional, ranging from roaring laughter to rolling tears. And it is often profoundly personal, framing political issues through young people’s personal experience and worldviews. In other words, it is anything *but* serious, detached, and rational. However, that does not make it any less meaningful. A key argument underlying our work—and that is also at the core of our forthcoming book—is the idea that studying political expression on TikTok seriously should mean putting aside our normative expectations for what political expression *should* look like and focusing instead on the messages being conveyed.

In doing so, we must also aim to understand how TikTok uniquely shapes political expression. Much current scholarship on social media and politics treats “social media” as if it were a unitary phenomenon when, in fact, differences between social media platforms crucially shape their political dynamics (Bode & Vraga, 2018). We should strive for a better understanding of how different platforms enable, as well as constrain, certain forms of political expression—and that involves paying close attention to the interaction between

a platform’s affordances, norms, and contents (see also Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020; Renninger, 2015; Stromer-Galley et al., 2015). Understanding this interaction is particularly important in the case of TikTok, as an under-researched but increasingly significant platform for political expression. Of course, a methodological issue that somewhat complicates this endeavor is the fact that there isn’t one TikTok, but rather many different subcultures (e.g., political TikTok, BeautyTok, BookTok, DeepTok). This means that research on TikTok—at least of the qualitative kind—is necessarily context-dependent, as the user’s experience of TikTok varies across these different corners, and is also shaped significantly by the platform’s infamously opaque recommendation algorithm (Schellewald, 2021) and visibility moderation practices (Zeng & Kaye, 2022).

Looking ahead, we urge scholars studying TikTok to maintain a balanced and constructive approach in researching the platform, and embrace the messiness and complexity inherent in this endeavor—which mirrors the messiness and complexity of the platform itself. Thinking back to 2016, one thing that facilitated our TikTok/musical.ly research was that we got there early, when the platform was smaller and political talk on it was somewhat more niche. The reputation that TikTok has now acquired is both good news and bad for those researching it: it facilitates research because there is considerably more interest in the platform, but its strong public image can also hamper research or make its findings harder to convey.

Embracing balance and complexity also means grappling with both sides of the coin. Yes, political expression on TikTok can be productive in all the ways we argue here, but it also brings up vital concerns, from misinformation (Kelly, 2021; Literat et al., 2021) to polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Vijay & Gekker, 2021). Importantly, considering both the potential benefits and risks of political expression on TikTok requires thought about how to regulate it as a space open for democratic debate. At a moment of much concern around the role of social media in politics, TikTok has largely stayed under the radar in this regard (Douek, 2021). Scholars studying the platform have an important opportunity to help inform policies that are well grounded in research and are deeply attuned to the specifics of TikTok as a cultural space.

Finally, another way in which we must maintain a balanced and constructive approach to TikTok—particularly important when studying youth and social movements—is to avoid glorifying what we find. Yes, TikTok is a vital space for youth activism, but there is also a danger in idealizing activism as seen on TikTok (the temptation to conclude that “youth will save us” and “the kids are alright”). What we found in our research over the past 6 years is that the kids are not (always) alright. They are often hurting, traumatized by recent events, and increasingly divided. Alongside activism and fearlessness, we also see heartbreak, fear, and behaviors that concern us (. . . sometimes the researcher hat slips off just a little, making way for our mom hat or our educator hat). Studying youth political expression on TikTok, we see

resilience alongside vulnerability, in line with the ethos of Gen Z itself. Be it through research, public advocacy, or policy work, it is our responsibility to help harness that power and support young people as citizens, including on TikTok.

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