

Us, Them, Right, Wrong: How TikTok's Green Screen, Duet, and Stitch help shape political discourse

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Abstract

As TikTok exploded in popularity following the initial lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, use from individual users skyrocketed. During this time, political content became largely ubiquitous across the app. Politics play out daily on TikTok, as individuals craft messages within the technological affordances and sociocultural dynamics of the app. This study expands on research regarding civic engagement in digital public spheres by examining and describing how TikTok shapes political expression and discourse through three technological affordances on the app: the Green Screen, the Stitch, and the Duet. While these affordances are often hailed as features that bolster user creativity through increased possible interactions, our analysis found these increased possible interactions to be highly specific, and also limited in conjunction with politics. On political TikTok, these affordances function more as political commentary than conversation, leading to an overall volatile environment.

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Introduction

A *New York Times* story noted on TikTok:

Teenagers in America — many of them too young to vote — are forming political coalitions on TikTok to campaign for their chosen candidates, post news updates and fact-check opponents. They are sharing real-time commentary for an audience that is far more likely to watch YouTube videos than turn on a cable news channel (Lorenz, 2020).

TikTok has become a space for political expression around the globe for all ages (Serrano, *et al.*, 2020; Vijay and Gekker, 2021). In terms of United States politics, at the time of writing, videos with the hashtag #Republican boast 10.9 billion views, and videos hashtagged #Democrat have garnered 6.5 billion views.

While these are by no means the extent of political hashtags, they provide a cursory glance at how widespread these discussions appear on TikTok. Similarly, Lorenz's remarks reiterates this pervasiveness and underscores the importance and reach of TikTok in the contemporary political media landscape.

Understanding how individuals perform political expression in digital public spheres has been a guiding interest of political communication (Bennett, *et al.*, 2011; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). Here we expand this by examining how TikTok is used in U.S. political commentary and present theory-informed and descriptive analyses. Specifically, we examine how TikTok shapes political expression through three technological affordances on the app: the Green Screen, Stitch, and Duet. To be sure, there are other affordances on TikTok, and affordances do not limit the extent of possible sociality in digital spaces. Additionally, affordances are not synonymous with features, but harken to the range of possibilities within interfaces, and how users perceive them (Bucher and Helmond, 2018). This is a useful framework for examining political expression online, as users may deploy features in ways not intended or imagined by developers (Nagy and Neff, 2015). By focusing on the Green Screen, Stitch, and Duet, we examine how political expression is given form on TikTok through features specifically designed to connect users in interactions with each another (TikTok, 2021, 2020, 2019).

This work joins a growing body of literature that considers quotidian uses of political expression in digital cultures (Hautea, *et al.*, 2021). While Kreiss, *et al.* (2018) examined how practitioners view social media affordances in conjunction with their candidate's campaign, their work focused specifically on political insiders, not quotidian users. Similarly, they call for how political communication and expression "on any single platform cannot automatically be logically generalized to any other, or social media as a whole. Platforms that are often lumped together under the banner of 'social media' are in some ways alike, and in other ways quite different" [1]. They call for urgency in understanding how political expression and affordances intertwine in specific ways, and our analysis answers this call by charting such a map on TikTok. We build on Hautea, *et al.*'s (2021) work on how TikTok affordances abet, amplify, and confuse science communication by focusing specifically on a political communication and expression framework. This work is necessarily descriptive at times due to its instrumental nature (Odell, 2001), for its broader purposes of defining a cultural-political space and offering "lessons learned" (Yin, 2014).

Platform-specific features and how users understand, deploy, alter, and resist them are essential for understanding political expression and its implications. While Zulli and Zulli (2022) theorized TikTok as a space for imitation publics, wherein "networks form through processes of imitation and replication, not interpersonal connections, expressions of sentiment, or lived experience" [2], our research found that on political TikTok, while the dance moves and memetic trends are present, they exist as secondary to attempted interpersonal dialogue, expressions of sentiment, and conversations of lived experience. We say attempted interpersonal dialogue, since instead of using these features to discuss issues, users invoke them to reinforce their own views. As such, on political TikTok, affordances are used in such ways that do not focus on their final texts as creativity and connection but instead as confirmation of one's own views and the demonizing of the opposition. This dynamic presents complicating possibilities that confound studies suggesting that intergroup contact across platforms could reduce out-party animus (Ansalem, *et al.*, 2022; Levendusky and Stecula, 2021). Based on this study, political content disseminated on TikTok is not a means of mitigation to the affective polarization that remains pervasive in the United States. While it is easy to blame platforms for the ills of contemporary politics, such as affective polarization, filter bubbles, and misinformation, it is imperative to focus on how users actually employ features afforded to them, and how they may understand features in ways that continue to silo political views and expressions.

Literature review

TikTok, affordances, and vernaculars

With over one billion active monthly users, TikTok is one of the most popular mobile applications in which users can create and share short video content (Abidin, 2021). Sounds are frequently used and can be extracted from songs, movies, or television dialogue, or can be produced and uploaded by other users (Haenlein, *et al.*, 2020). Users can search for a specific sound and all content utilizing it, making the sound selection process particularly vital to TikTok's success (Haenlein, *et al.*, 2020). This is one reason why Internet scholars conceptualize TikTok through "audio memes," as sound bites and music are often the primary consideration in creating content (Abidin, 2021). On TikTok, post-based virality is more important than persona-based fame. In other words, TikTok users may eschew a coherent, multi-platform brand in favor of whatever audio trend is presently popular to tap into whatever is viral at the moment (Abidin, 2021). TikTok offers users numerous features to create content, and how users perceive and deploy these features are understood as affordances.

The term affordance was adapted from psychology to communication technology studies (Nagy and Neff, 2015) to "reflect the possible relationships among actors and objects; they are the properties of the world" [3]. But, as McVeigh-Schultz and Baym (2015) argued, the origins of affordances are often narrow and prescriptive, and they instead advocate for relationality in terms of sense-making, wherein users invent new practices unanticipated by designers. The key to affordances is that while they are features that allow and limit specific actions on platforms, they are not wholly constrictive (Shaw, 2017). Users can employ them in myriad ways (Bucher and Helmond, 2018). The guiding research question for this study, then, pertains to better understanding of the ways in which TikTok users are employing the Green Screen, Duet, and Stitch affordances to engage in political expression on the app.

While it is impossible to read the minds of TikTok developers, we do have front-facing documents written by the platform to convey information about their interface, and these documents can reveal immense insights into platforms (Gillespie, 2010). In a news release announcing the Green Screen, TikTok boasted, "The Green Screen is known for its ability to transport people to another world and now TikTok [sic] have introduced a brand new 'Green Screen' effect to help give users the most creative tools available" (TikTok, 2019). "Duet allows you to post your video side-by-side from another creator on TikTok. A Duet contains two videos in a split screen that play at the same time. Keep in mind, you must have a public account to allow others to Duet with your videos" (TikTok, 2020). Lastly, "Stitch is a creation tool that allows you to combine another video on TikTok with one you're creating. If you allow another person to stitch your video, they can use part of your video as part of their own video. Keep in mind, you must have a public account to allow others to stitch with your videos" (TikTok, 2021). Given these brief descriptions, it becomes apparent that these affordances are designed for increased creativity, interaction, and possible connections.

While platform intent does not always translate to user preference, the relationship between affordances and political expression underscores political ills in quotidian ways. As such, Shaw's (2017) encoding/decoding model of affordances is particularly useful for examining political expression via affordances on TikTok, as the app's mission of connection may be at odds with disconnecting engagement. On political TikTok, affordances may be used in negotiated and oppositional ways.

By examining the Green Screen, Duet, and Stitch features as negotiated and oppositional affordances, we are looking at how political expression on TikTok is given form. Within this framework, features merge with platform vernaculars, or communication practices that "emerge within particular SNS to congeal as genres" [4]. In doing so, features of the platform allow users to create content in ways that make sense for the specific platform, as they rely heavily on understood trends and insights of surrounding communities. As Gibbs, *et al.* (2015) noted, "studying a platform vernacular shifts focus from the extraordinary or spectacular use of media platforms to the mundane and intensely social practices" [5]. This reflects broader calls in Internet studies to focus on the everyday (Brabham, 2015), and notably, political TikToks are ubiquitous and not tied to specific political events such as campaigns, elections, or court decisions. With this in mind, we now turn to considerations of political discourse, specifically on TikTok, and what may be at stake in these everyday posts.

TikTok as a site of political discourse

Early computer-mediated communication, and then social media, helped facilitate a more digital public sphere. Though far from ushering in a utopian world that solved critiques of Habermas' public sphere (Fraser, 1990), the digital public sphere exacerbated existing fault lines on access to participation (Rasmussen, 2014). Furthermore, participation in digital public spheres remains highly fragmented, with no central arena but numerous and often overlapping arenas. Digital technologies such as mobile Internet, smartphone applications, and constant connectivity mean that the potential for civic engagement, especially in the form of political expression, is ubiquitous but not realized in actuality or equality.

TikTok boasts a full spectrum of partisanship representations, each providing unique commentary regarding current events, policy opinions, politician approval or disapproval, and more. The majority of TikTok users creating political content related to the U.S. are under the age of 40, with Democrat-leaning creators skewing slightly younger in age (Serrano, *et al.*, 2020). There are slightly more males creating Republican-leaning content and slightly more females creating Democrat-leaning content (Serrano, *et al.*, 2020). Even though the majority of younger Americans — the primary user base of the application — identify as being more liberal, the majority of political TikTok content is pro-Trump and pro-Republican (Serrano, *et al.*, 2020). While our study focuses primarily on U.S. political TikTok, it is prudent for future research to examine how these affordances and the app may help shape political sociality in other countries. Due to the algorithmic nature of the app, if a user engages with political content from a singular ideological standpoint, they will likely be fed content of similar positions.

Political discussions on TikTok operate under a distinct “us vs. them” dynamic (Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). The propulsion of the “us vs. them” mentality to the fore of political TikTok is troubling regardless of individual ideological stance, particularly when considering the history of this discursive trope. As Blodgett and Salter (2018) discussed, the “‘us vs. them’ mentality has a long history in fringe political movements, [but] it is surprising to see its heavy deployment in popular media” [6]. The “us vs. them” stance is no longer relegated to the extremist periphery but is now a mainstream facet, bolstered by increasing partisanship. Importantly, this “us vs. them” formulation, “act[s] as what [Chantal] Mouffe would call a ‘libidinal bond’ in the formation of an ‘us’ ... frequently used in order to demarcate a *nebulous other* whose identity, if not clearly deducible from the local context, is left to the reader’s interpretation” [7]. The “us vs. them” formation binds similar individuals together as a collective *us*, and subsequently positions this collective against *them*, which may remain nebulous, but always understood. In the case of U.S. partisan politics on TikTok, depending on who one asks, it could be us (liberals/Democrats) vs. them (conservatives/Republicans) or vice versa.

Politics and identity in online expression

The United States’ political climate has undergone significant shifts in the last few decades, leading to higher division (Dimock and Wike, 2020). Increasing divisiveness on issues leads to polarization, or an increased disparity in ideological and policy stances between political parties (Fiorina and Abrams, 2008), as well as increased contempt for members of the opposite party (Iyengar, *et al.*, 2019).

As individuals become more polarized on issues, identities follow suit. Selection of political party affiliation is largely voluntary and, therefore, indicative of alignment with a person’s belief systems (Van Bavel and Pereira, 2018). In the United States, self-categorization as either a Republican or a Democrat often leads to heightened levels of affective attachment to that political party (West and Iyengar, 2020). Additionally, once self-categorized as a political party member, individuals begin to form perceptions of an “ingroup” and an “outgroup” (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Although this phenomenon has historically yielded negative perceptions of the outgroup, increased polarization in the United States has led to the dehumanization of opposing party members by both Republicans and Democrats (Martherus, *et al.*, 2021).

Scholars have long searched for ways to reduce polarization amongst citizens, considering tactics such as intraparty contact (Wojcieszak and Warner, 2020; Amsalen, *et al.*, 2022), counterattitudinal exposure

(Garrett, *et al.*, 2014), and inciting feelings of national patriotism (Levendusky, 2018). Because partisan identity, rather than legislative policy, has been shown to fuel affective polarization (Dias and Lelkes, 2021), focusing on how individuals make sense of their own identity, as well as the identities of others, provides additional angles for analysis. While individuals have long been political in public through townhalls, boycotts, and voting, today, partisanship is increasingly a public performance that harkens back to one's identity within a political party. Platforms like TikTok provide individuals with a new stage on which to perform, with a range of affordances for myriad possible performances.



Method

To answer our question of how political expression is given form on TikTok, we conducted a textual analysis of 150 political TikToks. First, we created a unique TikTok account to start from the beginning and avoid any previous algorithmic influence in creating a video corpus. While qualitative methods do focus on subjectivity and positionality over objectivity and bias, we wanted to create a new account for corpus collection given the volatility of politics. However, we acknowledge that mobile devices still may affect search results, even on new accounts. But, as Christin (2020) noted, qualitative researchers should not shy away from understanding the ways algorithms and other technological features may impact, subtly or substantially, Internet research processes and corpora. Similarly, Maddox and Gill (2023) noted a benefit of creating a new TikTok account in the research process is gleaning insights into who the app believes the new user to be (see also Brock, 2012). For our study, creating a new TikTok account aligned with our subjective epistemological stance and analyses into how TikTok pushes content to new users.

We searched to develop our corpus of videos for analysis. To do this we examined the hashtagged terms in the following iterations: #GreenScreen #Conservative #Liberal; #Duet #Conservative #Liberal; #Stitch #Conservative #Liberal. We searched each permutation of #conservative and #liberal with each feature. We also made the choice to include both major U.S. political viewpoints in our search to avoid the corpus skewing more toward one political party than the other. We chose “conservative” and “liberal” over the terms for the two-party political system to be more inclusive of a political spectrum. We collected the top 50 videos from each of the Duet, Green Screen, and Stitch permutations, which formed a corpus of 150 TikTok videos, which aligns with corpus size in previous TikTok textual analysis studies (Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin, 2022). We collected our videos in fall and winter 2021, into January of 2022. Our videos ranged in date from April 2020 to January 2022, with the bulk coming from the year 2021. Collectively, the videos in our corpus accounted for 169.1 million views.

Once we had our corpus, we conducted a textual analysis of all 150 videos. Pursuant to Stuart Hall's methodology for textual analysis, each author viewed each video, paying close attention to recurring themes, patterns, words, and ideas. Given that we were concerned with how these three affordances shaped political expression on TikTok, we also paid particular attention to the types of content and arguments made within each feature. After our initial viewings, we engaged in what Hall (1975) called a “long preliminary soak” to reflect on cursory findings. However, as Linda Steiner (2016) addressed, while the term may invite laziness, Hall gave no such excuse for this valuable portion of the method, as it provides an opportunity for “discourse analysts who need to ‘hear’ (must learn to hear) recurring appeals in different contexts” [8]. As such, our analysis consisted of identifying recurrent forms of communication, discursive styles, and their connections to the specific Green Screen, Duet, and Stitch affordances used. This soak allowed us to reflect on the recurring themes, patterns, words, and ideas, as well as the uses of these affordances and their connections to content present in our video corpus. Through reflection, we were able to make meaningful connections and textual pattern recognitions before coming together to discuss.

Below, we present our analysis as grounded in each affordance, explaining how they help shape political expression and engagement on TikTok through common uses. We present screenshots from videos in our corpus as a form of exemplar visual evidence to show how these affordances function in tandem with

sociality and political expression on TikTok.

Analysis

Affordance one: The Green Screen

TikTok's Green Screen feature allows users to superimpose images or videos onto the background of their creation (TikTok, 2019). This feature has been employed in a variety of ways, whether such as a background or creating fully-realized hypothetical scenarios, complete with setting changes. Political TikTok creators tend to use it in order to provide a visual representation of the video's topic or to reference the information presented. This often comes in the form of news articles or tweets, as shown in Figures 1 and 2.



Figure 1: A TikTok creator utilizes Green Screen to showcase Twitter/X screenshots.



Figure 2: A TikTok creator summarizes a news article displayed through the Green Screen affordance.

In [Figure 1](#), the creator pokes fun at U.S. representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.) for drafting a letter demanding that President Joe Biden launch an investigation into Dr. Anthony Fauci. The creator uses both the original tweet and images from the letter as background. Rep. Greene urged the Biden administration to answer her questions by 31 June, a non-existent date on the calendar. The creator then changes her Green Screen background to a calendar to illustrate this point. Similarly, in [Figure 2](#), the creator provides a summary of a news article displayed in the Green Screen. During the confrontation outlined in the article,

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene called United States representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) a baby and suggested that Rep. Ocasio-Cortez wore diapers. The creator then goes on to denounce Rep. Taylor Greene's actions, saying that this type of behavior should not be tolerated.

Twitter is an especially popular reference point for many political TikTok creators, with many screenshotted tweets or news articles employed to demonstrate citational authority. The videos depicted in Figures 1 and 2 also suggest that the Green Screen function may be used to lend credibility to the creator, providing a citation of sorts for information conveyed in a TikTok video, something that may be necessary to prove one's point in an era filled with epistemic distrust in the forms of misinformation and disinformation. Images are traditionally found to be trustworthy (Kasra, *et al.*, 2018), though a viewer's skill and experience serve as a mediating factor in their evaluations of image legitimacy (Shen, *et al.*, 2019). However, images are also immensely affective, and can contribute to polarization (Hokka and Nelimarkka, 2020). The Green Screen affordance on political TikTok allows for confirmation of one's own position, providing additional evidence that the creator and the political views being communicated in their TikTok are "right." However, the converse of this is that in doing so, individuals double down on their own beliefs and subsequent vilification of others. Here, the creativity TikTok touts is realized in affordances as ideological savviness in a divided political landscape. Such assumptions, and who the creator believes they are speaking to, underscores the role of the imagined audience (Marwick and boyd, 2010) in political expression on TikTok. In order to be "right", creators assume that the bulk of their audience will align politically with them.

However, individuals may use any image on the Green Screen. Evidence does not have to come in the form of a tweet or a news article. It can be any screenshotted image, as demonstrated by [Figure 3](#).

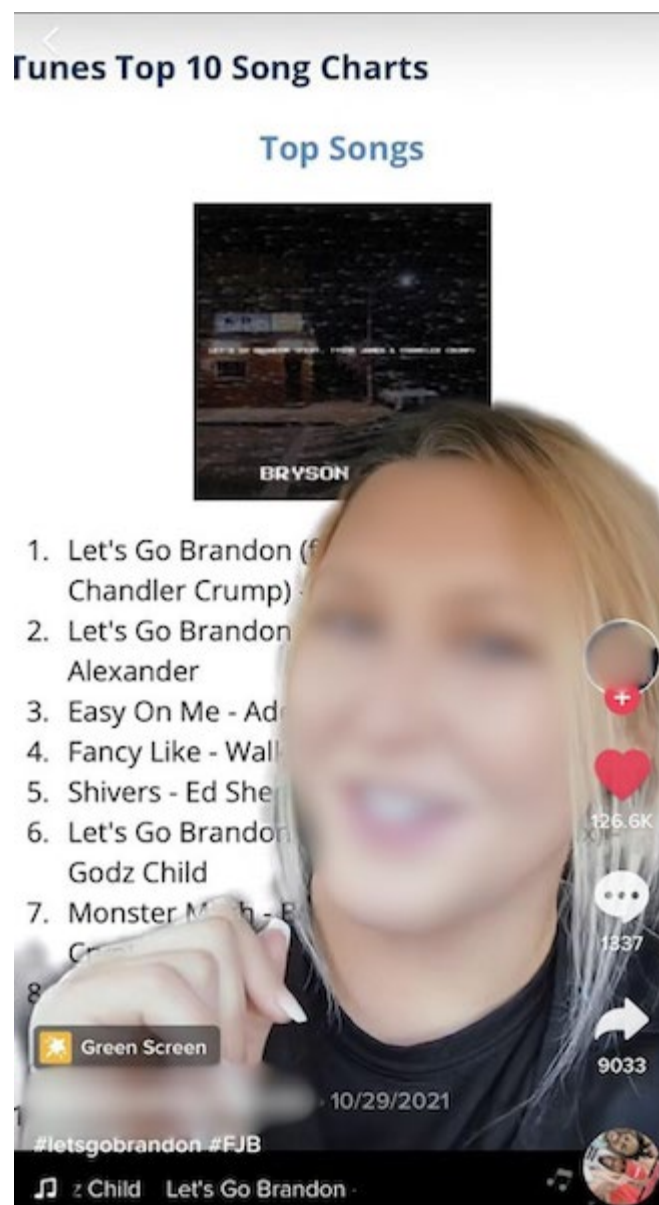


Figure 3: A TikTok creator uses Green Screen to reference Apple's iTunes top songs.

In [Figure 3](#), a TikTok creator highlights a snapshot of Apple's iTunes top songs, and she notes how a song called "Let's Go Brandon" has risen to the number one spot. "Let's Go Brandon" has become a popular coded insult for President Joe Biden among conservatives (Lowe, 2021). For this conservative content creator, the fact this song, inspired by the insult, beat out established artists like Adele and Ed Sheeran, highlighted for her the popularity of conservative ideas. This underscores Huddy and Bankert's (2017) notion of how political group members seek to protect their group and advance their ideas. However, in political TikToks, protection and advancement occurs at the level of the quotidian and is often intertwined with platform vernaculars. Here the Green Screen and use of culture as citational authority "prove" relevancy, which, in turn, communicates "winning" a political culture war. Politics are increasingly framed through utilizations of digital networked media, especially in efforts to provoke disruption and divisive discourse (Davis, 2019).

The videos depicted in [Figures 1, 2, and 3](#) show popular culture tools intersecting with the political sphere,

but also demonstrate noticeable partisan biases. Based on the commentary provided, and though personal partisanship is never explicitly mentioned, it is fairly easy to deduce which political parties the creators adhere to, making the commentary a public statement regarding political affiliation. This is not necessarily surprising, especially considering the correlation that exists between online political persuasion and political affiliation, meaning individuals who have identified political party alignment are more likely to engage in political persuasion attempts via digital media such as TikTok (Ahmad, 2020).

Affordance two: The Duet

The Duet feature allows users to post an original video side-by-side with another user's publicly accessible video (TikTok, 2020). This format allows the two videos to play simultaneously. In this regard, the term "Duet" is being used in a literal sense, as two people merge content together to create a new video. Some of the most common uses for the Duet feature across the app include reaction videos, or individuals responding to other content (Abidin, 2021); before and after videos, or those that show temporal progressions or results (Hautea, *et al.*, 2021); or role-playing, in which individuals perform as characters to convey a variety of positions.

The majority of Duets in our corpus used this feature not to verbally communicate, but nonverbally communicate. This appears as exaggerated facial expressions or actions as responses to claims being made in the original video. In the Duet feature, the original video is always on the right, with the reaction on the left, as indicated by [Figure 4](#).



Figure 4: Duet is utilized to showcase solidarity between like-minded TikTok users.

In the video depicted in [Figure 4](#), the original content details insights from a Trump rally that he had attended over the weekend. The original creator states, “Ya’ll have pissed off America’s moms,” and goes on to describe the women that he witnessed at the Trump rally. Figure 4’s creator, who used the Duet function, simply nods with a slight smile creeping across her face. She includes text that reads “Our kids deserve a better America,” to further show her support for the original video’s messaging. This is a clear example of solidarity being publicly showcased between like-minded TikTok users, again using TikTok affordances to enhance and show confirmation of one’s own political ideologies.

Sometimes, the Duet response doesn’t feature only the face, but one’s whole body. This is unsurprising, as TikTok, originally hailed as a dancing app, places high importance on bodily movements and actions to communicate (Vickery, 2020). While much of our corpus and analysis challenges pre-existing notions of how TikTok is used to enhance creativity, some videos, such as [Figure 5](#), show how bodily movements, a little bit of dancing, and creativity are still present in our corpus.



Figure 5: Duet is utilized to bolster political antagonism.

In [Figure 5](#), the original user dances to a pop song and puts her hand on the left edge of her screen. Her text, “let’s start a chain of women for Trump” indicates she is inviting users to Duet her and put their hands on the right side of their screen. The Duet feature will then make it look like the women are forming a chain in support. However, the user depicted on the left in Figure 5 holds up an iron, and the Duet feature makes it look like the iron is being placed against the original woman’s hand, essentially burning her. The creator on the left’s actions constitute what Katz and Shifman (2017) refer to as embodied silliness, or the centrality of the body in mediated communication through postures, challenges, and dances. However, the specific action of holding a presumably hot iron up to one’s hand also implies violence, which is an understood escalation of the “us vs. them” political trope (Tuters and Hagan, 2020). In this case, Duets do not prompt the community discussed touted by TikTok in presenting the feature, but Duets emerge as an affordance for how they are realized in actual user practice, which, in this example, is to bolster political antagonism.

In addition to facial expression and exaggerated bodily movements, the Duet feature on political TikTok also uses superimposed text on screen to convey points, prove the other creator “wrong.” [Figure 6](#) demonstrates one way that this text feature is used with Duets.

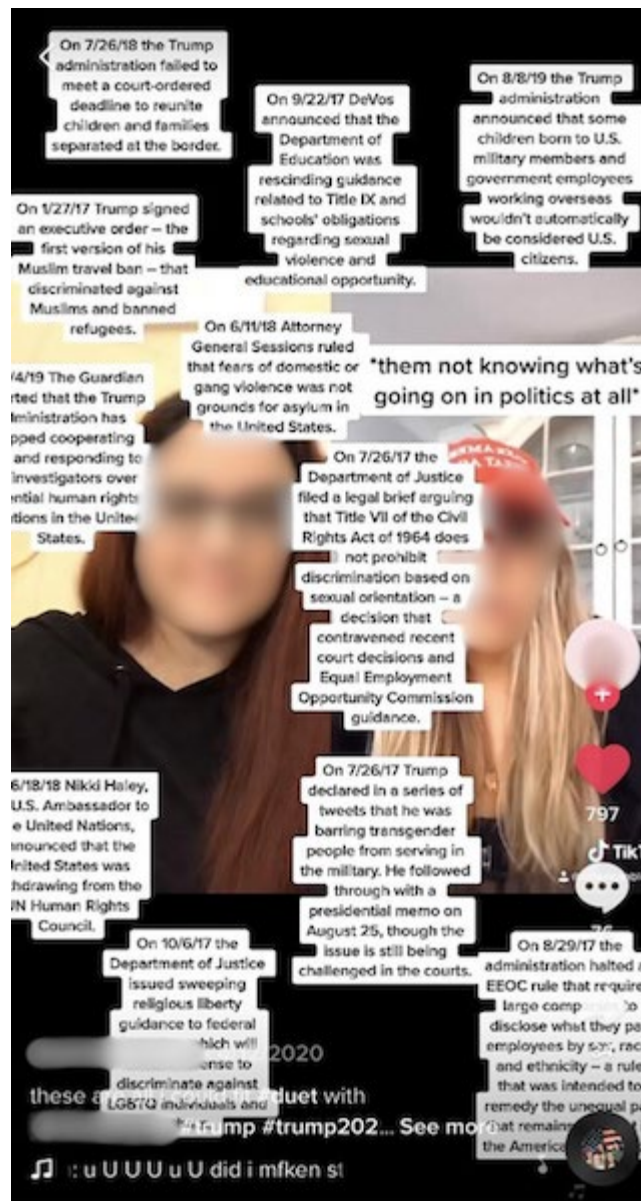


Figure 6: Duet is used to strengthen in-group affiliation and antagonize the opposing party.

In the video depicted in [Figure 6](#), the original video (displayed on the right) presents a hypothetical scenario in which the original creator is “listening to a Democrat say Trump is a terrible President and asking them why they think that.” The original creator states that the Democrat in question does not know what is happening in the country politically. The [Figure 6](#) creator, who utilized the Duet function, floods the screen with written instances that have led to their negative opinion of former President Trump. This is a clear example of text being used in the Duet function, with no verbal cues. It is also an instance of cross-cutting political discourse, as the two users featured in the Duet have obviously opposite political leanings based on

their content. Here, the Duet feature is used to bolster in-group political affiliation and how it is expressed, but also simultaneously be antagonistic against the opposite political party.

That being said, not all features were used in an “us vs. them” frame, and reaction to content did not always occur along political fault lines. [Figure 7](#) underscores this point, as this was one example from our corpus that illustrated how individuals also used the Duet feature to critique their own political party.



Figure 7: An individual uses Duet to critique their political party.

In [Figure 7](#), the user, a self-identified Democrat, uses the Duet feature to react to a video of a police car that has been decorated for LGBTQ Pride Month. For this user, this Pride-themed police care is a point of critique and contention, as they noted that Democrats often performed social justice instead of actively engaging with social justice issues for meaningful change. Notably, in our corpus, all conservative videos

attacked liberals, but not all liberal videos attacked conservatives. There was a small number of videos in our corpus ($n=3$) that had liberals critiquing the Democratic Party.

Affordance three: Stitches

The Stitch feature enables users to integrate other publicly available TikTok videos into their own. According to TikTok, this feature is a way to “reinterpret and add to another user’s content, building on their stories, tutorials, recipes, math lessons, and more” (TikTok, 2020). Political TikTok content, however, conceives the affordances as something to either refute or affirm the information presented by another. Similar to the Duet, the Stitch feature tends to prompt both inter- and intra- party political discourse, but does so using more direct verbal arguments. Inter-party interactions are those taking place between members of opposing political parties, while intra-party interactions are those taking place between members of the same political party. Intra-party interactions are typically supportive and reassuring, while inter-party interactions have a tendency toward combativeness. Our corpus shows that both inter- and intra-party political discourse function this way, as Stitches and Duets between users of the same political groups were often supportive (see [Figure 4](#)) but Stitches and Duets between users of different political groups were hostile, as indicated by [Figures 8](#) and [9](#).



Figure 8: The first clip of an inter-party Stitch interaction.



Figure 9: The second clip of an inter-party Stitch interaction.

These figures show two parts of a single video using the Stitch feature. The first half of the video, displayed in [Figure 8](#), incorporates content originally posted by a separate TikTok creator. In this video, the user does not provide verbalization, but just has the text “It’s not about your health and it never was. Something in your soul has got to be telling you this isn’t right. WAKE UP AMERICA” written over a video of her displaying disbelief. Immediately following this clip is the Stitch from the creator pictured in [Figure 9](#), in which she says the government has never cared about citizen health, but rather prioritizes a healthy

economy and reducing strain on hospitals. She then goes on to provide some statistics about COVID-19 hospitalizations and vaccinations (these statistics have not been verified). This particular TikTok creator employs TikTok's features and her authority as a healthcare provider to dispel myths surrounding COVID-19 and other political matters. In the case of inter-party political discourse on TikTok, the Stitch and Duet features can put an individual face on the "them," making that one individual stand for the larger whole of the political party. This affordance can bolster the "us vs. them" trope, by making one individual the face of an entire party and giving the typically "nebulous other" a definitive identity (Tuters and Hagan, 2020). Instead of humanizing the other by putting a face on them, attacks can now be directed to a specific person.

The Stitch is realized as an affordance to bolster their own in-group and intra-party identities, as shown by Figures 10 and 11. These images depict users showing solidarity and affirmation. In this video, the original calls for a "Let's Go Brandon" chant. By starting this chain through Stitches, some conservative users are able to make a public display of both their partisanship and their displeasure with President Joe Biden.



Figure 10: The first clip of an intra-party Stitch interaction.



Figure 11: The second clip of an intra-party Stitch interaction.

The Stitch is a vehicle for political discourse on TikTok, but it's realized differently from Duets. The Duet affordance allows commentary in tandem with another user's video, providing little opportunity to unpack one's perspective or positionality. The Stitch affordance, however, provides a blank canvas on which a creator can illustrate their point, if desired. This could provide a richer political discussion, which again, has the potential to prompt understanding, empathy, and political participation (Peacock and Leavitt, 2016) — all leading to a healthier democracy. The Stitch affordance also opens the door to potential cross-party animosity and same-party vindication to be on display for the public. Political tensions have been high for years (Dinkelberg, *et al.*, 2021), and people often have great disdain for the opposing party while also believing that their respective party is "correct" (West and Iyengar, 2020).

Of all of TikTok's affordances, the Stitch feature provides the most freedom to express grievances *and* revelry. Possibilities of strengthened partisan identification and affective polarization, which are already considerably powerful (Iyengar, *et al.*, 2019), remain an imminent threat for this reason. Conversely, some of the identified remedies for heightened affective polarization like misperception corrections or highlighting additional social identities outside of partisanship (Iyengar, *et al.*, 2019), could play out on TikTok. Video content of this nature was not prevalent in our corpus, but could potentially serve a purpose in reducing polarization amongst Political TikTok users.

Specifically, the Green Screen, Stitch, and Duet features on TikTok can be understood through what McVeigh-Schultz and Baym (2015) call the *interface-features level* of affordances, in which vernacular understandings of specific parts of an interface allow for certain types of interaction. The Green Screen, Stitch, and Duet are at the interface-features level of affordances because they are individual items that “represent a specific kind of feature that someone can use to post” [9]. Users understand those representations in their own ways, and on political TikTok, may be used for political ideologies instead of increasing connections.

Discussion and conclusion

Political TikToks form affective networked publics, in which publics are structured around expressions of sentiment (Papacharissi, 2015). In theorizing the term, Papacharissi (2015) argued that instead of looking at networked publics in terms of how they may translate to civic engagement and off-line change, examining them through affective expression as a structuring principle is paramount. Social media blend the personal and political in these types of expressions (Papacharissi, 2015). Research examines how this, in conjunction with technical features, affordances, cultures, and vernaculars become hyper-discursive spaces where political content remains ambivalent and subject to the very circumstances that it may seek to critique.

However, on political TikTok, the use of the platform-specific affordances, when realized and deployed in hyper-specific circumstances, leaves very little room for ambivalence. Phillips and Milner (2017) define ambivalence as “simultaneously antagonistic and social, creative and disruptive, humorous and barbed too variable across specific case studies to be essentialized as *this* as opposed to *that*” [10]. However, through the Green Screen, Duet, and Stitch, we found that these features were deployed by TikTok users in ways that make their meaning abundantly clear — their political affiliation or stance on issues is the correct one, and all others are wrong. While this content is certainly still subject to the very circumstances it may seek to critique, there is little ambivalence present. Fraser (1990), in her critique of Habermas' public sphere, has long posited that “deliberation can serve as a mask for domination” [11]. While our corpus was relatively evenly split between both major American political parties, the way these affordances are actualized by users may initially appear in the guise of deliberation and increased communication, as forwarded by TikTok, but in actuality solidifies one's own opinions and beliefs while relegating others to a “lesser” or “incorrect” position.

As demonstrated, TikTok has great possibilities for fostering political talk — both with likeminded individuals and with cross-cutting audiences. It is important to heed the risks that come with these possibilities, though. Our analysis demonstrates how three TikTok affordances — Green Screen, Duet, and Stitch — were used to create politically-centric content on an app that could be productive, but also detrimental to achieving a successful democracy (Scheufele, 1999). While the purposes of these features, as presented by the TikTok itself, is to enhance and amplify conversation and creativity, the way these features were deployed in our corpus largely focused on division, discord, insults, and proving others wrong. This demonstrates the role of perception in political TikTok affordances — the perception of these features is largely to divide, not unite. The effects of these videos largely depend on the content being shared, as TikTok has been shown to perpetuate misinformation and disinformation at alarming rates (Basch, *et al.*, 2021). This is of particular concern because TikTok is increasingly being utilized as a news source (Matsa,


2023). As of 2020, over half of Gen Z users reported deriving their news from the app (Newman, 2021).

By conducting a platform-specific analysis of affordances on TikTok via quotidian users, we have shown that there is very little room for ambivalence in these discussions, which contrasts with existing literature on communication on TikTok (Hautea, *et al.*, 2021) and Internet political literature more broadly (Phillips and Milner, 2017). This content is not variable but singular but does still play with sociality and antagonism, reaching out to others while vilifying the opposition. Because quotidian uses enable more harmful and salacious instances of things like misinformation, disinformation, and polarization, the use of these affordances shows how online political communication becomes partisan in everyday actions and interactions.

Based on our corpus, the Green Screen feature has squarely positioned itself as a tool for legitimation amongst content creators for citational evidence that it allows them to provide to their audiences. Because images are generally considered to be more trustworthy (Kasra, *et al.*, 2018), this feature functions in a way that may aid creators in appearing more authoritative on their subject matter than in reality.

The Duet feature adds a new dimension to interactivity across TikTok. While this affordance does facilitate political discourse, it is often through nonverbal communication. The two most frequently observed modes of this nonverbal communication were through exaggerated facial expressions, whether in agreement or disagreement or through superimposed written responses. There are instances of creativity at play in Duet videos, though, wherein full-body movements and embodied silliness are in full view. Unlike most Green Screen videos, TikToks utilizing the Duet affordance also necessitates interaction with other user content. This results in political discourse across the spectrum, whether a showing of intraparty support or a dismantling of an oppositional position.

Through Stitch, by allowing users to supply additional commentary or add to other publicly available videos, TikTok facilitates a veneer of dialogue, but content is actually one-sided. This singularity is bolstered by how individuals use affordances on political TikTok, as these exchanges appear conversational and deliberative but provide no dialogue. In almost all instances, these interactions are one-offs with no additional follow-up. On political TikTok, affordances realized to double down on one's own point of view provide only an illusion of dialogue. According to Habermas' theory of deliberative democracy, political discourse should strive toward "ongoing activity of mutual reason-giving, punctuated by collectively binding decisions" [12]. Using this standard, cross-cutting TikTok Stitches falls far short of productive deliberation. In contrast to these cross-party interactions are demonstrations of solidarity and support for like-minded creators. These videos, while available for both Republicans and Democrats, were more common among conservative-leaning creators. The Stitch affordance specifically warrants further study because of its versatility.

Future studies could investigate the ways in which these affordances are utilized in countries outside of the United States to better understand if these results are generalizable from an international perspective. Other qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, or long-form surveys would also be beneficial to explore the motivations behind the creation and consumption of politically-centric TikTok content. It appears as though TikTok might be here to stay and provide competition to long-standing social media giants like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Its popularity and its reach necessitate scholarly research within this realm to continue. 

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Notes

- [1](#) Kriess, *et al.*, 2018, pp. 9–10.
- [2](#) Zulli and Zulli, 2022, p. 1,874.
- [3](#) Norman, 1999, p. 42.
- [4](#) Gibbs, *et al.*, 2015, p. 256.
- [5](#) Gibbs, *et al.*, 2015, p. 257.
- [6](#) Blodgett and Salter, 2018, p. 137.
- [7](#) Tuters and Hagan, 2020, pp. 2,228, 2,230.
- [8](#) Steiner, 2016, p. 104.
- [9](#) McVeigh-Schultz and Baym, 2015, p. 6.
- [10](#) Phillips and Milner, 2017, p. 10, emphasis in original.
- [11](#) Fraser, 1990, p. 64.
- [12](#) Gutmann and Thompson, 2004, p. 134.

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Us, Them, Right, Wrong: How TikTok's Green Screen, Duet, and Stitch help shape political discourse
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