GEN Z'S POLITICAL IDENTIFICATION AND COLLECTIVIZATION:

CONSTRUCTING A GENERATION'S POLITICS ON TIKTOK

A THESIS

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By

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Introduction

From the Printing Press to TikTok: Connective Technology and Political Community Formation

  Through the ages, changes in media have transformed the political landscape. The invention of the printing press helped distribute knowledge faster and more broadly than ever before, connecting humanity to common ideals and spurring an unprecedented political awareness. Public radio brought the power of news and politics into the homes of millions. Television delivered visual realities from around the world into the optic consciousness of the masses. With each development came profound and novel political results. Information is power, as they say, and evolutions of technological communication have shown time and again that such advances facilitate the expansion of access to information and the subsequent founding of political collectives based in common understandings of shared realities.

  The last century's most celebrated innovation in communications technology was forecast to reflect this pattern of collective connectivity. In the earliest days of the internet, global leaders and civilians alike swelled with hope at the democratic prospects of the newest connective communications system. Never before was the human race bestowed with such a sweeping opportunity to share stories so widely and connect so instantaneously. Collective consciousnesses could, for the first time, be forged across oceans and languages in a moment's time.

  With the internet came novel domains and manifestations of public discourse. The earliest communication channels formed in cyberspace were rudimentary blogs and chat rooms through which individuals, who might otherwise be strangers, could exchange ideas, devise common interests, and build digital communities that roughly resembled informal, face-to-face conversations. Public discourse among early internet users could be casual and entirely remote, paving the way toward inclusive and widespread political communication among individuals.

Ultimately, the internet revolutionized human connectivity and the available realms of public and political discourse forever.

Human connectivity on the internet underwent a significant infrastructural shift in the first decades of the 21st century with the institution and evolution of social media platforms seemingly committed to facilitating widespread social connection in the digital realm. These early social media websites, such as SixDegrees and MySpace, boasted their connective virtues and benevolent opportunitzations toward fostering community in the internet's ever-expanding virtual universe. But these sites' wide-eyed hopes were politicized from the very beginning. In the organization of digital collectives surrounding shared interests or values, social media sites promptly featured boundless political discourses between their users.

In recent years, Facebook has become the most eminent platform for examining the political implications of contemporary social media. As the most popular social media platform in history, Facebook has faced public condemnation and synonymity with "hate speech, disinformation, election interference, and even genocide," and its American executives have faced a number of lawsuits and congressional hearings to hold the mammoth corporation accountable for the destructive capabilities of politicized social media use.[1] Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg has even reportedly suggested renaming and rebranding the entire corporation due to its incessant PR disasters.[2] Most recently, a former Facebook employee-turned-whistleblower released thousands of internal communications which point to Facebook's surreptitious recognition of its politically corrosive infrastructural models that favor profits over democratic protections. Overall, Facebook has become the prime example for how *not* to operate as a social media platform.

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[1] Gilbert, David. *Facebook's Brand is so Toxic Zuckerberg Reportedly Wants to Change its Name.*2021.
[2] Gilbert, David. *Facebook's Brand is so Toxic Zuckerberg Reportedly Wants to Change its Name.*2021.

Whether young Americans are fed up with Facebook's reprobate behavior or simply cycle in and out of attachment to certain platforms, it seems as though the American social media landscape is experiencing a dramatic shift away from Facebook and its daughter company, Instagram, toward new social media platforms that better reflect young people's generational desires and sociopolitical needs.[3]

Enter TikTok: the most rapidly growing social media platform at the time of writing. After merging with social media service Musical.ly in 2018 as a new platform with infrastructural and intentive nuance, TikTok has become the favored social media site of a significant number of young Americans — especially those belonging to Gen Z, defined as the generation born between 1997 and 2012. Inscribed with Gen Z's specific and offbeat, often dark brand of humor, TikTok's meme culture is forefronted in much of the platform's content. Whether a TikTok video relays the newest viral dance trend, documents a meticulous makeup routine, or narrates a current sociopolitical event, Gen Z's characteristic humor overwhelmingly permeates TikTok videos, regardless of the specific content's theme or message.

This distinctive and often jarring humor serves a relatively unexpected purpose: the broad collective political identification of a generation of young Americans. Through TikTok's humorous thematic content, Gen Z finds a new digital locus of sociopolitical interaction, engagement, and community building both within and beyond politics-specific content. TikTok has become one of the more central homes of Gen Z's political community, which may directly arise from the app's circulation of the generation's prolific and relatable humor. The question arises, then, how exactly does Gen Z's humor on TikTok either speak to or confront traditional understandings of the political, connective, and collective powers of humor? Can TikTok humor itself create a sustainable and engaged digital political community of young Americans? I argue

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[3] Kelly, Heather. *You've Decided to Quit Facebook. Here's how to Migrate Your Online Life Elsewhere.*2021.

that TikTok humor provides young Americans a crucial site of identifying and building their

engaged political community because it deeply personalizes politics yet simultaneously provides

accessible channels for connective and ultimately community-forming discourse. In other words,

young Americans engage with both their personal and collective politics on TikTok through their

utilization of and exposure to humorous content.

Literature Review

Affective Individualization in Politics Online

Widespread digitalization and the subsequent movement onto the internet of much of human communications have fundamentally altered the relationship between individuals and politics. Before the digital age, individuals could engage with politics through conventional channels, such as radio, television, telephones, print, and written communications. Their personalized discursive engagement with politics was restricted by technological limits of the time, and the affective or subjective personalization of politics was structurally circumscribed.

Digitalization, however, revolutionized modes of political engagement to encourage the dissemination of individuals' own interpretations of politics. Some contemporary scholars lament the digital realm's facilitation of personalized or individualized politics because the stability of political integrity is put into question. Political integrity in this context can be understood as the historical consistency of political essence through time.[4] Anti-digital individualization scholars argue that pre-internet political communities enjoyed consistency and integrity through the upholding of traditional communal memory. These memories connected generations to their sociopolitical roots and reminded each subsequent generation of its predecessors' normative political understandings, ultimately preserving political standards in favor of large, time-tested group interests over those of each individual.

Digitalization, according to this view, damages the communal historic memory because it privileges and legitimizes the individual's sharing of personal interpretations of political realities,

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[4] Yurievich, Mamychev Alexey, Kim Alexander, Dremliuga Roman Igorevich, Surzhik Mariia, and Zheng Fuxue. "Social–Political Integrity in the 21st Century: Threats and Risks of the Digitalization." *Journal of Politics and Law* 13, no. 4 (2020): 110-116

which may be in opposition to traditional normative political essences.[5] The communal historic memory becomes digitally fragmented into a million subjectivities that regrettably cannot be applied to descendant politics, according to this view. In other words, normative notions of collective politics are overpowered by the political whims of each individual in the digital age.

Because the internet is regularly characterized as the domain of younger people, anti-digital individualization scholars specifically accuse the youth for damaging political integrity through their online practices. Their political motivations online are written off as neither normative nor oriented toward the whole community, but rather represent a new form of political free-thinking and self-expressive subjectivity that favors individual experiences and subjective feelings over communal interests. In this view, the individual in the digital age exists as a privileged subject within an ever-expanding and boundless conversation facilitated by the globalized information flow that threatens the political integrity of dominant historical memories and narratives.

Other scholars, however, endorse exactly this notion. They suggest that perhaps dominant historical narratives do not inherently deserve preservation simply because they represent veteran ideas.[6] Rather, digitalization's affective individualization of politics might alleviate hegemonic narratives toward more honest representations of the personal consequences of various politics, and the internet is to thank for this inclusive shift. Pro-digital individualization scholars vouch for a reevaluation of traditional understandings of communal political integrity toward a more holistic evaluation of the individual's affective political experience. Young people, in this view,

[5] Yurievich, Mamychev Alexey, Kim Alexander, Dremliuga Roman Igorevich, Surzhik Mariia, and Zheng Fuxue. "Social–Political Integrity in the 21st Century: Threats and Risks of the Digitalization." *Journal of Politics and Law* 13, no. 4 (2020): 110-116

[6] Middaugh, Ellen, Lynn Schofield Clark, and Parissa J. Ballard. "Digital Media, Participatory Politics, and Positive Youth Development." *Pediatrics* 140, (2017): S127-S131.

galvanize this shift toward narrative inclusivity and should be trusted in their utilization and valuation of social media discourse.[7]

Digitalization, according to this alternative perspective, provides novel lenses through which contemporary politics can be understood. Rather than relying on generalized or aggregated understandings of political normativity and engagement, the digital space, and social media more specifically, can reveal how young people personally experience politics every day. Through social media observations, political analysis can zoom in on the individual user as a site of individualized political feeling. This individualization of politics on social media falls into the territory of classical phenomenology, which analyzes and values the everyday embodiment of politics as experienced by individuals.[8] In this view, the affective digital revelations of individualized politics on social media must be seen and valued as constitutive *of* political engagement, rather than deemed as frivolous in comparison to more traditionally legitimized modes of political engagement, such as voting or tuning in to candidate debates. Social media is a new, legitimate locus of political engagement because it facilitates a personalized association between an individual's experience and their personal political realities.[9]

Visual Affect in Social Media: Memes, the Individual, and the Collective

The power of individualized political affect on social media is powerfully attached to the visual media prominent in that space. The circulation of digital images and individuals' affective interpretations of and emotional responses to them constitute much of today's political

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[7] Middaugh, Ellen, Lynn Schofield Clark, and Parissa J. Ballard. "Digital Media, Participatory Politics, and Positive Youth Development." *Pediatrics* 140, (2017): S127-S131.

[8] Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "What is Phenomenology?" *Cross Currents* 6, no. 1 (1956): 59-70.

[9] Dean, Jonathan. "Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics." *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 3 (2019): 255-266.

engagement.[10] While many scholars acknowledge that digital visuals impact politics beyond the internet, others assert that their online circulation itself embodies political activity and engagement for both individuals and collectives.[11]

The humorous meme is one of the more prolific sites of visual political engagement on social media platforms. Memes are understood to be "units of cultural transmission" or "digital objects that riff on a given visual, textual or auditory form and are then appropriated, re-coded, and slotted back into the internet infrastructures they came from."[12] They are replicable, often playful or humorous, and have distinct political engagement implications for those that create, consume, and share them.

Memes can be both individualizers and community builders. Employing visual humor, irony, and subversion in a shareable format allows for individuals to apply their own experiences and perspectives onto a prefabricated visual. They are interpellative in function, as they call on individual viewers to identify with their message, either by agreeing with its implicit political sentiments or by simply "getting" the joke, tickling their preexisting political knowledge. Whether a humorous meme is inherently political or solely playful, individuals and collectives can find political meaning within the content on display. Afterall, humor and joy can be powerful political tools in the face of systemic adversity, and one of the only imperative natures of memes is the fostering of relatable and viral joy.[13]

Political humor, more specifically, runs deeply throughout internet memes. This digitized political humor becomes an element of the "everyday vernacular of politics" for digitally

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[10] Dean, Jonathan. "Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics." *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 3 (2019): 255-266.

[11] Shaw, Frances. *The Politics of Blogs: Theories of Discursive Activism Online.*2012.

[12] Nooney, Laine, and Laura Portwood-Stacer. *One does Not Simply: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Internet Memes.*2014.

[13] Stephenson, Janey. "Why Joy is the Perfect Resistance to a Politics of Fear." August 9,Available from https://wagingnonviolence.org/2017/08/joy-resistance-politics-fear-fascism/.

engaged individuals in the contemporary context, suggesting that politics today are being internally and personally evaluated through exposures to social media's humorous political memes.[14] These distinctive visuals are so powerful and compelling because they trigger affective responses from their viewers: they can be sites of pleasure, fun, anger, or resentment depending on the specifics of a certain piece of content.[15] The emotions provoked by political memes tints contemporary politics with personalized affect and experience. Thus, the online circulation of this affective content evokes a unique experience within each viewer, allowing for a daily, casual, and highly personal interpretive engagement with politics based on subjective feelings.

Through young people's digital engagements with humorous political memes on social media, they claim subjective agency in the production and consumption of politically-relevant content on their own terms, within their own lived contexts, and supported by a technology they are already generationally familiar with.[16] The individual user's judgment is central here, as their affective responses to certain memes determine their relatability, funniness, and therefore their viral success. This virality, or the extensive frequency of content circulation, ultimately depends on the platform engagement actions of a copious number of individual social media users. Without a user to "get" the joke inherent to a certain political meme, the content loses all meaning and chance to proliferate. Thus, the individual is central to online political meme culture because the format necessitates an individual's affective relation and response to the certain political narrative on display.[17]

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[14]Dean, Jonathan. "Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics." *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 3 (2019): 255-266.

[15] Dean, Jonathan. "Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics." *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 3 (2019): 255-266.

[16] Middaugh, Ellen, Lynn Schofield Clark, and Parissa J. Ballard. "Digital Media, Participatory Politics, and Positive Youth Development." *Pediatrics* 140, (2017): S127-S131.

[17] Milan, Stefania. *From Social Movements to Cloud Protesting: The Evolution of Collective Identity.*2015.

The quintessential humor of political memes is often dark, meaning it centers on and jests with real, relatable struggles or pains emanating from political realities. Through its deep and often telling affect, dark political humor in memes often reflects significant political issues that individual viewers can interpret and relate to according to their own experiences.[18] The subjective experiences emanating from current politics can be "memed on" in order to tell an accessible, heartfelt political narrative. This inspires a form of political engagement online that is personalizable and thus likely experienced internally. Individual users can be "called in" by the visual affect of dark meme humor and subsequently make sense of the implicative political message in their own unique fashion. Through the digital culture of dark meme humor, social media users can privately engage with complex or sensitive political matters on a regular basis. In fact, memes can be enjoyed to such a degree that they become central to young people's overall political engagement.[19] Social media's meme culture has created a new pathway toward individual political identification that encourages subjective interpretations of politics. Pro-digital individualization scholars might beam at this prospect.

While meme humor can affectively personalize politics on social media, it can also allow young people to communicate their politics because engagement with memes is very rarely a private affair. Rather, social media sites usually encourage individuals to share their reactions to content and engage in discourse through particular platform infrastructures, such as comment sections and "like" counters. Further, due to the exoneratibility of joking, memes can allow young people to communicate their politics without significant risk of retaliation, as long as their

[18] Ask, Kristine, and Crystal Abidin. *My Life is a Mess: Self-Deprecating Relatability and Collective Identities in the Memification of Student Issues.*2018.

[19] Dean, Jonathan. "Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics." *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 3 (2019): 255-266.

interactions with content do not violate platform-dependent norms.[20] When a user smiles or "lol"s at a certain political meme, they can enjoy political expression without significantly compromising their safety.

Engaging with memes is thus a soft method of individual political engagement that evades some of the risks of offline political engagement. Individuals who choose to create, engage with, or even smile at humorous political memes can *enjoy* the pathway toward their individual political consciousness through a casual, less daunting channel. Political memes thus become a relatively mild form of political engagement. The structural inclusivity of meme-based individual political engagement invites young people into a personalized political engagement that is at least enjoyable and even potentially more sustainable than traditional modes of offline political engagement.[21]

Whether a political meme is funny, relatable, or even intelligible depends entirely on the political background of the user in question. Not only do many political memes require at least some preexisting knowledge, but they can in fact guide the development of a user's political consciousness according to their background.[22] In other words, social media memes provide young people with a stage upon which they can forge political meaning through their individual sharings of and exposures to affectively thematic political visuals.[23] Through the internalization and individualization of political meme content, social media users can personally construct their political identities on a perpetual, informal basis.[24] Thus, social media memes afford young

[20] Ask, Kristine, and Crystal Abidin. *My Life is a Mess: Self-Deprecating Relatability and Collective Identities in the Memification of Student Issues.*2018.

[21] Doona, Joanna. "Political Comedy Engagement: Identity and Community Construction." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (2020): 531-547.

[22] Middaugh, Ellen, Lynn Schofield Clark, and Parissa J. Ballard. "Digital Media, Participatory Politics, and Positive Youth Development." *Pediatrics* 140, (2017): S127-S131.

[23] Dean, Jonathan. "Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics." *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 3 (2019): 255-266.

[24] Milan, Stefania. *From Social Movements to Cloud Protesting: The Evolution of Collective Identity.*2015.

people with the opportunity to relate to, identify with, and embrace certain political narratives depending on the backgrounds they carry with them into the digital realm.

While political memes certainly allow for the internalization of personalized politics, they can also foster effective digital political collectives. These functions, however, are in no way mutually exclusive. Rather, the individualization of politics that occurs through affective identifications with political memes on social media remains central in the formation of digital collectives practicing political engagement. Fundamental to the meme format is its shareability; they are meant to be related to by many and circulated to vast numbers of like-minded individuals. Based on the reciprocal sharing of individualized political experiences through which crowds of users can relate, individualized politics become uniquely legible to young people's generational peers.[25] Through this legibility, a political collective of young people is born. In other words, individuals' common relations to political memes supply the digital masses with the affective modes necessary for politically engaged collectivization online. The political meme becomes the heart of a new collective of digital political engagement.

The core of this new collective, however, is still the affective capacity of the singular user. As a number of users face others' experiences more frequently and with more emotive depth, the emotional salience of political content is intensified; users become more aware of their counterparts' political realities and can relate their own experiences more intimately.[26] This visibility of the individual can serve to foster empathy within other users, as they frequently come into contact with the intimate political realities of those who are otherwise, for all intents

[25] Penney, Joel. "'It's so Hard Not to be Funny in this Situation': Memes and Humor in U.S. Youth Online Political Expression." *Television & New Media* 21, no. 8 (2020): 791-806.
[26] Milan, Stefania. *From Social Movements to Cloud Protesting: The Evolution of Collective Identity.*2015.

and purposes, strangers.[27] In meme-based digital collectives, the individual's political reality remains essential. Rather than conceptualizing digital collectives as losses of individual subjectivities in the spirit of broad, common understandings of politics, through social media memes, the subjectivity of the individual in creating collective political identities is emboldened.[28]

Via the individual user's sharings of and responses to political memes, social media politics become "collective confessional[s]" in which sociopolitical meaning is forged through personal yet relatable sharings of thematic political experiences.[29] The novel form of personalizable solidarity founded through political memes relies on individuals' relations to others' experiences, meanings, identities, knowledge, and narratives found on humor-based channels of digital communication. Since memes can be so highly personalized and internalized depending on the user, individuals are afforded the right to pick and choose which collective identifications they can place their own experiences on to, making collective narratives more horizontal and fluid.[30] Collectivized political engagements become crowd-sourced and yet still hinge on individuals' interpretations.

The collective "we" forged through political memes on social media is thus a conglomerate of unique individualizations of political content. The subjective user remains the fundamental unit engaging with memes, directing their own subscriptions to various and ever-evolving collective political identities. This is a bottom-up process of collectivization that is exceptionally inclusive, since a user needs only to decide whether a certain narrative fits their

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[27] Penney, Joel. "'It's so Hard Not to be Funny in this Situation': Memes and Humor in U.S. Youth Online Political Expression." *Television & New Media* 21, no. 8 (2020): 791-806.

[28] Milan, Stefania. *From Social Movements to Cloud Protesting: The Evolution of Collective Identity.* 2015.

[29] Milan, Stefania. *From Social Movements to Cloud Protesting: The Evolution of Collective Identity.* 2015.

[30] Dean, Jonathan. "Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics." *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 3 (2019): 255-266.

own experiences in order to participate in responding to a meme. If they don't "get" the joke, they can simply scroll away or create their own version. Since the collectivizing power of political memes is experienced and conceptualized through the individual, the full-fledged political engagement of the collective is fundamentally reliant upon the engagements of "individuals-in-the-group."[31] Ultimately, collective political engagement through social media memes becomes a web of individuals' own personal engagements.

Structurally, the humor specific to political memes combined with their shareable format encourages the construction of a digital political community centered on common senses of humor, which are often generation- and location-based.[32] Humorous political memes can associate various users with similar comedic preferences into a digital network of political perspectives. If a multitude of individual users find the same political content to be funny, it is likely that they share some of the political perspectives "called in" by a given meme.[33] The shared affective responses to political memes on social media can translate into the founding of an engaged and unified sense of humor-turned-political community.

This political community, centered on humorous memes, relies on "connective" over collective political engagement.[34] This view characterizes digital political communities as "fluid, horizontal, inclusive and 'easily personalized'" to further support the notion that in the social media age, the collective is experienced and conceptualized through the individual.[35] The humor of political memes as experienced by individuals is essential to the fostering of a new, digital

[31] Milan, Stefania. *From Social Movements to Cloud Protesting: The Evolution of Collective Identity.*2015.

[32] Innocenti, Beth, and Elizabeth Miller. "The Persuasive Force of Political Humor." *Journal of Communication* 66, no. 3 (2016): 366-385.

[33] Dean, Jonathan. "Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics." *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 3 (2019): 255-266.

[34] Bennett, W. L., and Alexandra Segerberg. *The Logic of Connective Action : Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics.* Stockholms universitet, Statsvetenskapliga institutionen, 2012.

[35] Dean, Jonathan. "Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics." *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 3 (2019): 255-266.

form of engaged political community based on casual, humorous "political talk" or discourse between social media users.[36] The collectivizing power of political memes on social media can arrange shared political identities, affiliations, and antagonisms to play a "crucial role" in young people's formation of legitimate political communities through enjoyable and attractive means.[37]

The traditional understandings of the collectivizing powers of political humor seem to apply to political memes on social media, since humor has played a part in community building for ages.[38] Historically, "live" political humor was commonly delivered in person through comedians. Joking about politics operated as a powerful architect of community among creator and audience because political humor relies on common, implicit understandings of the sociopolitical world. For a joke to "land" in front of a live audience, a comedian has to establish a sort of shared consciousness between their content and viewers.[39] Shared, normative perceptions of politics can politically unite an audience through a collective expression of joy or laughter. This unification requires assumptions, localized research, and lots of "reading the room," slowing down and thus simplifying the process of comedic design.[40]

While contemporary political meme dynamics certainly rely on common understandings between creator and viewer, the sheer speed and frequency of social media content creation allows for more specialized, niche, and temporally reactive politically humorous memes, since their format does not require much practice nor comedic complexity to reach a vast swath of

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[36] Vromen, Ariadne, Michael A. Xenos, and Brian Loader. "Young People, Social Media and Connective Action: From Organisational Maintenance to Everyday Political Talk." *Journal of Youth Studies* 18, no. 1 (2015): 80-100.

[37] Middaugh, Ellen, Lynn Schofield Clark, and Parissa J. Ballard. "Digital Media, Participatory Politics, and Positive Youth Development." *Pediatrics* 140, (2017): S127-S131.

[38] Dean, Jonathan. "Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics." *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 3 (2019): 255-266.

[39] Doona, Joanna. "Political Comedy Engagement: Identity and Community Construction." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (2020): 531-547.

[40] Doona, Joanna. "Political Comedy Engagement: Identity and Community Construction." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (2020): 531-547.

individuals. A digital community of politically engaged users can form overnight on social media without much planning. Thus, digital communities formed via political memes can be perpetually updated and flexible, yet may be ultimately short-lived as circumstances and trends change.

The politically engaged digital community transforms the dynamics of in-person political collectives based on traditional, top-down definitions and boundaries of what constitutes "us" and "them."[41] Rather, memes form nuanced collectives that resemble "networked publics" in the sense that they compile narratives, identities, and discourses that individuals can utilize to complicate traditional methods of communication and political socialization.[42] Rather than representing seemingly frivolous or apolitical activities of young people, humorous memes can shape mindsets of groups to overcome the often simplified or even hegemonic narratives of dominant media to establish new, collective political vernaculars and normative boundaries.[43] Through meme culture's continuous evaluations of humor or relatability, the digital collective is perpetually constructing norms and values in the digital space. Thus, the political engagement stemming from memes is always a work in progress. There is no final nor objectively defined political resolution in this space.

The new, digital communities of sociopolitical affiliation employ their political engagements through distinct platform conditions, such as likes, shares, trend amplifications, and comments. Engagement with politics is more casually interactive in this space but remains legitimate in the sense that young people can genuinely air grievances and criticize political

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[41] Milan, Stefania. *From Social Movements to Cloud Protesting: The Evolution of Collective Identity.*2015.
[42] Ask, Kristine, and Crystal Abidin. *My Life is a Mess: Self-Deprecating Relatability and Collective Identities in the Memification of Student Issues.*2018.
[43] Ask, Kristine, and Crystal Abidin. *My Life is a Mess: Self-Deprecating Relatability and Collective Identities in the Memification of Student Issues.*2018.

realities through their engagements with political memes.[44] The collective, discursive responses to political memes also constitute proper political engagement because they can effectively build political solidarity and identification among members of the digital collective.[45]

The political goals of social media memes, however, appear distinct in comparison to offline political humor. The collectives formed by political humor in the tangible world can often be goal-oriented in the sense that they intentionally reference certain policies or public personas with the objective of directly spurring tangible political change.[46] When a political comedy television host delivers a speech referencing the current president or a recent Supreme Court case, they may explicitly or implicitly direct their audience to vote, volunteer, or sign petitions for certain causes once the bit ends.[47]

Digital political collectives, however, often experience and respond to social media memes simply for the sake of spurring collective political knowledge or enjoying the basic pleasure of sharing a common sense of humor.[48] Just because social media memes are not definitively goal-oriented, however, does not mean they cannot foster legitimate political engagement. Rather, engaging with political memes builds solidarity among individuals, reinforces communal identities, and creates access to casual political critique for young people, again, through the affective experiences and operations of the individual.[49] Meme interactions, whether they are individualized or represent a subsequent collectivization of users, constitute

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[44] Ask, Kristine, and Crystal Abidin. *My Life is a Mess: Self-Deprecating Relatability and Collective Identities in the Memification of Student Issues.*2018.

[45] Penney, Joel. "'It's so Hard Not to be Funny in this Situation': Memes and Humor in U.S. Youth Online Political Expression." *Television & New Media* 21, no. 8 (2020): 791-806.

[46] Innocenti, Beth, and Elizabeth Miller. "The Persuasive Force of Political Humor." *Journal of Communication* 66, no. 3 (2016): 366-385.

[47] Innocenti, Beth, and Elizabeth Miller. "The Persuasive Force of Political Humor." *Journal of Communication* 66, no. 3 (2016): 366-385.

[48] Doona, Joanna. "Political Comedy Engagement: Identity and Community Construction." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (2020): 531-547.

[49] Penney, Joel. "'It's so Hard Not to be Funny in this Situation': Memes and Humor in U.S. Youth Online Political Expression." *Television & New Media* 21, no. 8 (2020): 791-806.

political engagement because they operate as one of the more widespread forms of young

people's political community formation and paths of discourse today.[50] Memes can reveal the

personal political realities of single users and also can reveal how such users can unite through

shared digital actions to form viable political communities and identities.

A reexamination of what constitutes political engagement is central to understanding the

politics of memes.[51] If we are to understand young people's phenomenological experiences with

contemporary politics, social media memes' parallel individualizing and collectivizing functions

must be deemed as legitimate forms of political engagement.

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[50] Dean, Jonathan. "Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics." *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 3 (2019): 255-266.

[51] Dean, Jonathan. "Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics." *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 3 (2019): 255-266.

Theory

Individualized Collectivization on TikTok

On predecessor social media platforms such as Meta's Instagram, the individual user exercises agency in the curation of their feeds. Their consumption of content relies on active choice and the seeking out of pages or groups that coincide with their interests. As users, individuals on these older social media sites express the infrastructural imperative of choice in following certain pages, and their feeds tend to reflect a curatorial amalgamation of content they actively sought out. Traditionally, if an individual on Instagram wanted to add humorous political memes to their daily social media diet, they were tasked with actively seeking out such pages and choosing to press the "follow" button. Otherwise, they might never see a single political meme on Instagram.

With app updates, however, new and more automated features have sprouted that rely less heavily on user choice. More specifically, in 2019, Instagram modified their "Explore Page," a tab interface which consists of an infinite-scroll grid presenting content based on a user's derived interests. Each Explore Page tab is now unique to respective users and includes media content they may not have actively sought out; but still, users must beforehand curate their follows, consequently train the app to understand their preferences, and ultimately *choose* to select this tab. If they so desire, they can simply avoid the Explore Page altogether in favor of their curated following feed. Thus, Instagram still overwhelmingly relies on a self-curation of feeds, and leaves the consumption of app-suggested content to the inclinations of its users.

Page visibility on Instagram depended on this user choice imperative, as the more coherent, predictable, and aesthetically organized pages gained abundant following numbers. Over time, the media content found on Instagram users' following feeds came to represent an

attention economy strongly reliant on this expectations-driven, personality-based visibility culture. Since the most popular pages conformed to clear aesthetic, thematic, and style parameters, pages ultimately became highly curated, aesthetically coherent, and based on an adherence to page-specific norms that reflected hours of work toward perfectionism in their media production. Popular personalities on Instagram found visibility in thematic particularity, often centering on the individual's constructed digital persona. Influencers of Instagram's golden age were widely recognized as members of specific communities. A travel influencer, food and wine influencer, and entrepreneurial influencer were operating within particular social norms and could not enjoy significant degrees of aesthetic or thematic flexibility. Even with Instagram's introduction of video content, those with the most Instagram visibility continued to "trade" in their attention economy through professionalized content production according to their designed personalities and aesthetics. Instagram, to this day, still operates around this particular form of attention economy despite introducing a new tab called "Reels," which imitates the spectacularly popular and fastest growing social media network of all time, TikTok.

From its inception, TikTok sought to revolutionize the user choice-based social media attention economy. Its unique "ForYou Page" (FYP) distinctly embodies this change and seeks to detach both the user choice imperative and the rigid subjectivities of influencer personas from the very character of its interface. Rather than imitating Instagram's classical reliance on the self-curation of feeds, TikTok's FYP reimagines the function of social media altogether. In fact, it privileges *individual post visibility* over persona-based visibility in the vast majority of cases. In other words, virality and followership on TikTok resemble a dynamicism and relatively unrestrained formatting that privilege the singular piece of content, the TikTok video, over the brand of the creator — because the FYP is curated with little regard to whether a user already

follows the creator responsible for a certain piece of content. In other words, the average TikTok user will not know nor necessarily mind that a certain piece of content is seemingly "off-brand" for a particular creator. Simply put, page "brands" are significantly less prominent on TikTok. And while the individual user is still the core relevant unit of this relatively new app, their actions reflect a significant shift away from persona or choice-centered activity. Rather than seeking out pages, influencers, or content that reflect conscious preferences of certain influencer personalities or aesthetics, users delegate their exposures to new content onto TikTok's in-house algorithm, which delivers single posts at a time with little to no consideration of whether a page is already followed by a respective user. Ultimately, the shift away from Instagram and onto TikTok promotes the idea that users are less interested in compulsively following the daily lives of "branded" influencers, and are seeking a new, less aesthetically circumscribed media delivery system.

While users certainly retain choice and agency in their interactions with particular pages or videos, the vast majority of time spent on the app is on this FYP tab, which minds an individual's past interactions such as views, likes, shares, or comments to deliver relevant and enjoyable content to their screens — again, with little regard to whether a certain creator has already been followed. When a user *does* follow a certain account, they can opt to scroll the significantly less trafficked "Following" feed.

Arguably one of TikTok's more attractive aspects is its seamless presentation of such content through the FYP. No longer must social media users spend time seeking out their individual interests nor expend energy scrolling through an often chaotic Explore Page on Instagram. Rather, TikTok's internal programs continuously "learn" more about the individual as they scroll and consequently present them with content more and more aligned with their

preferences or derived demographic. The longer a user spends on the app, the more accurately they will be delivered content based on their interests and preferences. In the comments sections of many TikTok videos, it is common to find a comment saying something like, "they really meant FOR YOU," signaling to both Gen Z's quirky brand of humor and the appreciation of the seemingly flawless accuracy of the TikTok FYP's content presentation technology. Overall, TikTok users do not have to expend much effort to come into contact with videos they find relatable or enjoyable.

Not only can content *find* users without much sorting or intentional effort on the human's end, but content creators themselves must keep in mind the platform's shift away from the influencer aesthetic attention economy and toward the individual post variation. Since visibility, virality, and creator success on TikTok relies most heavily on post-based, FYP fame over aesthetic "persona-based" individual page branding, creators must tailor their content toward audience relatability, trend awareness, and the overall culture of the app; all of which are always in flux. Even if a certain TikTok personality is generally recognized for their dance videos, for example, their posts vary in degrees of casualness, theme, and genre — many are often categorically *not* choreography videos. These TikTok dance stars will almost always feature thematic assortments of posts within their pages, furthering the concept that TikTok personas are more fluid, and less adherent to aesthetic and thematic boundaries.

This TikTok culture is perhaps one of the more nuanced aspects of the platform. Before its inception, social media cultures varied heavily *within* certain platforms. While the norms of, say, cooking pages subscribed to similar aesthetics, they did not necessarily apply to meme pages, for example. TikTok, however, for the most part dashes these normative guidelines for page thematics. Rather, the single most evident culture permeating TikTok is its app-wide

humorous, often dark meme culture. Meme trends transfer across all sorts of pages, regardless of a piece of content's theme. One can find similar jokes trending throughout TikTok videos of any subject, and this can be substantially attributed to the TikTok FYP's novel platform technology that connects individual users to a diverse array of interests. When millions of users become avid TikTok consumers, connections among interests become inevitable, and humorous, relatable meme trends proliferate on all corners of the app.

Memes, when understood to be "units of cultural transmission" or "digital objects that riff on a given visual, textual or auditory form and are then appropriated, re-coded, and slotted back into the internet infrastructures they came from," find a comfortable home within TikTok's infrastructure. After all, TikTok content overwhelmingly relies on the repackaging of auditory files, or "sounds," which users can speak over, reuse, and manipulate to both invite other users into an ingroup of cultural understanding or add their own narratives atop an already familiar and thus digestible structure. The comedic possibilities here are endless, as TikTok will never run out of viral sounds to "meme on."

Though these TikTok auditory meme trends are often relatively short-lived, they become important identifiers of Gen Z-ness both within and beyond the app. In the fall of 2021, troves of TikTok videos flooded the FYP using the audio to a 2016 America's Funniest Home Videos clip showing a young child stacking bricks atop their family's glass coffee table. Of course, the table shatters, and the child, in a laughably defeated voice, says, "Oh no! Our table! It's broken!" TikTok users ran wild with the audio, and it became a generational identifier both on TikTok and in the offline youth culture. I run a weekly after school program for middle schoolers, and for the months when the trend was booming, the kids applied it to almost every in-person scenario.

While TikTok's distinctive meme culture can certainly be understood as a representation of digital frivolity, it also is an increasingly fundamental locus of political engagement for young Americans. Since memes are central to TikTok's popularity among young people, the cohort can effortlessly establish a new form of generational grouping within the app. After all, one of the more prolific TikTok trends of recent years is the "OK Boomer" trope, which has been described as the epitome of Gen Z's digitally constructed "we sense." Through the poking fun of older Americans, TikTok memes provide young Americans with a new collective political identification, and humor is central to this phenomenon. The perpetual, generational, and comedic meme culture on TikTok, due to its widespread relatability and openness to the additions of individuals' accounts, must be understood as a tangible site of widespread youthful community engagement and a site of political literacy formation.

As an identification symbol for young Americans, the OK Boomer trend on TikTok encourages individuals within the cohort to engage with intergenerational politics in a markedly casual and intentionally humorous fashion. Rather than resorting to formalized discourse regarding sensitive, age-based topics, such as generational wealth inequality, TikTok users can ridicule quite serious realities with the impetus of forging generational solidarity — all without risking the harassment or uncertainties that come with engaging in troubling conversations face-to-face. The digital anonymity that stems from digital political discourse on TikTok makes political engagement relatively less risky, and young Americans using the platform seem to have discovered a new way to both forge a critical collective identity without having to potentially insult a "Boomer" to their face. Pointing out problematic generational trends without directly ridiculing an older individual behaves like the anonymity-based political safety nets found on other social media platforms; but TikTok specifically facilitates this notion due to its mass

circulation of seemingly randomized content. A young TikTok user does not need to follow outwardly politically active Gen Z-ers in order to see content that has generationally collectivizing power. Rather, the FYP takes it upon itself to deliver such content to any user who might find it relatable or enjoyable. Thus, young people's collective identification becomes automated and overtly based on a culture of humorous memes.

The collectivizing power of TikTok's OK Boomer meme does not stand alone in its political engagement implications. Rather, it simply exemplifies a new form of active political engagement that is occurring widely within the platform through a multitude of audiovisual meme trends. Even if a certain, nonpolitical trend is circulating widely at a given moment on users' FYPs, it can still be co-opted by political creators who understand the visibility mechanisms of the platform. For example, the seemingly apolitical "Oh no! Our table! It's broken!" sound trend, at first listen, is not an obviously political statement. But due to its exceedingly high meme potential and its vast virality, some TikTok users politicized the audio and paired it with text visuals saying things like, "Oh no! Our *democracy*! It's broken!" These now-political TikToks were widely accessible and intelligible due to the original audio's remarkable scope. Familiarity with the original sound provided the politicized version a humorous channel to reach swaths of Gen Z-ers who might otherwise not identify with the notion that American democracy is broken. The meme, however, through its relatability and already salient generational identification potential, spoke an intrinsically Gen-Z political language. User interactions with these videos signified a TikTok-specific form of humor-motivated political engagement.

Through the utilization of familiar, highly legible audio tropes, miniature political discourse ensues in TikTok's comments sections. While some comments are utterly serious in

tone, such as users calling out representatives or the current president directly, many are simply funny and align with Gen Z's off-kilter humor. One of such popular and silly comments is the "Thanks Obama" meme comment. One can find it in the comments sections of both political and apolitical TikToks. Ultimately, its definition is unserious, of course, as President Obama has not been in office since January of 2017. The meme, however, intentionally signals to this false blame. It recognizes that Obama does not steer the American political ship any longer, and to scapegoat him for a creator's broken leg or parking ticket, to provide two examples, is utterly nonsensical. This is the point — nonsense is central to Gen Z's humor, both political and otherwise. And to blame Obama is to somehow acknowledge the nonsense, the contradictions, and the individual's potential helplessness within the American sociopolitical system. Dark humor is key here.

The political calling-in through TikTok meme trends, both written and audio, highlights the impact of relatable humor on political engagement. When widely distributed political repackagings of the "broken table" or "Thanks Obama" tropes are legible to a generation of young Americans on TikTok, then the political messaging can be internalized in a refreshingly casual, humor-centered fashion. Ultimately, these sorts of political co-optations of TikTok trends permeate the app and FYPs of multitudes of users, and demonstrate the collectivizing political engagement implications of TikTok meme trends. A TikTok user who "gets" these memes is subtly drawn into a loose, decentralized political community of individuals with similar senses of political humor. If these memes are central to the culture of the platform as a whole, then they certainly find a comfortable home within the political capacities of the app.

This brings us to the discussion of political individualization through meme trends on TikTok. Before TikTok, individuals could relate their own narratives to and add their own stories

and realities atop the visual infrastructures preexisting their own meme interpretations. They could comment on, create their own, or share memes. In other words, pre-TikTok visual memes provided individuals on social media with a locus of political identification that usually tickled their own political knowledge. TikTok certainly falls into this area of political engagement but adds strength to this phenomenon through its combination of visual memes with audio memes. Never before has this sort of dynamic, bifold memeification been so prolific or user-friendly. With Vine, users could post viral six-second videos, but repostable audio memes were relatively rare. Now, TikTok facilitates a more complex and retrofittable means to forge individualized political identification and collectivization. Through the humor that permeates TikTok's meme culture, users can both interact with content through traditional modes, such as liking, commenting, and sharing, but they can also get closer to face-to-face discourse than ever before.

TikTok's "duet" and "stitch" functions break the bounds of social media discourse because now, audiovisual memes can be reacted to in a remarkably shareable and visible format. If a user decides to "duet" or "stitch" a certain TikTok, they are essentially speaking directly to the original creator. Their new TikTok shows their added content directly next to the video they are responding to. Often, creators simply react with animated facial expressions but sometimes edit the original audio to respond verbally in snippets. Due to TikTok's widespread reliance on memes and humor, these "duets" and "stitches" and the discourse they exhibit, are often *funny*, further strengthening the political engagement power of the app. If a user stumbles upon one of these reaction videos, three individuals are in fact relating to one another through the screen. If a comical political jest is made, one is encountering a political interaction, a bona fide political engagement among individuals.

This is social media's "connective" political engagement in action. On TikTok, users who are likely otherwise strangers can relate their senses of humor, their phenomenological experiences, and their individual politics to form that aforementioned horizontal and fluid digital political community. Undoubtedly, Gen Z's political humor on TikTok has a certain flavor. It is often nonsensical and cryptic, as discussed before, but it is also "sardonic" and represents a generation's shared feelings in the face of an unknown and often dark future. As a coping mechanism-turned-bonding tool, political humor on TikTok instills a certain generational understanding, a unique sense of "us" as a political group. In order to successfully participate in TikTok politics or "join" the connective political ingroup, users must achieve literacy in all meme trends, political or otherwise. Thus, the app's very infrastructure encourages long term use and platform loyalty. As a result, based on the sharings of and exposures to the app's specific humorous meme culture, the political collective on TikTok is ever strengthening.

Political collectivization on social media is certainly no new concept. TikTok, however, and its highly repackageable pieces of content, privileges memes and trends over many other formats. These viral trends, centered on Gen Z's circulation of humor, give users a sense of participation in a cultural phenomenon larger than the self. The generational collectivization here is salient but is ultimately reliant on *individuals'* internal experiences of these local meme videos.

The most viral and obvious TikTok meme trends, political or otherwise, center on the individual user's relationships and responses to other creators' content. In other words, for an engaged political collective to be born out of a humorous TikTok trend, swaths of *individual* users must relate to the content, choose to interact through their likes, shares, and comments, and, most uniquely to TikTok, they can even react publicly to the video with their own stitches or

duets. Ultimately, their interactions with a single TikTok encourage the FYP algorithm to deliver more and more content of similar themes, furthering the individual user's summoning into a collective.

Adding their stories to ongoing collectivizing trends, the individual TikTok user is thus empowered, often through humor, to make visible their unique and personal phenomenological experiences. The political effects here are endless, as the individual *within* the digital collective can steer a massive conglomerated political understanding through their own words and actions. Individuals on TikTok, through their memeifications and understandings of meme trends, become the critical component of collective, and in this case connective, politics on the app.

The singular user's experience on TikTok is utterly dependent on their own internal politics, identities, and experiences. The post-based, non-aesthetic attention economy here requires each user to apply their own judgment systems towards content and decide, whether consciously or not, to interact with a certain video and subsequently join the loose political digital collective. The participatory nature of politics here leans heavily on how each unique user digests content, and creates a new imperative of political individualization. In order to achieve visibility on the app, individual users must be able to connect on a personal level to other creators' posts, otherwise they can easily signal to the app through selecting the "show fewer videos like this" button. Thus, the most popular videos are often tinted with Gen Z's humor because they activate that aforementioned generational solidarity — the post is funny because it's true for the individual user in question. And when a piece of content is intended to discuss political matters, this subliminal solidarity is vital.

Viral and trendy humorous threads on TikTok empower individuals to both join a digital political collective yet simultaneously employ their unique voice and experience onto political

realities. This is the unique nature of TikTok politics — users are first and foremost operating as individuals, but at the same time, they are often unwittingly participating in the horizontal collectivization of political narratives. Displaying temporal relevance, relatability, entertainment, and accessibility of concept call-in individuals to formulate their politics. On the large scale and through repetition, this notion has the power to turn millions of single users into a new sort of connective political bloc, still centered on the individual's phenomenology.

The audio/visual format and its meme-encouraging nature incentivize users to both create and enjoy exposures to discursive content such as storytelling and intimate disclosures of personal politics. If Instagram privileges aesthetically contained content, then TikTok encourages off-the-cuff, even chaotic aesthetics of vulnerability and subjective individuality. Politically, this provides a channel for users to express their unique truths through a language their peers are fluent in. In other words, TikTok users do not simply consume content. Rather, they *become* the content through the practicing of politics according to their own phenomenological understandings, their personalities, their truths. And with TikTok's short format, users can share their stories, make their jokes, and seek empathy with confidence that their story will be heard to the extent it was intended. Empowerment and control are central here, and Gen Z deserves recognition for its ingenious, well-balanced, and often humorous political application of an entertainment platform.

Presumably, many content creators on TikTok are simply behaving in second nature. Their preexisting digital literacy and the casualness of the app allow them to focus less on immaculate editing or special effects, and rather give the majority of their energy to narrative formulation and reach. Ultimately, no prior training is required to make it big on TikTok. Many of the most viral videos consist of average people sitting in their cars, at their kitchen tables, or

walking around their neighborhood simply speaking to their cellphone's camera and cracking jokes about their political reality with the goal of visibility. This intimate sharing of political individuality is a core of TikTok's political power. What matters most is the educated and relatable utilization of a generation's brand of humor and a familiarity with the social norms of the app. Otherwise, there are no rules. This is utterly refreshing to a generation of young people who grew up during the birth of influencer culture's perfectionism. In the political context, if TikTok's few rules are followed, a politically humorous piece of content can go viral in mere hours.

Speaking one's truth on their own terms, among their generational peers, and through a language of humorous relatability is fiercely powerful to a cohort of individuals facing a dark future. Fostering connective collectivization *through* the individual, TikTok both normalizes and deformalizes political engagement for troves of young people. Facing an uncertain future, an app's incidental activation of a political consciousness within young people is pretty remarkable.

In Sum

TikTok, as a relatively new and exceptionally popular social media app, provides infrastructural novelties through which individualized and collective political engagement can be examined. From a political science point of view, TikTok is a prime embodiment of phenomenological politics — through users' daily interactions with and responses to humorous political content, their visceral interactions with politics come to light. After all, TikTok operates around the premise of powerfully accurate personalized content feeds. Thus, the political engagement implications of TikTok are structurally personal to each user and draw on the affective powers of political humor.

TikTok's distinct platform infrastructure facilitates and reveals the affective dimensions of young people's personal and collective politics. In line with preceding theories of political humor on social media, TikTok's audio-visual memeifications of politics can spur the affective personalization of politics for the individual user while simultaneously encouraging the formations of flexible, horizontal, and inclusive political collectives. In other words, TikTok, like other social media platforms of the 21st century, has become a crucial site of political identity formation for Gen Z, both for the individual and collective.

TikTok and its memeified political humor both align with and splinter away from current understandings of the affective individualization and collectivization of politics stemming from social media memes. While TikTok, as the new, favored home of digital political content for many young Americans provides affective modes for relating to political realities, its technology itself bursts forth as a new political mechanism and expands the notions of what political engagement can look like in the digital age.

As a platform with infrastructural nuance in an overwhelmingly vast landscape of social media companies, TikTok necessitates the engagement actions of singular users. Their experiences on the app snowball in accordance to their own previous actions and keep them coming back for more. The FYP, beloved by many, allows for a highly personalized political experience for users. Their individuality is emboldened, yet it is simultaneously nurturing a form of connective political identification that can be based in the joy of consuming memes. TikTok humor provides young Americans a crucial site of identifying and building their engaged political community because it deeply personalizes politics yet simultaneously provides accessible channels for connective and ultimately community-forming activity.

Empirical Approach Outline

To better understand users' political identification and collectivization experiences from exposures to TikTok memes, a two-pronged empirical process becomes crucial. First, an exploratory interview procedure will provide the qualitative data necessary to most effectively formulate a large-scale survey later on. This preliminary interview will allow subjects to explore their own conceptions of TikTok memes' political functions in their own language through their own terminology and experiences. Framing this preliminary and exploratory interview as open-ended and without any significant priming will avoid framing errors and bias on the interviewer's end. After these initial interviews are conducted, the research team will design a survey based on common themes deduced from the original interviews. Thus, the final survey will be based on respondents' organic conceptualizations of TikTok, rather than assumptions the research team might bring to their conversations with subjects. The following preliminary interview questions will allow researchers to develop a systematic method for studying the phenomenon of political individualization and collectivization via TikTok memes.

Hypotheses

I have argued that humorous memes on TikTok deeply personalize politics for a generation of young Americans and ultimately create a horizontal, fluid collective structure of political connectivity. Through TikTok meme culture's circulation of a generation-specific sense of humor-turned political language, individual users can both construct their personal and collective politics on the platform. Drawing users in with affective narratives and relatable memes, TikTok facilitates a connective, ever-building of political stories centrally based on the individual's phenomenological experience.

H1: Exposures to humorous political TikTok memes over time lead to the development of the individual's political identification.

H2: Exposures to humorous political TikTok memes over time lead to the strengthening of users' political collectivization.

Preliminary Interview Questions:

1. How long have you been using the TikTok app?

2. How often do you encounter TikTok meme trends?

    a. What proportion of these TikTok videos bear political themes?

3. Can you speak about how your personal politics interact with TikTok meme trends?

    a. Would you say that your political identity has remained unchanged, become strengthened, or weakened over the period in which you have been on TikTok?

    b. Are there certain TikTok meme trends that come to mind when thinking about how your own personal politics have changed?

4. Can you speak about political community on TikTok?

    a. How do you think you might fit into these communities?

    b. Do you believe TikTok has brought you into a digital political community?

    c. How might you describe this political community?

    d. How does TikTok meme culture influence this political community?

5. Finally, since the FYP is entirely tailored to *your* derived preferences, do you think it delivers you appropriate and relatable political content?

    a. How would you describe this content?

    b. Broadly, how does this content influence your politics?

After these open-ended interviews are conducted, researchers will analyze responses and form coding categories based on the two dependent variables of interest: development of political identification and strengthening of political identification. Responses to the qualitative interview questions will help operationalize key independent variables as well, including but not limited to: exposure, political community, efficacy.

The qualitative data gathered through these interviews will ultimately lead to a better understanding of how users speak about and relate to the politics of TikTok meme trends. Thus, these preliminary open-ended style qualitative interviews will inform the development of quantitative surveys. Ultimately, through the combined interpretations of the preliminary interviews' qualitative data and the final survey's quantitative data, the goal is to derive an empirical conclusion regarding the relationship between exposures to TikTok political meme humor and individual political identification and collectivization.

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