



# Political Performances: TikTok's Sonic Influence on Affective Activist Expression

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**DOI:** 10.71045/musau.2025.SI.20

**Abstract:** This study explores political expression on TikTok among Austria-based creators, revealing how the platform's unique architecture opens up new avenues for civic activism. Employing online ethnography and interviews, it uncovers insights into users' engagement with local politics, highlighting TikTok's aural dimensions of activist expression. The research showcases TikTok's role in fostering political mobilization through creative sonic expressions, like lip-syncs, songs, and skits. It highlights the platform's significance in youth activism, emphasizing its playful and joyful approach in engaging Gen Z with political discussion. Furthermore, the study analyzes TikTok's performative aspects, spotlighting its cultural impact on sound and how sonic creativity serves as a tool for engaging audiences. By examining political performances on TikTok, this research contributes to an understanding of affective political engagement on the platform by expanding national studies and positioning TikTok as a catalyst for a new form of political expression, rooted in creative sonic elements and affective mobilization. It advocates for further exploration of TikTok's role in broader social movements and encourages an investigation of affective dimensions in audiovisual activism across various media landscapes.

**Keywords:** affect; audiovisual; COVID-19; digital activism; digital ethnography; Gen Z; social media; social creativity; sonic turn; TikTok

## Introduction

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok has witnessed not only a notable upsurge in its user base but also a change in its reputation, diverging from its initially apolitically perceived stance. Contrary to the popular perception of the platform as associated solely with lip-syncing teens and lighthearted dances, there has been a discernible integration of political discourse within the app's short video format. This emergence of political content, cleverly interwoven with the medium's playful and musical nature,

began to capture public attention around 2020. Instances such as the online advocacy of the Black Lives Matter movement and a protest orchestrated through TikTok influencing a Trump campaign rally marked pivotal moments in acknowledging the platform's political dimension. Although leveraging social media for political ends is not novel, exploring how the influential short video app contributes to civic activism warrants thorough examination. This study illuminates the nuances of political expression on TikTok through a detailed investigation focusing on Austria-based creators, elucidating their engagement with local politics and underscoring the prominence of the auditory sphere within this realm of digital activism.

Due to its relative novelty, the research landscape surrounding TikTok lacks an extensive scholarly backdrop. Initially, only a handful of researchers, such as Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik (2019),<sup>1</sup> Ackermann and Dewitz (2020),<sup>2</sup> and Serrano et al. (2020),<sup>3</sup> explored facets of political discourse within the app. However, the academic discourse on the platform has swiftly expanded, culminating in substantial publications, like a book by Kaye et al. titled *TikTok: Creativity and Culture in Short Video* (2022).<sup>4</sup> Notably, this work dedicates a chapter to activism, spotlighting TikTok's global influence on social movements—an assertion echoed in the introduction to the 2023 special issue of *Social Media + Society*, "TikTok and Social Movements," co-edited by Lee and Abidin. This introduction contends that "TikTok's interactive and creative affordances have augmented and altered ways of mobilizing and engaging with publics for various beliefs through the vehicle of social media pop cultures."<sup>5</sup>

Building upon this interconnectedness between protest practices, youth culture, and digital realms, the present study endeavors to augment the current understanding of activist discourse on TikTok. Specifically, it delves into the impact of TikTok's sonic architectural elements on fostering opportunities for affective political mobilization. The technological landscape of TikTok, which notably prioritizes the auditory dimension of content creation, introduces an unprecedented emphasis on sound within contemporary hybrid activism. While video-sharing encompasses various aesthetic forms, TikTok's socio-technological ecosystem amplifies the role of sonic creativity, with participants leveraging sound as a medium for shaping personae and engaging with audiences in playful yet impactful ways. From remixing audio templates to creating original sounds through creative sonic expressions such as lip-syncs, songs, and skits, creators of this study

engage in performances that address local political issues, particularly within the context of Austria. These embodied engagements are construed as generating affective sonic experiences, underscoring the potent influence of sound in eliciting tactile sensations and evoking emotional responses from audiences.

This study adopts an online ethnographic research methodology, integrating data collected through participant observation and nine in-depth interviews with users and creators based in Austria. The semi-structured interviews, conducted from May to July 2021, were all conducted with the participants' explicit consent for recording and had an average duration of 53 minutes each. At the study's inception, the participants' ages ranged between 16 and 27, and seven self-identified as cisgender female, one as a cisgender male, and one as non-binary. Participants may be identified on the basis of their preference, using their first name, platform username, or an asterisk-marked pseudonym assigned to them. All interviews were conducted in German, and original quotes from these interviews are provided in the footnotes. Given the limited prior exposure to TikTok before this research, this work reflects the accumulation of field-specific observations and the thematic analysis of online ethnographic interviews. The qualitative nature of this study offers a partial perspective of TikTok's activist landscape; however, the insights are anticipated to offer profound perspectives into the experiences of individuals, enriching our understanding of the growing significance of auditory elements within (digital) activist endeavors.

## **Reimagining Activism: TikTok as a Catalyst for Civic Participation**

"I don't think one thing can exist without the other nowadays," asserts activist @yourfuturesteppapai, delving into the discourse surrounding online and offline activism.<sup>6</sup> Employment of digital platforms, tools, and applications to advocate for political and social change typically falls under the umbrella term "digital activism." Kaun and Uldam elucidate that digital activism is an ambiguous and broad concept, encompassing specific activist forms as well as all digital endeavors aimed at political ends.<sup>7</sup> It is imperative to transcend the dichotomy between virtual and "real-world" protest to comprehend activism and protest in today's digitalized society, along with its possibilities, dynamics,

and risks—while digital platforms have introduced new collective forms, mobilization conditions, and political engagement avenues, they should not be misconstrued as impartial spaces.<sup>8</sup> The widespread utilization of social media in particular has sparked debates regarding its efficacy in fostering political participation. Nonetheless, studies challenge these reservations by demonstrating the political relevance of even low-effort actions (Freelon et al. 2020),<sup>9</sup> the predictive nature of sharing political content on social media for offline political engagement (Lane et al. 2017),<sup>10</sup> and the convergence of offline and online activism into “hybrid activism” that complement each other (Milošević-Đorđević and Žeželj 2017).<sup>11</sup> Fabian, an active participant in activism, offers insights into the role of digital activism within existing and evolving protest cultures, highlighting TikTok’s burgeoning popularity as a platform for online activist engagement:

In the past we have witnessed success for social movements on several social media, starting with the Arab Spring, which was mainly organized through Twitter, or in Belarus, which mainly happens via Telegram. In any case, social media contribute a very large part and of course also help social movements because they go beyond these usual well-trying news channels, some of which are under state control in autocratic systems. ... The advantage of TikTok is that as soon as there is any fuss or a topic that defines the time, you will be flooded with content on that topic. So, when I look at the Black Lives Matter time, when the big demonstrations took place about a year ago, my “For You” page was full of it.<sup>12</sup>

Fabian, despite being an infrequent user of TikTok, has ventured into video production through his profile “@fhurbi” with the goal of providing young individuals with their first exposure to political content while communicating his messages effectively (Fig. 1). He strives for broad outreach, targeting users who may not have solidified strong political views. His approach involves delivering explanations and educational insights, focusing on daily Austrian political occurrences in a clear and engaging manner within his videos:

I thought I should mainly politically educate and give background information on what is happening on a daily basis and explain the things that are happening. ... Also to shed light on things that are not so present in the basic perception. For example, I have discussed voting behavior in parliament, because a lot of people do not follow that, and sometimes very interesting things happen.<sup>13</sup>

Fabian employs diverse strategies to ensure that his content resonates with users, such as producing content that is “not too clearly recognizable as left-wing content,” discussing current issues, and actively engaging with young



Figure 1: Screenshot of a TikTok video by @fhurbi

users on the platform.<sup>14</sup> His emphasis on fostering political education and discussion is evident in his appreciation for a particular affordance: “One of my favorite features is that you can reply to comments with videos.”<sup>15</sup> An illustrative instance is showcased in figure 1,<sup>16</sup> where Fabian addresses a reaction he received on a video discussing the ongoing Syrian conflict, emphasizing Austria’s responsibility in providing refuge. In response to a comment querying Syria’s role in past world wars, Fabian shared a video clarifying the historical context.

Fabian’s interactive approach underscores how activists are adapting their methods to leverage new digital platforms for expressing concerns and influencing political spheres. Notably, social media have emerged as a pivotal space for political discourse, evident in movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo originating from Twitter hashtags.<sup>17</sup> Within this realm, Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik advocate for discerning the unique affordances of various social media platforms and recognizing how platform design shapes the dissemination of political information, allowing activists to strategically utilize digital resources aligned with their agendas.<sup>18</sup> Examining political communication on TikTok, Serrano et al. highlight how political discourse on the platform is growing into a “relevant aspect of TikTok’s ecosystem.”<sup>19</sup> The authors identify TikTok as fostering more interactive

political communication compared to other platforms, attributing this to video reproduction features like replies, duets, and stitches.<sup>20</sup> These functionalities, as creator @vik.talk highlights, “make TikTok a great discussion platform, because you can respond to videos directly,”<sup>21</sup> enabling direct comparisons between viewpoints. @vik.talk’s videos, which she categorizes as “political commentary,” are inspired by current events, reflecting the platform’s capacity to facilitate engaging discussions:

I get inspired by a political event or something that I've read or something that someone has commented on, and then I just give my opinion on it ... I noticed that many people say “thank you for saying that,” because they feel that they are heard. So I find it very interesting that there are apparently a lot of people who currently have the feeling that certain topics are not being addressed or are not being discussed in politics. I believe that TikTok is a great platform where you can see that there are others in the population who also think that way; not politicians but citizens.<sup>22</sup>



Figure 2: Screenshot of a TikTok video by @vik.talk

@vik.talk further highlights that TikTok has “created the opportunity for me to reach people with my opinions and my expertise in an uncomplicated way.”<sup>23</sup> This sentiment aligns with Zhao and Abidin’s conceptualization of TikTok as an alternative activist space, fostering “everyday, nonheroic, and performative forms of online discursive activism.”<sup>24</sup> In the video captured

in figure 2,<sup>25</sup> @vik.talk contributes to this kind of civic political discourse by addressing a recent domestic policy in Austria, which she characterizes as Islamophobic. Through her continuous monologues in such videos, she adopts a satirical approach to situations, conveying messages that are both earnest and provocative.

TikTok's engaging and interactive dynamics have drawn attention in discussions about political participation behaviors. Teri Del Rosso emphasizes TikTok's "participatory culture," highlighting how engagement with current trends and the use of its distinctive features fosters collaborative interactions unlike those on other social media.<sup>26</sup> Bandy and Diakopoulos delve deeper into collective action within the short video app, underscoring its crucial divergence from other platforms. They note that TikTok's algorithmic proactive approach of continuously delivering a personalized and limitless stream of videos fundamentally shapes the user's experience and content discovery process.<sup>27</sup>

Judith Ackermann's research demonstrates that compared to other social media platforms, TikTok exhibits notably heightened levels of user activity and deeper user engagement in activities that reflect opinion formation, particularly in political realms: liking, sharing, commenting on videos, and creating original content.<sup>28</sup> Interviewed participants unanimously recognize the algorithm's global reach as a significant advantage, acknowledging TikTok's unparalleled speed in propelling video success. Ebru, a TikTok creator and musician known as Schwesta Ebra, emphasizes the emergence of communities on TikTok that foster encouragement and discussion: "it is also a space where you can open up and find like-minded people."<sup>29</sup> She reflects on the impact of positive feedback on one of her videos transforming into her debut single: "The first single, which was actually just a TikTok video at the beginning, got a lot of reactions and was what ultimately motivated me to actually publish it."<sup>30</sup> Further underscoring the platform's influence on her creative process, in her second single Ebru addresses the issue of so-called dickpics and the issue often associated with it of women facing unsolicited nude photos and sexual harassment. Engaging the TikTok community, she actively sought input from individuals, inviting them to share their experiences before releasing this impactful single:

So I reached out to a few people and asked if they wanted to participate by briefly saying how old they were the first time they were involuntarily sent a dickpic. A lot of people also commented their age. They wrote, 11,

12, 14; that's extremely young.<sup>31</sup>



Figure 3: Screenshot of a TikTok video by Ebru, released on her account @2bebis

Ebru integrated parts of this empowering story-sharing into her track and shared a snippet of the music video to promote her new song on the account she co-owns, “@2bebis,” shown in figure 3.<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, she refrains from categorizing her civic engagement as activism, expressing the following sentiment: “It’s not enough.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, @vik.talk, known for fostering political discussions on TikTok, hesitates to self-identify as an activist, believing her efforts are insufficient, stating: “I probably wouldn’t call myself an activist, because I think that would somewhat minimize other people’s activism ... I don’t do enough for that”.<sup>34</sup> This ambivalence reflects a prevalent trend in which digital spaces have become integral to contemporary social movements, while legitimacy still largely rests with activism in physical spaces. Madison and Klang highlight this discrepancy, noting that while a broad spectrum of activities supporting an overarching goal is accepted in offline political and civic engagement, digital activism often faces harsher scrutiny.<sup>35</sup> Chris Bobel observes that the “activist” label is often associated with a “perfect standard” with which many carrying out acts of activism do not identify,<sup>36</sup> mirroring the interviewed creators’ sentiments.



## Gen Z's Playground: Political Voicing Through Creativity

TikTok has solidified its position as a global frontrunner in social media, maintaining its status as the most downloaded app worldwide for the third consecutive year in 2022.<sup>37</sup> The circumstances of widespread lockdowns due to the coronavirus outbreak appear to have contributed to the app's meteoric rise, with people globally seeking entertainment during periods of enforced isolation. Most individuals interviewed for this study revealed that they began using TikTok specifically during the spring 2020 lockdowns. Mona Khattab highlights that beyond serving as an antidote to lockdown-induced boredom, the app features innovative editing tools that elevate "the individualization and creativity of video sharing to a new level."<sup>38</sup> In the realm of political content dissemination, a discernible pattern emerges wherein messages are conveyed through a distinct emphasis on musical and sonic creativity. This manifests in the creation and reinterpretation of diverse soundbites, executed through techniques such as voiceovers, singing, lip-syncing, or the performance of skits. While TikTok's creative potential plays a pivotal role in disseminating and appropriating political information, Kaye et al. propose the concept of "circumscribed creativity," suggesting that the platform's design subtly influences TikTokers toward specific creative expressions.<sup>39</sup> For example, Lee and Abidin observe that memes have become the predominant vehicle for circulating political messages, asserting that meme culture within TikTok's framework has fundamentally "reconfigured our ways to engage in, lead, and even disrupt social movements."<sup>40</sup>

Activists harness a spectrum of creative potentials within TikTok's humor-infused environment, leveraging memes, parody, and ironic exaggeration as distinct stylistic tools in the artistic expression of political messaging. The profound influence of TikTok's entertaining landscape on political engagement has recently captured the attention of scholars like Cervi and Divon, who introduced the term "playful activism," opening avenues for making "democratic participation more relatable, tangible, and accessible."<sup>41</sup> Contrasting the nature of political content on TikTok with other platforms, @yourfuturesteppapai notes that "some activists on Instagram have gotten into the habit of writing very high-handedly and thus exercising a form of epistemic violence ... Because of its humoristic environment, it [TikTok] offers a nice 'low-threshold' approach to politics."<sup>42</sup> Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik

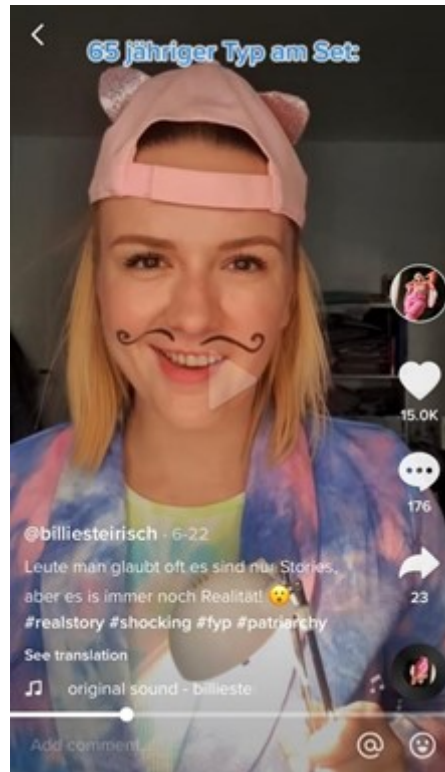


Figure 4: Screenshot of a TikTok video by @billiesteirisch

underscore the relevance of these novel forms within activism paradigms, emphasizing how TikTok’s playful culture challenges traditional norms of political expression.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Vijay and Gekker’s case study on TikTok accentuates how satirical videos attract audiences that are typically harder to engage.<sup>44</sup> Singer and actress @billiesteirisch also echoes the sentiment that through TikTok’s performative and playful elements, “political content is made more easily accessible to the masses; it’s easier to digest that way.”<sup>45</sup> As illustrated in figure 4,<sup>46</sup> she narrates an incident of workplace sexual harassment, employing varied voice tones, facial expressions, and gestures to enact the role of the harasser. This storytelling approach aims at raising awareness for everyday sexism women face in (working) life. @billiesteirisch likes to adopt a comedic approach to shed light on serious topics, often incorporating her original music or utilizing compatible background sounds. Through her alter ego, she regularly shares concise comedic skits, intending to spark critical reflections on societal issues:

I want there to be a discourse between people who are still stuck in patriarchy with their heads and people who are simply more open and educated in that regard—in terms of feminism. I notice that the fronts are totally hardened, and that’s why I try to break it up a bit in a playful way ... Instead of just talking about it, I want to portray issues as an actor

in a scene.<sup>47</sup>

The playful nature that defines TikTok's content has transformed the platform from light entertainment into a platform for self-expression and information dissemination, becoming a hub conducive to political expression and dialogue. Because @zoffnix perceives the video sharing platform as an invaluable information repository for political discourse, she has established an account dedicated to discussing political candidates, parties, and their agendas in Austria. Through the creation of short skits, the creator shares engaging political content, frequently adopting a dialogue simulation format to convey information:

I try to make a mixture of funny videos that at the same time very often have a serious message behind them. ... With serious content but somehow packaged in trends or other funny things, you definitely can reach people and convey certain messages.<sup>48</sup>



Figure 5: Screenshot of a TikTok video by @zoffnix

The auditory dimension consistently defines @zoffnix's videos, comprising predominantly musical or memetic sounds. She frequently sources sounds from her "For You" page, adeptly combining trending audio elements with the thematic content she intends to address. In the video depicted in figure 5,<sup>49</sup> @zoffnix tackles the critical issue of deteriorating mental health among young

individuals due to the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing its neglect within political discourse. Segments from the song “Seguimento Tin” by Mosta Man accompany her performance, creating a sarcastic undertone when taken out of context and adapted to suit the desired effect. The inclusion of text overlays serves to disentangle the intricate interplay between sound, video, and textual elements within @zoffnix’s creations. With a professional involvement in political youth education, the creator advocates for adapting to emerging media landscapes, viewing TikTok as an increasingly influential platform for engaging with youth.<sup>50</sup> Echoing this sentiment, @vik.talk observes a trend of young people actively engaging with and expressing their political views on TikTok, highlighting a critically engaged youth: “It must be said that that Gen Z is very political anyway ... and TikTok is the platform that Gen Z uses the most.”<sup>51</sup> The 16-year-old student Elisabeth\* offers further insight:

Most of my friends have TikTok; I could only name two people who don’t. ... Through TikTok I generally often find out that something has happened if a lot of people address it. ... I wasn’t concerned with the word “femicide” before learning about it through TikTok and social media.<sup>52</sup>

With over 75 percent of TikTok’s users worldwide under 25 years old and nearly 50 percent falling within the 18 to 24 age group in 2022,<sup>53</sup> Kaye et al. argue that this youthful majority defines the platform’s tone, evident in its political content: “TikTok activism largely manifests the generational spirit of youth, and especially that of Gen Z members.”<sup>54</sup> Pioneering TikTok researchers Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik point to TikTok’s significance as a pivotal space for civic discourse and political awareness among the zoomers in their recent reflection (see Aguilera in this Issue):

TikTok is a valuable space for youth activism, enabling young people to experiment with their political voice in richly creative ways. ... We see the political expression happening on TikTok as a harbinger of the changing nature of this phenomenon, and a necessary impetus to broaden our understandings of activism.<sup>55</sup>

The present study also underscores how TikTok’s playful approach fosters the political engagement of Generation Z. For instance, 16-year-old Anna\* attributes her increased involvement in political matters to TikTok,<sup>56</sup> while Elisabeth\* expresses a desire to learn more about Austrian politics through the platform.<sup>57</sup> The creators interviewed for this study all contribute to this wish by generating German-language content that references local politics, thereby catering to a specific audience. Their diverse examples encompass a broad spectrum of creative approaches to political expression on TikTok,

encompassing commentary, educational endeavors, critical viewpoints, and personal narratives, all centered around various political issues in Austria. Presenting the first comprehensive study of TikTok within an Austrian context, ethnomusicologist Juan Bermúdez investigates notions of locality on TikTok and introduces the framework of a “glocal” perspective.<sup>58</sup> Focusing on content pertaining to local politics has emerged as a promising strategy, given the platform’s apparent emphasis on amplifying local content through enhanced visibility in the main feed. While TikTok has not officially addressed this, data analyses indicate a propensity for the frequent circulation of locally relevant content to users.<sup>59</sup> Fabian observes instances of socio-political engagements spurred by TikTok visible in Austria:

As far as the overall socio-political discussion is concerned, we have movements like Black Lives Matter, or if I think back to the Kurdish/Turkish protests last year even in Favoriten [district in Vienna], TikTok has very strongly influenced these protests on a global level as well on a small-scale level in Austria.<sup>60</sup>

The discussion thus far underscores TikTok’s capacity to mobilize political engagement, rooted in the creation of creatively crafted playful content that celebrates youth culture and incorporates pop-cultural references. This concept gains further depth when one considers activists’ use of cynicism, humor, and exaggeration as emotive expressions, ranging from the communication of emotions to the establishment of collective emotional connections. Olivia Sadler’s study on protest music’s functions on TikTok highlights the emergence of new safe spaces on the platform, fostering agency and enabling “a new form of resistance through joy.”<sup>61</sup> Amid the consideration of the time-intensive nature of producing politically charged videos, @zoffnix expresses a distinct sentiment: “I think the difference is that it [TikTok] is fun. Honestly, I’ve rarely enjoyed creating a Facebook post, but making TikToks videos is fun to do.”<sup>62</sup> This perception refines the understanding of TikTok activism not solely as playful but also as joyful, thereby expanding the potential for mobilization through emotive labor, often grounded in personal experiences. Scholarly analysis exploring joyful forms of resistance has utilized concepts of emotion and affect to elucidate how communal joy can inform political action. Bergman and Montgomery’s edited collection *Joyful Militancy* notably demonstrates the coexistence of tenderness and vulnerability within militant dedication,<sup>63</sup> resonating with Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik’s findings that “studying youth political expression on TikTok, we see resilience alongside vulnerability, in line with the ethos of Gen Z

itself.”<sup>64</sup>

## **Performing Politics: Affective Mobilization via Sonic Pathways**

The mobilization potentials rooted in emotion, affect, and intensified bodily experience find a prominent space on TikTok, as they can be conveyed through a creator’s digital persona. Anna\* thinks that compared to Instagram, “on TikTok people are much more personal and talk about their opinions in a much more personal way.”<sup>65</sup> @yourfuturesteppapai shares this view on personalities being mediated on TikTok, “because of course the content is always connected to the person who creates it.”<sup>66</sup> Expanding on this from her perspective as a creator, @billiesteirisch expresses her preference for utilizing personalized narratives: “I try to reach people on a personal level ... This only works for me if I actually use my face and my voice to do something that I came up with myself, or if I sing.”<sup>67</sup> Examining these performative strategies within the platform’s framework, Serrano et al. contend that TikTok has given rise to a novel form of political communication, where “users do not just merely circulate content and comment it; they become the content. ... Every TikTok user is a performer who externalizes personal political opinion via an audiovisual act.”<sup>68</sup> This performative aspect is echoed by political TikToker @zoffnix:

With TikTok a completely new dimension comes along, because with these videos you reveal yourself. No matter in what form, whether you talk or dance; it’s a whole new dimension, because you argue not just with words, not just with writing, but you actually include your whole personality.<sup>69</sup>

Expanding upon Philip Auslander’s concept of a musical persona, Bermúdez delves into the process of TikTok creators shaping a performer identity: “A person is not a TikToker just by using the application, but it is necessary to actively create, negotiate, and perform this identity as a TikTok persona.”<sup>70</sup> Leveraging the app’s video-centric format, TikTok creators navigate their TikTok personae to mobilize audiences at a heightened emotional and affective level. The platform’s video format enables creators to convey playful

yet impactful content seamlessly, a sentiment echoed by Ebru, who perceives TikTok's video-dominant interface as advantageous: "Well, because TikTok is a pure video platform, you won't be bombarded with texts."<sup>71</sup>

Scholarship on video activism has explored videos in Web 2.0 spaces as pivotal means in today's protests to present information and spur action, fostering new forms that actively involve audiences through social media.<sup>72</sup> Building on Tina Askanius's theorizations of video activism across various platforms within the media landscape, such as politically charged mash-up videos on YouTube,<sup>73</sup> Kathrin Fahlenbrach's recent study on different strategies of audio-visual mobilization online briefly touches upon TikTok in its conclusion.<sup>74</sup> The author contends that within the spectrum of video activism practices, "expressive" activist videos designed for mobilization purposes stand out as particularly prevalent.<sup>75</sup> These videos, characterized by their affective dynamics, combine persuasive audio-visual staging with popular network culture practices. This fusion not only amplifies the mobilizing effect of a message but also facilitates widespread dissemination and the compelling persuasion of audiences. This "expressive" video approach resonates with the nature of numerous political videos observed on TikTok, which can be further categorized as "performative" videos, underscoring TikTok's potential as a platform suited for mobilization activism. While this perspective enriches our understanding of the affective potential of audiovisual activism within the TikTok sphere, Fahlenbrach describes video activism as dependent on other forms of activism and gravitates towards visual imagery, relegating the focus on sonic elements solely to the example of activist music videos.<sup>76</sup>

TikTok has illuminated the profound reliance of video activism on the auditory realm, emphasizing the critical role of "audio" within its emerging political audiovisual expression. The short-form video platform has amplified the significance of sound within the attention-driven dynamics of social media, rendering the creation and consumption of its content devoid of sound nearly inconceivable. Given the platform's inclination toward various musical expressions as prevalent performance practices, TikTok has moreover ascended to become a significant influencer in the music industry, shaping the trajectory of trending popular music while often birthing collective earworms among users immersed in the digital vernacular culture. TikToker @zoffnix underscores this cultural impact: "If you are somewhere and a song that you already know from TikTok is played, then this is the song from TikTok. ... It's

almost like a culture that came about with TikTok.”<sup>77</sup> In light of what has been referred to as the “sonic turn” in cultural studies-related discourses, Abidin and Kaye advocate that TikTok serves as an example emblematic of the pivotal role sound plays in cultural production: “The centrality of the ‘audio’ on TikTok encapsulates exactly this. Trends do not just go viral, they become solidified as culture, whether ‘TikTok culture,’ ‘Gen Z culture,’ or ‘social media culture.’”<sup>78</sup> The authors expound on digital anthropologist Crystal Abidin’s notion of TikTok’s promotion of sound as the “organizing principle” for content creation on TikTok,<sup>79</sup> articulating an “aural turn” within meme culture. Exemplified by the ascendancy of audio memes on TikTok, the sonic texture assumes an intimate character, demanding nuanced navigation to contextualize and decode its meaning.<sup>80</sup> In scrutinizing intergenerational discursive activism on TikTok through the lens of audio aesthetics, Zeng and Abidin introduce the concept of “lip-sync activism,” highlighting how individuals creatively employ existing sound templates to advocate personal narratives and showcasing a playful approach to political engagement.<sup>81</sup>

While TikTok’s video-sharing adopts a multimodal format, encompassing various aesthetic forms of video, sound, and textual expressions, the platform’s socio-technological environment fosters a notable emphasis on sonic creativity. This research reveals that participants harness sonic creativity as a mobilization tool, employing it to shape personae and engage audiences in a playful manner, constituting a significant component of their political performances. Their use of sound spans diverse techniques, including selecting sounds as a backdrop, remixing audio templates, utilizing the musical qualities of a song to construct narratives, and creating original sounds. Some users, exemplified by @vik.talk and Fabian, employ solely oral speech, with the latter focusing on employing his own voice within his political expression:

As known from YouTube, I just speak directly into the camera, sometimes as energetically as possible, so that people stay and keep watching—that might be a bit performative, but I don’t play a role or try to reach people through sketches, and it still works fine.<sup>82</sup>

Utilizing the performative capabilities inherent in the platform, various TikTok creators exemplify diverse approaches to conveying messages and engaging in activism. For instance, @billiesteirisch infuses bodily expressions and movements alongside voice in her comedic skits to communicate effectively. On the other hand, @zoffnix engages in playful activism by repurposing



existing audio templates, weaving them into new contexts to craft storylines. Meanwhile, Ebru participates in music creation through interactive story exchanges within the TikTok community. In their examination of dramatized audiovisual performances using personal narratives to raise awareness about social issues through tactics of virality and visibility, Zhao and Abidin coin the term “gesticular activism.”<sup>83</sup> Arguing for a heterogenous understanding of video activism in their anti-racism case study, they consider TikTok as a platform on which sonic elements cultivate an affective environment conducive to novel modes of expression.<sup>84</sup> Highlighting TikTok’s affective power, Hautea et al. emphasize how the platform enables creators “to construct and propagate multi-layered, affect-laden messages with varying degrees of earnestness, humor, and ambiguity” that produce affective publics, especially through the platform’s memetic dimensions.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, Brown et al. build upon studies of affect on social media and interpret TikTok’s “affective design” as an avenue for a distinctive form of political engagement, observing how users harness this potential by employing memetic qualities such as humor to shape and amplify affects.<sup>86</sup>

The centrality of sound on TikTok significantly amplifies the platform’s affective dimensions, fostering enhanced opportunities for mobilization through creative performance, particularly owing to the affective qualities embedded in sound and music. Delving into musical and sonic affects, ethnomusicological scholarship has extensively studied the intricate connections between embodiment, emotions, and the ability of (organized) sound to evoke affective responses within the body’s tactile senses.<sup>87</sup> Sonic affective experiences, comprising a fusion of sensory and embodied sentiments that can extend to emotions, wield a potent influence, intertwining the realms of cognition, physicality, and materiality while stimulating tactile sensations. Recent scholarly discussions, exemplified by the special issue “The Soundwork of Media Activism” in *Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture*, acknowledge the significance of probing sound and listening dynamics to augment our comprehension of political activism, suggesting that we should trace “the affective, embodied, sometimes playful, sometimes violent experiences of aurality in activist and otherwise transformative media” for political analysis.<sup>88</sup> Correspondingly, in their 2023 edited volume focusing on sonic engagement, Woodland and Vachon scrutinize how sonic protest aesthetics serve as catalysts for political mobilization, highlighting the burgeoning role of sound as a tool in activism and protest, facilitated by

advancing technologies that democratize sound and audio creation.<sup>89</sup> TikTok stands as a prime illustration of a new technological landscape empowering individuals to engage in creative sonic expression, paving the way within the ever-evolving realms of (digital) activism with a specific focus on the auditory domain.

## Conclusion

This study has delved into the growing impact of political performances on TikTok, contributing to the dynamic field of research focused on diverse forms of activism on the short video platform. Drawing on a blend of digital ethnography and insightful interviews with TikTokers, this research offers fresh insights into the platform's role as a space for political expression. Specifically, it underscores the pivotal role of sonic elements in shaping activism on TikTok, while also expanding the scope of national research by using political practices in Austria as a case study. Rather than leveraging the platform solely for advocating specific political agendas, creators predominantly use it as a space to critically engage with and stimulate discourse on local political concerns. Their primary goal is to elevate awareness, particularly among Gen Z, regarding ongoing societal issues. Notably, these creators tend to perceive physical protests as more legitimizing forms of activism, prompting a reconsideration of TikTok activism as hybrid political engagement that could shed the "digital" prefix to work "towards destigmatizing contemporary activism in both theory and practice," as Suay Ozkula proposes for forms of "digital activism."<sup>90</sup>

Moreover, this study offers a novel perspective on how TikTok's affordances create new pathways for shaping public discourse by delving into the performative architecture of the app and unveiling how its design expands the scope of possibilities for mobilization. The analysis of creatively crafted videos reveals the platform's ability to mediate emotions and affects through the personae adopted by activist performances. Affective mobilization hinges prominently on sonic elements, leveraging playful activism to capture attention and engage new audiences effectively. This discovery enriches existing scholarly comprehension by positing TikTok as a catalyst for a new paradigm of political expression, advocating for its status as an emblematic illustration of the aural turn in activism. Consequently, TikTok's video activism

stands out as a novel form of (digital) political engagement, accentuating the unprecedented centrality of sound in this dynamic landscape.

This study was not designed to be representative of the entirety of potential political expressions on TikTok but rather serves as a valuable contribution to the burgeoning academic inquiry into the performative nature of politics within the platform. Its aim is to offer insights that can benefit forthcoming research endeavors on the broader significance of TikTok within social movements. Such investigations could delve deeper into the affective dimensions of various audiovisual forms of activism across diverse media landscapes. As hybrid forms of activism rapidly evolve and continue to undergo transformation, it becomes intriguing to contemplate whether TikTok has established a trend through its distinctive blend of audiovisual, performative, sonic, and affective strategies. Observing the trajectory of the platform's influence in shaping these realms holds substantial interest.

## Notes

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7. Anne Kaun and Julie Uldam, "Digital Activism: After the Hype," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 6 (2017): 2100, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817731924>.
8. Maik Fielitz et al., "Digitaler Aktivismus: Hybride Repertoires zwischen Mobilisierung,

Organisation und Vermittlung," *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen* 33, no. 2 (September 2020): 398. <https://doi.org/10.1515/fjsb-2020-0034>.

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10. Daniel S. Lane et al., "From Online Disagreement to Offline Action: How Diverse Motivations for Using Social Media Can Increase Political Information Sharing and Catalyze Offline Political Participation," *Social Media + Society* 3, no. 3 (July 2017): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117716274>.
11. Jasna S. Milošević-Dorđević and Iris L. Žeželj, "Civic Activism Online: Making Young People Dormant or More Active in Real Life?," *Computers in Human Behavior* 70 (May 2017): 114, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.12.070>.
12. Fabian Schweiger, interview by Emma Schrott, June 11, 2021. ("Also wir haben da in der Vergangenheit schon auf mehreren sozialen Medien irgendwie Erfolge für soziale Bewegungen gesehen. Also es fängt ja bei dem Arabischen Frühling an, der sich vor allem durch Twitter organisiert hat oder in Weißrussland, das hauptsächlich über Telegram passiert. Soziale Medien tragen da auf jeden Fall einen sehr großen Teil bei und helfen natürlich auch sozialen Bewegungen, weil sie über diese üblichen altbewährten Nachrichtenkanäle hinaus gehen, die teilweise unter staatlicher Kontrolle in autokratischen Systemen stehen. ... Der Vorteil dadurch ist auf TikTok, dass sobald es irgendwie eine Aufregung gibt oder ein Thema das gerade die Zeit bestimmt, wirst du mit Inhalten zu diesem Thema überflutet. Also wenn ich mir die Black Lives Matter Zeit anschau und zu der Zeit wo die großen Demos vor ca. einem Jahr stattgefunden haben, da war meine 'For You' Page voll damit.")
13. Fabian, interview. ("Ich hab mir vor allem gedacht ich sollt politisch bilden und Hintergründe zu dem geben, was gerade tagespolitisch passiert und die Sachen die passieren erklären. ... Auch Dinge zu beleuchten, die in der grundsätzlichen Wahrnehmung nicht so präsent waren, also ich hab zum Beispiel Abstimmungsverhalten im Parlament thematisiert, weil das einfach viele Leute nicht mitverfolgen und da sind teilweise sehr interessante Sachen passiert.")
14. Ibid. ("nicht zu klar als stark linke Inhalte erkennbar")
15. Ibid. ("Eine meiner Lieblingsfunktionen ist, dass man Kommentare mit Videos beantworten kann.")
16. Figure 1. @fhurbi, screenshot of TikTok video, retrieved September 28, 2021, from <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMRWBRmk8/>.
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18. Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, "Youth Collective Political Expression," 2003.
19. Serrano, Papakyriakopoulos, and Hegelich, "Dancing to the Partisan Beat," 258.
20. Ibid., 257.

21. @vik.talk, interview by Emma Schrott, July 18, 2021. ("Was TikTok natürlich zu einer super Diskussionsplattform macht ist die Stitch-Funktion, das heißt du kannst direkt auf Videos antworten.")
22. Ibid. ("Ich werd halt inspiriert von einem politischen Ereignis oder von irgendwas das ich gelesen hab oder was wer kommentiert hat und dann sag ich einfach meine Meinung dazu. ... Was mir aufgefallen ist: es sagen mir dann viele Leute 'danke, dass du das sagst, danke, dass du da aussprichst' und dass sich die Leute gehört fühlen. Also das find ich ganz interessant, dass es anscheinend viele Leute gibt, die momentan in der Politik das Gefühl haben, dass die Themen nicht angesprochen werden oder dass die Sachen nicht ausgesprochen werden und da glaub ich, dass TikTok eine super Plattform ist, wo man auch dann sieht es gibt noch andere in der Bevölkerung, die auch so denken, nämlich nicht Politiker\*innen, sondern wirklich auch Bürger\*innen.")
23. Ibid.
24. Andy Zhao and Crystal Abidin, "The 'Fox Eye' Challenge Trend: Anti-Racism Work, Platform Affordances, and the Vernacular of Gesticular Activism on TikTok," *Social Media + Society* 9, no.1 (February 2023): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157590>.
25. Figure 2. @vik.talk, screenshot of TikTok video, retrieved September 28, 2021, from <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMRWBFHx9/>.
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27. Jack Bandy and Nicholas Diakopoulos, "TulsaFlop: A Case Study of Algorithmically-Influenced Collective Action on TikTok," Cornell University Library, arXiv.org (December 2020), <http://arxiv.org/abs/2012.07716>.
28. Judith Ackermann, "Präsentieren, liken, teilen, kommentieren—Politik auf TikTok," *Journal für politische Bildung* 11, no. 2 (May 2021): 29, <https://doi.org/10.46499/1670.1953>.
29. Ebru Sokolova, interview by Emma Schrott, July 11, 2021. ("Also irgendwie ist das auch ein Raum, wo man sich öffnen kann und Gleichgesinnte finden kann.")
30. Ibid. ("Die erste Single, das war ja eigentlich auch am Anfang nur ein TikTok Video, das hat auch viele Reaktionen bekommen, das hat mich auch schlussendlich motiviert, dass ich das auch wirklich veröffentliche.")
31. Ibid. ("Da hab ich ein paar Leute angeschrieben und gefragt ob sie da mitmachen wollen, dass sie einfach nur kurz sagen, wie alt sei waren, als sie das erste Mal unfreiwillig ein Dickpick bekommen haben, weil man da ja schon recht jung ist und da haben dann auch voll viele Leute ihr Alter kommentiert, sie haben geschrieben, 11, 12, 14; also extrem jung.")
32. Figure 3. @2bebis, screenshot of TikTok video, retrieved September 26, 2022, from <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZTRu5KBcj/>.
33. Ebru, interview. ("Dafür dass man das Aktivismus nennen kann, ist das glaub ich schon zu wenig.")

34. @vik.talk, interview. ("Ich würd mich jetzt selber wahrscheinlich nicht als Aktivistin bezeichnen, weil ich find das würd den Aktivismus anderer Menschen bisschen minimieren ... für das tu ich zu wenig dafür.")
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41. Laura Cervi and Tom Divon, "Playful Activism: Memetic Performances of Palestinian Resistance in TikTok #Challenges," *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 1 (March 2023): 10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157607>.
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43. Ioana Literat and Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, "TikTok as a Key Platform for Youth Political Expression: Reflecting on the Opportunities and Stakes Involved," *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 1 (February 2023): 2. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157595>.
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45. @yourfuturesteppapai, interview. ("Der politische Content wird leichter für die Masse zugänglich gemacht glaub ich, der wird leichter verdaulich gemacht.")
46. Figure 4. @billiesteirisch, screenshot of TikTok video, retrieved September 28, 2021, from <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMRWBF2g/>.
47. @billiesteirisch, interview by Emma Schrott, June 16, 2021. ("Ich wünsche mir, dass es einen Diskurs gibt zwischen Leute, die absolut noch im Patriachat feststecken mit ihrem Kopf und Leuten, die einfach schon offener sind und gebildeter in der Hinsicht—in der Hinsicht auf Feminismus, weil ich seh, dass die Fronten total verhärtet sind. Deswegen versuch ich das auch so ein bisschen auf spielerische Art aufzubrechen ... in dem man's in einer Szene schauspielerisch darstellt, anstatt da immer nur drüber zu reden.")

48. @zoffnix, interview by Emma Schrott, June 15, 2021. ("Ich versuch eine Mischung zu machen aus lustigen Videos, die gleichzeitig sehr oft auch eine ernste Message dahinter haben ... Mit doch seriösem Content bzw. ernsterem Content aber irgendwie verpackt durch Trends oder irgendwelche lustigen Sachen, dass man dadurch auf jeden Fall Menschen erreichen kann und gewisse Messages rüberbringen kann.")
49. Figure 5. @zoffnix, screenshot of TikTok video, retrieved September 28, 2021, from <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMRWBkdu8/>.
50. @zoffnix, interview.
51. @vik.talk, interview. ("Also man muss sagen Gen Z ist sowieso sehr politisch ... und es ist TikTok halt eben die Plattform, die von Gen Z eben am meisten genutzt wird.")
52. Elisabeth\*, interview by Emma Schrott, May 30, 2021. ("Also die meisten meiner Freunde haben TikTok, direkt könnt ich nur so 2 Personen nennen, die ich kenn, die kein TikTok haben. ... Über TikTok erfähr ich oft einfach so grundsätzlich, dass etwas passiert ist, also wenn irgendwie viele Leute sagen was drüber. ... Ich hätte mich nicht mit dem Wort 'Femizid' befasst, bevor ich das nicht durch TikTok und generell Social Media gelernt hab.")
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54. Kaye, Wikstrom, and Zeng, *TikTok*, 131.
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56. Anna\*, interview by Emma Schrott, May 23, 2021.
57. Elisabeth\*, interview 2021.
58. Juan Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok: A Musical Ethnography from a Glocal Austrian Context*, *New Approaches to Sound, Music, and Media* 15 (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025).
59. Adil Sbai, "TikTok—Der neue Stern Am Social-Media-Himmel," in *Influencer Marketing*, ed. Marlis Jahnke (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2021), 108.
60. Fabian, interview. ("Ja, was die gesellschaftspolitische gesamte Diskussion angeht haben wir ja gerade so Bewegungen wie Black Lives Matter oder auch wenn ich an die Kurd\*innen / Türk\*innen Proteste letztes Jahr in Favoriten zurückdenk, hat die TikTok diese Proteste so org auf globaler Ebene als auch im kleinen sogar in Österreich sehr stark beeinflusst. ... Also das hat wirklich großes Potenzial um realpolitisch auch Veränderung zu bringen und beeinflusst die sozialen Bewegungen enorm.")
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62. @zoffnix, interview. ("Ich find der Unterschied ist, dass es Spaß macht. Also mir hat selten ein Facebook Beitrag Spaß gemacht ehrlicherweise, aber TikToks Videos zu machen ist für einen selber auch witzig.")

63. Nick Montgomery and Carla Bergman, *Joyful Militancy: Building Resistance in Toxic Times*. (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017).
64. Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, "TikTok," 3.
65. Anna\*, interview. ("Ja weil auf TikTok sind halt eben Leute viel persönlicher und reden viel persönlicher über ihre Meinungen.")
66. @yourfuturesteppapai, interview. ("Weil ich halt immer auch natürlich mit der Person verbunden werde, die halt den Content macht.")
67. @billiesteirisch, interview. ("Ich versuch's auf einer persönlichen Ebene ... Bei mir funktioniert das nur wenn ich mit meinem Gesicht und meiner Stimme wirklich was mache, was mir eingefallen ist oder wo ich singe.")
68. Serrano, Papakyriakopoulos, and Hegelich, "Dancing to the Partisan Beat," 264.
69. @zoffnix, interview. ("Aber das ist auf TikTok natürlich eine komplett neue Dimension mit diesen Videos, wo du dich ja selber auch so preisgibst, egal in was für einer Form, ob du redest ob du tanzst; das ist ja eine ganz neue andere Dimension wo du quasi nicht nur durch Wörter nicht nur durch Schrift argumentierst, sondern tatsächlich halt eine komplette...deine ganze Persönlichkeit mitreinnimmst.")
70. Juan Bermúdez, "Virtual Musical.ly(ties): Identities, Performances, & Meanings in a Mobile Application; An Ethnomusicological Approach to TikTok's Musicking" (PhD diss., University of Vienna, 2022), 74.
71. Ebru, interview. ("Na ja dadurch, dass TikTok eine reine Videoplattform ist, wird man nicht mit Texten zu bombardiert.")
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74. Kathrin Fahlenbrach, "Video-Aktivismus: Formen und Strategien der audiovisuellen Mobilisierung im Netz," *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen* 33, no. 2 (September 2020): 471, <https://doi.org/10.1515/fjsb-2020-0039>.
75. Ibid., 468–69.
76. Ibid., 458–59.
77. @zoffnix, interview. ("Wenn man irgendwo ist und dann spielt's ein Lied, das man schon von TikTok kennt, dann ist das das Lied von TikTok. ... Fast so eine Kultur eigentlich, die da mit TikTok entstanden ist.")
78. Crystal Abidin and D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, "Audio memes, Earworms, and Templatability: The 'Aural Turn' of Memes on TikTok," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral*



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81. Jing Zeng and Crystal Abidin, "'#OkBoomer, time to meet the Zoomers': Studying the memefication of intergenerational politics on TikTok," *Communication & Society* 24, no. 16 (August 2021): 2470, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1961007>.
82. Fabian, interview. ("Also ich hab wie man's aus YouTube kennt einfach direkt in die Kamera gesprochen, teilweise möglichst energisch, damit die Leute auch dableiben und zuschauen, das war vielleicht etwas performativ, aber grundsätzlich hab ich keine Rolle in dem Sinn gespielt und durch Sketches versucht Leute zu erreichen und es hat trotzdem gut funktioniert.")
83. Xinyu Zhao and Crystal Abidin, "The 'Fox Eye' Challenge Trend: Anti-Racism Work, Platform Affordances, and the Vernacular of Gesticular Activism on TikTok," *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 1 (February 2023): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157590>.
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