Defiant Amplification or Decontextualized Commercialization? Protest Music, TikTok, and Social Movements

Olivia Sadler

Abstract

Protest music has historically been a central part of American social change movements. Although some protest music is used solely to bring attention to the evils of an oppressive group, another purpose it may serve is to foster positive self-definition and feelings of unity in communities of oppressed people, and some songs may even do both. This project aimed to explore how TikTok affords expression and connection in relation to the use of and interaction with protest music in online spaces. A critical discourse analysis of a specific case of TikTok protest music, You About To Lose Yo Job, was conducted through the lenses of personal expression as a feature of connective action and affordance theory. The following three themes emerged: lip-syncing as a tool of defiance and reclamation of space, the use of hashtags to game a commercialized platform, and the decontextualization or loss of essence of protest music. These findings indicated that the social and ideological functions served by protest music as background sounds on TikTok created potential new avenues for agency through spatial defiance afforded by green screens and strategies to amplify users’ content to new audiences. However, dominant ideologies of capitalism were also reinforced through gaming of hashtags that were associated with events and trends of culture, diluting the context and blurring the movement affiliation of users, making unclear the function the protest music may serve.

Keywords

social movements, connective action, protest music, TikTok

Protest music and chants have historically been a central part of American social change movements centered around the rights of marginalized people. Although some protest music is solely used to bring attention to the evils of an oppressive group, another purpose it may serve is to foster positive self-definition and feelings of unity in communities of oppressed people, and some songs may even do both. This project aimed to explore how TikTok affords expression and connection in relation to the use of and interaction with protest music in online spaces. A critical discourse analysis of a specific case of TikTok protest music, You About To Lose Yo Job, was conducted through the lenses of personal expression as a feature of connective action and affordance theory. The following three themes emerged: lip-syncing as a tool of defiance and reclamation of space, the use of hashtags to game a commercialized platform, and the decontextualization or loss of essence of protest music. These findings indicated that the social and ideological functions served by protest music as background sounds on TikTok created potential new avenues for agency through spatial defiance afforded by green screens and strategies to amplify users’ content to new audiences. However, dominant ideologies of capitalism were also reinforced through gaming of hashtags that were associated with events and trends of culture, diluting the context and blurring the movement affiliation of users, making unclear the function the protest music may serve.

Keywords

social movements, connective action, protest music, TikTok

Protest music and chants have historically been a central part of American social change movements centered around the rights of marginalized people. Although some protest music is solely used to bring attention to the evils of an oppressive group, another purpose it may serve is to foster positive self-definition and feelings of unity in communities of oppressed people, and some songs may even do both. This project aimed to explore how TikTok affords expression and connection in relation to the use of and interaction with protest music in online spaces. A critical discourse analysis of a specific case of TikTok protest music, You About To Lose Yo Job, was conducted through the lenses of personal expression as a feature of connective action and affordance theory. The following three themes emerged: lip-syncing as a tool of defiance and reclamation of space, the use of hashtags to game a commercialized platform, and the decontextualization or loss of essence of protest music. These findings indicated that the social and ideological functions served by protest music as background sounds on TikTok created potential new avenues for agency through spatial defiance afforded by green screens and strategies to amplify users’ content to new audiences. However, dominant ideologies of capitalism were also reinforced through gaming of hashtags that were associated with events and trends of culture, diluting the context and blurring the movement affiliation of users, making unclear the function the protest music may serve.

Keywords

social movements, connective action, protest music, TikTok

Protest music and chants have historically been a central part of American social change movements centered around the rights of marginalized people. Although some protest music is solely used to bring attention to the evils of an oppressive group, another purpose it may serve is to foster positive self-definition and feelings of unity in communities of oppressed people, and some songs may even do both. This project aimed to explore how TikTok affords expression and connection in relation to the use of and interaction with protest music in online spaces. A critical discourse analysis of a specific case of TikTok protest music, You About To Lose Yo Job, was conducted through the lenses of personal expression as a feature of connective action and affordance theory. The following three themes emerged: lip-syncing as a tool of defiance and reclamation of space, the use of hashtags to game a commercialized platform, and the decontextualization or loss of essence of protest music. These findings indicated that the social and ideological functions served by protest music as background sounds on TikTok created potential new avenues for agency through spatial defiance afforded by green screens and strategies to amplify users’ content to new audiences. However, dominant ideologies of capitalism were also reinforced through gaming of hashtags that were associated with events and trends of culture, diluting the context and blurring the movement affiliation of users, making unclear the function the protest music may serve.

Keywords

social movements, connective action, protest music, TikTok

Protest music and chants have historically been a central part of American social change movements centered around the rights of marginalized people. Although some protest music is solely used to bring attention to the evils of an oppressive group, another purpose it may serve is to foster positive self-definition and feelings of unity in communities of oppressed people, and some songs may even do both. This project aimed to explore how TikTok affords expression and connection in relation to the use of and interaction with protest music in online spaces. A critical discourse analysis of a specific case of TikTok protest music, You About To Lose Yo Job, was conducted through the lenses of personal expression as a feature of connective action and affordance theory. The following three themes emerged: lip-syncing as a tool of defiance and reclamation of space, the use of hashtags to game a commercialized platform, and the decontextualization or loss of essence of protest music. These findings indicated that the social and ideological functions served by protest music as background sounds on TikTok created potential new avenues for agency through spatial defiance afforded by green screens and strategies to amplify users’ content to new audiences. However, dominant ideologies of capitalism were also reinforced through gaming of hashtags that were associated with events and trends of culture, diluting the context and blurring the movement affiliation of users, making unclear the function the protest music may serve.

Keywords

social movements, connective action, protest music, TikTok

Protest music and chants have historically been a central part of American social change movements centered around the rights of marginalized people. Although some protest music is solely used to bring attention to the evils of an oppressive group, another purpose it may serve is to foster positive self-definition and feelings of unity in communities of oppressed people, and some songs may even do both. This project aimed to explore how TikTok affords expression and connection in relation to the use of and interaction with protest music in online spaces. A critical discourse analysis of a specific case of TikTok protest music, You About To Lose Yo Job, was conducted through the lenses of personal expression as a feature of connective action and affordance theory. The following three themes emerged: lip-syncing as a tool of defiance and reclamation of space, the use of hashtags to game a commercialized platform, and the decontextualization or loss of essence of protest music. These findings indicated that the social and ideological functions served by protest music as background sounds on TikTok created potential new avenues for agency through spatial defiance afforded by green screens and strategies to amplify users’ content to new audiences. However, dominant ideologies of capitalism were also reinforced through gaming of hashtags that were associated with events and trends of culture, diluting the context and blurring the movement affiliation of users, making unclear the function the protest music may serve.
to one’s network and is thus creating new opportunities for use of protest music as expression and unification (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Finally, as TikTok continues to be one of the most used apps in the United States, its cultural impact cannot be understated (Koetsier, 2020). Although protest music is just one potential use of the platform, continuing to take TikTok’s cultural power seriously can help further interrogation into how we communicate about change and progress through technology.

Communication scholars have studied internal and external functions regarding the rhetorical power of protest music in offline spaces (Hurner, 2006; Lake, 1983; Morris & Browne, 2013; Sanger, 1995; Stewart et al., 2004). There has also been research on platforms that host music, such as YouTube, being spaces for social-political collective debate (Denisova & Herasimenka, 2019). However, there has been little to no research on how protest music is affected and amplified by the affordances of specific platforms, and how this leads to new avenues for agency and control in terms of personal expression and social movements. In this article, I will extend research on protest music in social movements through the lens of theories of connective action and affordances, as they consider distributed agency of human and nonhuman actors on these sites (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bucher & Helmond, 2018). First, I will review literature on the topics of internal functions of protest music, social movements and connective action, affordances of platforms, and the culture and affordances of TikTok specifically. Using a viral remix that gained popularity as a protest anthem on TikTok called You About To Lose Yo Job as a case study, I will use critical discourse analysis to explore how joy and unity are communicated in protest music on TikTok and how its affordances as a platform potentially enable and constrain its sharing and creation.

Literature Review

Functions of Protest Music

Communication scholars have studied how protest music works as a rhetorical element of social change movements (Lake, 1983; Morris & Browne, 2013; Stewart et al., 2004). The use of protest music can aim to serve both internal functions, or ones meant to empower the oppressed, and external functions, or ones used to critique and enlighten outside dominant groups for social change movements, and even can serve both. Social change efforts that serve internal functions work to sustain and empower members of the group who are advocating for change by promoting self-definition and a sense of solidarity with other members of the group (Lake, 1983; Stewart et al., 2004). For example, during the Black Lives Matter protests of summer 2020 specifically in reaction to the murder of George Floyd and other instances of police brutality, Beyonce released a song called Black Parade, which aimed to celebrate Black diasporic identity as a form of resistance by centering joy over oppression. In addition, protest music can serve an external function, or be rhetorically directed outside the movement to gain the attention or acceptance of the public outside of the group (Stewart et al., 2004). An example from the summer 2020 protests that served this function is the song Black Like Me by Mickey Guyton, which asked White Americans to rethink their privileges. While both rhetorical functions of protest music play key roles in sustaining movements, in this article I will focus on internal functions, as they are the ones that aim to create unity and joy among marginalized groups.

Protest music can potentially serve many internal functions, or ones that serve to support and motivate oppressed people within movements that center around their own liberation. One of the major internal functions of social change music is the mobilization of disparate people that can be accomplished through energizing and uniting a community (Stewart et al., 2004). It is also argued that another internal function of protest music is its work as a creative space for marginalized individuals to reclaim their rhetorical power and positively define themselves through celebration (Sanger, 1995). Protest songs have historically been used by the marginalized, from spirituals sung by enslaved peoples to suffragette anthems, as safe space to build identity and empower oneself outside of the dominant public in defiant ways (Hurner, 2006; Sanger, 1995). Internally aimed social change rhetoric’s have also been shown to serve a consummatory function or help members of communities to define themselves and their relations to others like them, encouraging marginalized individuals to contribute to shifting norms (Hubbs, 2007; Lake, 1983; Stewart et al., 2004). It has yet to be explored in depth by scholars how these functions of protest music may translate into online environments, where music is shared and utilized in novel ways. However, there have been studies on how this feeling of connection is amplified in online spaces, specifically how participants in social movements feel and understand their place within it, through viewing videos and other contents, which often contain musical protest elements (Alfonzo, 2021; Papacharissi, 2015).

Connective Action, Personal Expression, and Online Social Movements

As social movements of the 21st century incorporate both offline and online elements, scholars have noted a shift in logic from collective action brokered mainly by change centered organizations, to one of technologically enabled connective action, as “taking public or contributing to a common good becomes an act of personal expression and recognition or self-validation achieved through sharing ideas and actions in trusted relationships” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 753). Instead of a movement action focusing solely on getting individuals to contribute to the cause, there is now an emphasis on individuals personal sharing about the cause in one’s network. This has seemingly challenged traditional
notions of who brokers relationships in social movements, as the hierarchies of organizations are often traded for ones of horizontal co-production which also has led to a potential decentralization of social movements, turning away from large nonprofit organizations to participation by individuals in their own networks (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Authors have also critically examined this turn toward individualistic activism, specifically focusing on its potential threats to democracy and activist movements (Andrejevic, 2005; Fenton & Barassi, 2011; Hindman, 2009; Sandoval & Fuchs, 2009). Though on a surface level, social media platforms seem to center the role of the individual in activism, they are still deeply embedded with power inequalities that exist offline. Therefore, the platforms have been argued to be representative of neoliberal economic ideologies of surveillance, which include control by corporations, as well as the exploitation of online participants in movements as unpaid labor (Andrejevic, 2005; Sandoval & Fuchs, 2009). Specifically, social media platforms are still subject to what Hindman (2009) referred to as an “online eyeball economy” where individuals and organizations with more mainstream social capital tend to get more views. Therefore, the quality of their political agency is still often controlled by collectives, like traditional news sources, elites, and well-known activist organizations (Hindman, 2009). Along with this illusionary power, individualistic self-centered participation in activism often leads to quantity of participation over quality, leading to fragmented calls for action and unclear goals among movements (Fenton & Barassi, 2011).

However, this does not imply a lack of connection to social change by individuals expressing themselves online, as feelings of connectedness online can lead to the creation of affective publics or “networked publics that are mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 7). Spaces of online discourse, including hashtags, therefore have what have been argued to be their own structures of feeling, or developed tonality and expressive tendencies (Papacharissi, 2015). Raymond Williams developed the concept of structures of feeling to problematize the idea of hegemony. The concept posits that there is never just one dominant way of thinking, instead there are a multitude that reflect the culture of a specific time and they must be looked at in terms of both their structural and affective dimensions. (Williams, 1961). The discursive spaces opened by these structures of feeling are not fully formed static discourses, but rather can be seen as a place for stories to be told and meaning to be made slowly and over time, thus making space for cultural resistance and radicalism to occur in both feeling and action (Papacharissi, 2015).

For example, research shows that Black people use platforms like Vine and Twitter to not only be able to use oral communication and music to express and create joy and positive self-definition, but also as a tool to transcend and resist against normative structures of racist subjugation in discursive spaces (Lu & Steele, 2018). Temed Hashtag Activism, movements including #MeToo and #Sayhername have been used to present counternarratives and build networks of dissent based around personal expression of those often not included in the media elite (Jackson et al., 2020). These hashtags have been shown to lead to the creation of hashtag publics formed around specific social change issues that motivate debate and enable sharing of personal expression, which can include protest music or art (Rambukkana, 2015).

Although little to no research has been done specifically on protest music as a form of movement-based personal expression on TikTok, there has been a small amount of research that has looked at protest music has also been shared more easily among disparate groups in countries with strict media control like Turkey and Pakistan due to social media (Rasul, 2017; Way, 2015). By looking at how the internal functions of protest music manifest through the affordances of social media platforms like TikTok, it will allow a better understanding of how protest music functions as a form of personal expression for individuals which they project to their networks.

Affordances

The theory of affordances was originally forwarded to understand how environments offer clues that suggest animals take certain actions, either directly or indirectly (Gibson, 1979). This theoretical framework has been adapted to study technology in ways that not only look at the design features of devices that prompt users to take certain actions, but also focus on imagined affordances or “the material, mediated, and emotional aspects of technological artifacts and their implications for affordance perception tendencies” (Nagy & Neff, 2015, p. 7). Studying social media platforms based on their affordances, both material and imagined, is a broad theoretical framework, but for this article I aimed to take a platform-sensitive approach, or one that does not see all social media platforms as identical communicative spaces. To understand what a platform affords its users on both a lower level, the specific technological features it has, and a high level, what kind of conditions of engagement and for social dynamics does it enable are not just “limited to the visible senses but can also be felt or heard” (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 7).

Affordances can be seen in mechanisms that can request, demand, allow, encourage, discourage and refuse certain behaviors in users in both easily seen and abstract ways. Looking at the mechanism of affordances in this way allows us to look at how they afford, not just what they afford in both the realms of the social and the technical (Davis, 2020). This approach, which will act as a theoretical framework in this study, operationalizes affordances in a way that account for both human and nonhuman forces at play and gives both agency. Also, this framework acknowledges that a platform’s
By clicking and liking end-users fuel the algorithms, which in their turn generate the information flows fed back to end-users. Moreover, the clicks and likes fuel the interest and engagement of developers, researchers and advertisers who help to keep the platforms in business. (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 29)

One crucial benefit argued to be afforded to marginalized individuals on social media platforms is the ability to craft a space to both cultivate and protect their identity and form community with like-minded others (Hanckel et al., 2019; Lu & Hampton, 2019). For example, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender/and queer or questioning+ youth have been shown to use blocking and privacy settings to partake in “queer world building,” turning the platforms into a place of comfort and security through their own personal curation (Hanckel et al., 2019). Social support is one of the primary functions of social networks, so for marginalized groups a platform’s ability to facilitate perceived, enacted, and received support is a key affordance (Lu & Hampton, 2019). This is especially true on social media sites with affordances that make it so marginalized groups are easily visible to outsiders. The ability to build identity, social support, joy, and catharsis through libidinal energy has been shown to be important to build a strong sense of group unity against a dominant other (Brock, 2019).

Affordances can both constrain or enable marginalized individual’s ability to mobilize and resist (Khazraee & Novak, 2018; Literat & Kliger-Vilenchik, 2019). For example, through a case study analysis, scholars were able to explore how Iranian women were able to share personal narratives in private Facebook groups that would be considered too transgressive to share in offline society. The privacy features of the platform afforded them these resources, creating a new avenue for resistance when offline gathering is unavailable (Khazraee & Novak, 2018). While for different reasons, this study shows how powerful platforms can be for creating unity when proximity is not possible, similar to the summer 2020 protests and November 2020 elections due to COVID restrictions. To this point, research has shown that during election seasons, platforms that have both audio and visual affordances, like Musical.ly, are a central way for young people to connect politically through shared symbolic resources like hashtag use (Literat & Kliger-Vilenchik, 2019). TikTok, while comparable to Musical.ly in terms of affordances for protest and political expression, has unique features that allow new levels of unity and collaboration through musical features which have yet to be explored in depth.

While looking at affordances to understand agency in terms of resistance, it is crucial to acknowledge that technological affordances of a platform exist within a larger societal and cultural frame. As argued by Ganesh and Stohl (2013), when looking at protest movements in the digital age, we must not just look at the affordances of specific technology, but also analyze the social, cultural, economic and historical environments in which they are embedded, thus centering technology as the sole determination of agency and behavior. Technological platforms are created to solve social problems and social problems can be shaped by the platform affordance that control who and what content is given prominence and agency, showing the bias embedded by the human actors who create platforms (Gillespie, 2015; Gillespie et al., 2014).

Therefore, in analyzing the platform affordances of TikTok, I will consider the social and cultural environments in which the platform exists.

**Culture and Affordances of TikTok**

During COVID-related lockdowns, many individuals began spending more time at home than usual, which led to increased use of the already popular platform TikTok, potentially due to boredom and a desire to feel less isolated. TikTok allowed people to enter the “bedrooms of others” and feel a celebration of youth culture through watching others dance and feel joy in their own spaces (Kennedy, 2020). However, TikTok was shown to not be used solely for escapism. Many young people also began to use TikTok as a place to mobilize and galvanize social change, connecting with and empowering each other through fostering feelings of allegiance around shared social concerns (Abidin, 2021).

As use of the platform expanded, so did scholarship aiming to understand its cultural uses as a platform. One of the unique affordances of TikTok is that unlike in traditional social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter, when you open the app you are immediately taken to your scrolling For You page (FYP). While all social network sites include algorithmic features, TikTok purposefully centers theirs. The FYP does not present you primarily with posts and content from people you follow, but rather individuals you do not know that the platform has decided through algorithmic technical features will interest you. This algorithmic feature the FYP has been argued to be set up to incentivize scrolling rather than liking or commenting, blurring the lines between users and platforms. Thus, TikTok encourages individuals to negotiate identity using the algorithm as a sort of moderator, selecting who and what content they interact with, unless users do not have an account and, therefore, do not have access to the
algorithmic FYP (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020). It is also essential to acknowledge that algorithms on all platforms, including TikTok, are not neutral and contain the biases of those who coded them, which means racist logics can exist within them that privilege agency of certain users over others (Sandvig et al., 2016). Therefore, these algorithms often mirror, as opposed to challenging societal affordances, the privilege of certain identities over others in terms of power and control.

The feature of duets is another form of connection afforded by the structure of TikTok, which is both unique and has potential implications for collaborative audio sharing. A duet allows users to place a video clip side by side with another user. An additional popular feature is called stitching, where you can add your clip to the end of other users as a call and response. Finally, individuals commonly use green screens which allow them to insert themselves into photos or videos. All these features contribute to a tree branch like structure of sharing and response leading to high interactivity (Medina Serrano et al., 2020).

TikTok also features the use of background sounds, which are often parts of songs, centering music and other audio features in all content created. Users can take other people’s sounds and interpret them in new ways with ease and without fear of copyright. Similar to how hashtags trend on Twitter, on TikTok sound clips have their own trending page. This leads to the creation of an environment that encourages sharing and parasocial behavior to appeal to others, manifest displays of support or disavowal towards specific users and issues, foster and maintain allegiances within trends and silos, and maintain feelings of connection and enjoyment among each other. (Abidin, 2021, p. 91)

Therefore, one of the potential abstract affordances of TikTok as a platform is feelings of unity which are allowed for by technological affordances, making it a social media environment that may have unique potential to serve internal functions to social movements through music and dance. One popular protest song on TikTok that works as a case to explore this potential is You About To Lose Yo Job (Remix), which worked as a case study for this project.

**Case Study: You About To Lose Yo Job**

Combining theory on internal functions of protest music, individual personal expression as a goal of connective action, as well as affordances, I analyzed a popular protest song which became a viral sound on TikTok called You About To Lose Your Job (Remix). One of the most talked about protest chants of the 2020 came from Johnniqua Charles, a woman with no association with the music industry. A clip of her joyfully singing, “you about to lose yo job” as a police officer detained her with unnecessary force, became an anthem used in offline protests during the summer of 2020, specifically ones centered on Black Lives Matter (Aviles & Kaufman, 2020). It also became a viral sound on TikTok, with over 30 million views of the hashtag associated with it, many of which were made during both the Summer 2020 protests and the November 2020 election. Remixes of the clip have been used as a background sound in millions of TikToks celebrating corrupt politicians, police officers, and White supremacists losing their jobs. The sound clip even spawned a #youabouttoloseyojobtiktok challenge. This case study of the specific discursive space of this viral sound hashtag will work as an exemplar because this remix is an example of a protest song that was based on a viral video, reappropriated as a protest song for progressive groups on TikTok to promote joy and unity, as well as hold those in power accountable and spread easily because of the affordances of the platform. The following questions drove my analysis: What purposes does the You About To Lose Your Job TikTok hashtag as a discursive space represent in terms of personal expression? How is personal expression supported or constrained within this discursive space centered around interaction through and about an example of protest music? How and to what extent does TikTok’s affordance shape this discursive space?

**Method**

To explore these guiding questions, I used critical discourse analysis to study TikTok videos using You About To Lose Yo Job as a background sound. For this study, these TikTok videos were viewed as cultural texts with specific meanings and complex structures and hierarchies of interaction and social practice that play specific functions due to context, society and culture (van Dijk, 1997). Discourse analysis focuses both on the social and ideological functions of language, therefore it can be used to study both the structure and agency of social practices (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Looking at the TikToks through the methodology of critical discourse analysis, as explained by Van Dijk and Fairclough & Wodak, enabled me to view this set of videos as texts of personal expression, as well as connective social processes with ideological dimensions influenced by power and context of the wider social movements they are a part of.

As the original clip of You About To Lose Yo Job led to the creation of countless multitudes of remixes, used in the over 30 million TikToks, I selected one particular sound clip to work as a representative sample. The Lord Sky remix was selected because it is the first sound to come up when you search “Yo About To Lose Yo Job” on TikTok, providing evidence for its prominence. According to the number listed during the month of the study on the TikTok page for the sound, this remix had been used in 3,491 TikToks, allowing for a large variety of audio and visual content for me to observe. A preliminary viewing of the tag for this background sound showed that the TikToks varied in content and style in a way that allowed for a high level of variation in what I observed.
Each of the TikTok videos in the tag associated with this sound was analyzed in the aggregate as both visual and audio texts that expressed dominant and subordinate ideologies in terms of social movements. The sound tag was systematically and thematically coded to explore how their creators expressed themselves through use of this protest song through the lenses of connective action and affordance theories. I viewed the tag multiple times over the course of a month to find emergent themes, noting the similarities and differences, as well as how the videos provided agency or reinforced dominant ideologies.

Connective action as a theoretical position posits that due to digital features becoming central to social movements, there is now an emphasis on personal sharing of expressive emotion about the cause in one’s network. Specifically, there has been a shift to the rise of individualistic personal action framing when speaking about activism that “result in engagement with politics as an expression of personal hopes, lifestyles, and grievances” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 743). I paid key attention to the emotional expression shown by the individual users to their networks through their interpretation and interaction with the song and how this fit into their individualism. I specifically looked for personal expressions of positive emotion as guided by my research questions but did not ignore other potential emotions expressed in the units of analysis.

In addition, key attention was paid to expression aimed to connect and create unity within a perceived social movement through looking at both the visual and audio elements of the TikTok, as it is crucial in critical discourse analysis to look at not only the technical elements of the units of analysis but the social processes they are a part of. Finally, I analyzed what the platform of TikTok affords users in the creation of content using this protest song as background sound, paying special attention to what uses of the platform were common and those that were absent. Using Davis’ (2020) operationalization of affordances, I looked at the structural and abstract features of the platform and what they requested, demanded, allowed, encouraged, and discouraged the users in my sample to do.

To organize the data that came from my multiple passes through the sample, I used the constant comparative method which is useful in creating abstract theoretical categories from data while focusing on similarities and differences. During the first few passes of the sample, I used open coding to note emergent themes and their relation to the theoretical framework of this study. Then, I used axial coding to create connections between codes, leading to the final stage of selective coding when I reached the point where I could delimit the core themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I discovered three main thematic categories that will be explained and discussed in the Findings and Discussion section.

Findings and Discussion

Through the use of constant comparison certain themes appeared, recurred, and were reinforced throughout the videos observed, rising to the top in terms of prevalence as they addressed how these TikTok affordances served to enable and constrain personal expression and connective action through the use of protest music. These findings are revealed in the following three thematic categories: lip-syncing as defiance, gaming and commercializing amplification, and decontextualization of protest music.

Lip-Syncing as Defiance

In terms of self-expression, an exceedingly large number of the videos in this sample involved individuals lip-syncing along to the *You About To Lose Yo Job* often coupled with joyous, exuberant, and celebratory dancing. Past research has shown how marginalized communities, particularly Black communities, use protest music to feel energy and communicate unity with others and that was clearly the case on this platform as well (Lu & Steele, 2018). Memetics, or the creation of content with large amounts of user engagement that encourage creativity and mimicking, has long been a part of social media culture (Shifman, 2011). This use of movement and lip-syncing on TikTok to this specific viral clip falls into that tradition as it was specifically mocking and defiant, in a comedic way. For example, one video in the tag featured a young Black woman happily eating snacks, lip-syncing, and dancing with a picture of a news story about a racist soldier losing his job over his violent assault of a Black man in the background. The act of the young girl snacking implies that she finds this man receiving a punishment for his action as entertaining and joyous, and thus, worthy of celebration like one might watch a movie or concert. Another specific example of this prevalent and repeating theme was a video of a young White woman who self-identified as a member of the queer community danced and lip-synced over a reply of another user that said, “You are a libtard #TRUMP2020,” dancing directly on top of the reply on the screen with her tongue sticking out, showing a sense of literal and symbolic “above-ness” over both Trump and the individuals who support his ideologies. This expressive mocking afforded is part of a greater social trend that exists both in and outside of this platform and thus cannot be solely attributed to its affordances. It has been argued that normally marginalized groups can feel empowered through their ability to contribute to the “cancelling” of an individual whose actions they deem problematic (Ng, 2020). Although this has negative consequences in some cases, it seems to be emancipatory and joyful as a form of expression here. The frequency of this joyful and emancipatory expression helped in shaping this discursive space’s specific structure of feeling.
Throughout the TikTok videos observed, while other collaborative features like stitching and slide shows were used frequently, the most common feature that users utilized was green screens. This feature affords users to place a picture or image in their video which they can move in front of and become a part of, like computer-generated imagery (CGI) in a movie. In this tag the most used green screens were news stories of right-wing oppressors losing their jobs or facing other tangible consequences for their actions, as well as election maps showing Trump’s 2020 defeat. This feature encouraged users in this tag to interact with news media in an expressive way not allowed by traditional comment sections, as they had space to move, prompting a sense of agency and power. This feature also allowed users to express mocking and defiant joy in ways that may be physically unsafe in offline protest spaces. Many users used the green screen to make it look as though they were outside a police precinct or even in Trump’s Oval Office, creating the illusion that they are lip-syncing this protest song in the face of those who have caused them and others in their community harm. For example, one Black woman defiantly danced on a green screen of Trump’s desk. TikTok’s green screen feature coupled with this protest sound provided users with a unique opportunity to mock those who caused them harm without threat of physical violence. It is also crucial to note that this protest song rose to popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing the green screen to serve as a substitute for being in protest space due to health and safety reasons. For example, some people used a green screen of a Black Lives Matter protest picture to make it seem as though they were a part of this offline event, affording them the opportunity to enter into the great social and cultural moment outside of the platform.

This recurrent theme exemplifies how TikTok audio and visual features allow for opportunities to both interact with social issues and express joy in victories of all sizes, without fear of physical offline violence. Connective action allowed by social media has led to sharing becoming a key part of movements, thus gaming the system to amplify oneself has become one as well, leading to potentials for protest music to be used in relation to dominant ideologies of capitalism and influencer culture, potentially obsessed with amplification over unification. The focus on quantity over quality of political action due to the

Gaming and Commercializing Amplification

Another theme that emerged in different instances throughout the tag observed was the use of both video caption and hashtags to both amplify and dilute the movement affiliation of the users. While other social media sites like Twitter and Instagram aggregate users’ posts by hashtags, on TikTok videos are also searchable by background sound hashtags. This means that the individuals that used *You About To Lose Yo Job* as a background sound also had the potential to amplify their video onto other hashtags on the platform. As stated earlier, one of TikTok’s unique features is the FYP, which through algorithmic means presents users with videos of people outside their network of followers based on perceived shared interests (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020). Many users in the sample would put #fyp and #fyppage alongside tags with social movement implications like #dumptrump and #blm potentially indicating motivation to get their content featured on the FYP. Users also tagged specific TikTok trends or challenges that were popular during the time beside movement tags. For example, many videos in the tag made in late February 2021 used the tag #SuperBowlLV which indicates an attempt to amplify their video into that popular event tag, even though it had no association with the event content wise. TikTok affords the use of multiple hashtags in captions allowing users to connect to like-minded others, creating a sense of community, while also connecting to capitalistic, brand sponsored tags by attempting to game the system to amplify their videos to larger audiences. Connective action posits that individual’s major goal in this kind activist action is to share with one’s network, and these users aimed to make there’s as large as possible. Therefore, both the users and the creators of hashtags associated with trends in media and culture benefit, potentially diluting the resistive elements of the protest music, as it feeds into capitalistic trends.

Along with users in this tag utilizing the FYP and commercial tags to amplify their videos, many also used hashtags in a way that made it unclear what social movements they were associated with. For example, many videos used hashtags associated with left winged political movements like #Blacklivesmatter, #DefundThePolice, and #Dumptrump while also tagging #MAGA, #Conservative, and #DonaldTrump in the same caption. Doing this afforded the user the chance to amplify their content to different groups on TikTok, including ones who would disagree with their positionalality. While looking at how the person utilizes the protest song in the background of their video, one could make assumptions about which hashtags best represent their social leanings, however concrete movement affiliation is blurred. This abstraction highlights some of the soft ties made in affective publics created through hashtags, as the structures of feeling that define the groupings are not always clearly definable (Papacharissi, 2015).

Connective action on social media theorizes that personal sharing has become a key part of movements, thus gaming the system to amplify oneself has become one as well, leading to potentials for protest music to be used in relation to dominant ideologies of capitalism and influencer culture, potentially obsessed with amplification over unification.
Decontextualization of Protest Music

The third emergent theme discovered was that while all the TikTok videos in the sample utilized the same protest song as a background sound, many of them did not appear to hold true to the essence of the original origins of the remix. *You About To Lose Your Job* was a viral clip of a Black woman humorously defying an authority figure who traditionally has oppressed Black people in America, the police. Along with being crafted into a viral musical remix that spread on social media, this remix was used specifically as a chant at Black Lives Matter protests that aimed to hold police accountable and advocated for the reform, defunding, or sometimes abolition of the policing system (Aviles & Kaufman, 2020). All these goals are often associated with marginalized activists who experience disproportionate abuse by these systems.

However, TikTok encourages users to appropriate sound clips in a way that diffuses the original context, leading to a problematic potential for the diminished agency for the creators. As Davis (2020) argues, platforms can afford the creation of content that silences and amplifies certain voices. In this case, the original context of the song as a form of protest was seemingly muddled by the spread of it as a background sound. Many individuals were potentially introduced to the sound in a way detached from a specific social movement action, like protest, and instead learned of it solely through TikTok. Therefore, the users may or may not know the original context of the song, which was shown here in this sample in differing levels. First, many of the individuals dancing and singing in these videos were White presenting individuals. Although their content and hashtag use often indicated support for Black Lives Matter and other progressive movements, these individuals mouthing along to a song which features the voice of a Black woman can be seen as appropriation, as Johnniqua Charles’ voice as a Black woman is decentered by the White bodies dancing in the videos.

The sound was further appropriated and stripped of its original essence by right wing TikTok users. For example, some users used this song to celebrate fanatical and fictional claims, including a White woman smugly dancing behind a green screen of Joe Biden, who she claimed would lose his job as explained by a Q Anon conspiracy theory. Another user lip-synced and flipped off the camera with a green screen of a photo saying “Trump Back-to-Back impeachment champ” looming over him. Finally, some users even further decontextualized the original origin of the song by using it as a background sound for apolitical videos. For example, a few videos included teachers lip-syncing the song to student line leaders who misbehaved, claiming they would lose their job.

TikTok encourages the use of sounds made by a variety of creators without fear of copyright. However, this free reign also affords the potential loss of agency of the song as a protest anthem, as it is diluted and reappropriated in uncontrollable ways. Protest music has historically been used to communicate with both external and internal publics in social movements, but TikTok allows these songs to be able to communicate meanings that strip them of their essence completely, potentially sanitizing their abilities to promote energy and unity to specific movements.

Conclusion

In sum, this project aimed to explore how a specific discursive space on TikTok centered around a protest song affords expression and intersects with connective action as a logic of social movement, specifically in terms of individualistic participation and personal expression. Through a critical discourse analysis of a specific case of protest music used on the platform TikTok, the following themes of use emerged: lip-syncing as tool of defiance and reclamation of space, the use of hashtags to game a commercialized platform, and the decontextualization or loss of essence of protest music. These findings indicate that the social and ideological functions served by this exemplar of protest music on TikTok create new avenues for expression and agency through spatial defiance afforded by green screens and strategies to amplify user’s content to new audiences. However, analysis of this background sound’s usage indicates how users also reinforce dominant ideologies of capitalism through gaming of hashtags that are associated with events and trends of culture, while also diluting the context and blurring the movement affiliation of users, making potentially unclear the function the protest music may serve, but not erasing their resistive storytelling potentials.

This project has potential implications for those who participate in social movements as well as those who study them in online platforms. Protest music online serves both novel and traditional functions. First, the novel ways the green screen feature on TikTok provides agency to the oppressed to mock their oppressors in space that would be unsafe offline, can be utilized as a new form of resistance through joy. Social activists can express themselves through combination of protest music and visuals in a way that both provides agency and promotes creativity in movement-based expression. Second, social movement organizers can benefit from the amplification techniques afforded by hashtags like the FYP or trend
centered tags to distribute their messages into wider audiences than their direct network of followers.

This study also holds potential theoretical implications for the study of movements. Along with new potentials for using protest music to spread joy and unity, TikTok’s imagined affordances, including allowing the use of background sounds drained from original context, can lead to the diluting of essence of protest music in a way that sanitizes their political power. This study also illuminates some of the pitfalls of personal expression as a key feature of connective action as a new logic of social movements. Specifically, it shows how emphasis on sharing and personal expression as a form of social action has led to social movements becoming intertwined with capitalist ideologies, both explicitly and implicitly. The desire to amplify one’s causes is sometimes hard to distinguish from the desire to be seen and profit from exposure, both socially and monetarily. This is exemplary of the increasingly horizontal nature of social action, complicated hierarchies of social activism and creating novel avenues of participation.

One limitation of this study was that I did not speak to individual users and thus their motivations and gratifications from using protest music as a background sound is unknown. Therefore, it is unclear if personal expression shown was what the individual intended, and what networks they aimed to share their activism with. Future research could expand on this study by performing qualitative interviews of users, thus expanding understanding on how the use of protest music functions on these platforms. The scope of the sample is also a limitation, as it just looked at one remix of a viral clip that constitutes a much larger scope of videos on the platform. I also only looked at one protest song, specifically deriving from a grassroots manor, and not at one created by someone prominent in the music industry. The use of more traditional protest songs may offer different forms of expression. Future research should look at how TikTok affords and inhibits the sharing and creation of protest art of other kinds, creating more strategies for social movements. Finally, I did not take into account the expression and sharing occurring in the comments section, as my question aimed to look at the audio and visual features of the TikTok videos themselves as texts of personal expression, limiting my ability to understand inter-user interaction outside of visual features like stiches and duets. This, however, did not limit my ability to look at connective action occurring, as this logic centers the individual and their expression to their perceived networks. Future research could expand the critical discourse analysis performed here by exploring the conversations that take place in the comment sections and their implications for connection, unity, and disunity within movements. This project explored the viral sound, You About To Lose Yo Jobs, use on TikTok and how the affordances of this platform may have potential uses and impacts for personal and emotive expression as well as the creation of discursive spaces of connective action. As TikTok continues to evolve as a space for social movements to both exist and resist conventional offline practice, scholars must explore the implications this platform has for both novel and traditional forms of expression that has been a part of social movements in American culture throughout its history, including protest music.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD
Olivia Sadler https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6753-2608

References
Abidin, C. (2021). Mapping internet celebrity on TikTok: Exploring attention economies and visibility labours. Cultural Science Journal, 12(1), 77–103. http://doi.org/10.5334/csci.140
Alfonzo, P. (2021). A typology of twitter tactics: Tracing the rhetorical dimension and digital labor of networked publics. Social Media + Society, 7(2), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305121102514
Andrejevic, M. (2005). The work of watching one another: Lateral, surveillance, risk and governance. Surveillance and Society, 2, 479–497. https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v2i4.3359
Aviles, G., & Kaufman, S. (2020, June 16). “You about to lose yo job” creator talks about how viral video has changed her life. NBC News. https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/pop-culture-news/you-about-lose-yo-job-creator-talks-about-how-viral-n1231117
Bennett, L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. Information, Communication & Society, 15(5), 739–768. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661
Bhandari, A., & Bimo, S. (2020). TikTok and the “algorithmized self”: A new model of online interaction. AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research, 2020. https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2020i0.1117
Brock, A. L. (2019). Distributed blackness: African American cybercultures. NYU Press.
Bucher, T., & Helmond, A. (2018). The affordances of social media platforms. In J. Burgess, A. Marwick, & T. Poell (Eds.), The SAGE handbook of social media (pp. 233–253). SAGE.
Davis, J. (2020). How artifacts afford: The power and politics of everyday things. MIT Press.
Denisova, A., & Herasimenka, A. (2019). How Russian rap on YouTube advances alternative political deliberation: Hegemony, counter-hegemony, and emerging resistant publics. Social Media + Society, 5(2), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119835200
Fairclough, N., & Wodak, R. (1997). Critical Discourse Analysis. In T. van Dijk (Ed.), Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction (pp. 258–284). SAGE.
Fenton, N., & Barassi, V. (2011). Alternative media and social networking sites: The Politics of individuation and political participation. The Communication Review, 14(3), 179–196. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2011.597245
