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Memetic Performances on TikTok:
Between Feminist Killjoys and
Happy Feminism

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Affective Dynamics in #MyBodyMyChoice Memetic Performances on TikTok: Between Feminist Killjoys and Happy Feminism

Margreth Lünenborg and Annabella Backes

May 10, 2025

Abstract

The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and the repeal of Germany’s abortion advertisement ban in June 2022 represent a momentous shift in the global landscape of reproductive rights, amplifying contentious debates around bodily autonomy and women’s rights. Feminist activism, traditionally rooted in body politics, has adapted to digital platforms, utilising their affordances to mobilise around socio-political issues such as abortion rights. This paper investigates the affective dynamics, i.e., intensities and registers, of feminist digital activism through the lens of affect theory and feminist media studies, with a focus on the #mybodymychoice TikTok challenge. We examine how TikTok’s algorithmically driven, viral structure shapes the affective intensity of the challenge; and introduce the concept of affective registers to analyse how the platform’s multimodal affordances foster distinct types of memetic performances that privilege certain forms of feminist digital activism. Our findings reveal how affective registers of joy, anger, shock, and solidarity circulate within the challenge, fuelling wide, intense, but ephemeral mobilisation while also exposing the risks of political dilution. Through our typology of affective registers, we examine the tension between popular feminist performances of “happy feminism”—where joy and personal empowerment prevail—and more confrontational forms of “killjoy feminist activism,” shedding light on the potential and limitations of feminist activism on TikTok and the platform’s ability to foster affective solidarity while also commodifying affect and constraining sustained political impact. Thus, this study exemplarily delineates the broader dynamics and contours of contemporary feminist digital activism, illustrating how playful, intimate, and vivid memetic performances both amplify and reshape feminist activism in digitally networked societies.

Keywords: affect; feminist digital activism; TikTok; abortion discourse; memetic performance; body politics

1 Introduction and Rationale

June 24th, 2022, stands as a watershed moment in women’s rights history, emblematic of both progress and setback. On this day, Germany took an important step toward reproductive justice by repealing the so-called abortion advertisement ban (§ 219a of the German Criminal Code), “a Nazi-era law that criminalises doctors who provide information about abortion procedures” (Oltermann 2022), marking progress toward women’s right to information, destigmatisation of abortion, and decriminalisation of doctors. However, having an abortion “remains technically illegal” (Oltermann 2022).

In stark contrast, the United States witnessed a major rollback of reproductive rights with the Supreme Court’s overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, dismantling nearly half a century of federally protected abortion rights (The New York Times 2022). This seismic shift not only impacts the lives of millions but also sent ripples across the globe, reigniting protests and debates on bodily autonomy, state control, and reproductive justice.

As the BBC (2022) noted, the U.S. decision “is being felt in countries across the world,” underlining the transnational and highly affective dimensions of the abortion debate and the broader struggle for justice.

The longstanding discourse on abortion has been central to feminist activism globally and has increasingly moved online, complementing traditional street protests with digital forms of mobilisation (Clark-Parsons 2022; MacDonald et al. 2022). Especially on social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter/X, and TikTok affective dynamics are amplified and emotions like rage, empathy, fear, and hope circulate rapidly and visibly, creating what Papacharissi (2015) has termed “affective publics”—networks of individuals or groups connected or disconnected through affective intensities and shared emotional expression. Understanding the affective dynamics of publics is essential, as they are not only mobilising forces but frequently reflect deeper tensions within societies—between inclusion and exclusion, belonging and alienation, solidarity and division (Ahmed 2014; Slaby and von Scheve 2019; Lünenborg and Röttger-Rössler 2024). Accordingly, with the “affective turn” in the 1990s, theories of affect have become more central to the study of publics and social movements (Gould 2010; Ahmed 2010; Hemmings 2012).

The affective dimension is also core to abortion rights activism as feminist campaigns and movements have historically relied on bodily performances and personal stories as key mobilising tools—both directly and through mediated forms. Concurrently, counter movements urging for abortion restriction and the curtailment of women’s bodily autonomy and reproductive rights similarly utilise affectively charged imagery and narratives to mobilise support and shape public discourse (Pérez-Arredondo and Graells-Garrido 2021). Thus, abortion discourse stands paradigmatic for polarisation on social media (Sharma et al. 2017).

Despite the wealth of scholarship on abortion (rights) discourse and activism in communication studies (e.g., De Zordo, Mishtal, and Anton 2018), much research examined individual emotional narratives in abortion storytelling (e.g., Kosenko, Winderman, and Pugh 2019; Hunt et al. 2022). However, we are particularly interested in how collective affective performances of emotion shape feminist activism and identities affectively. Furthermore, existing literature predominantly focuses on platforms like Twitter (e.g., Willis 2022; Gerbaudo 2022) and Instagram (e.g., Kim and Lee 2022), leaving a gap in understanding how these debates evolve on TikTok and how TikTok’s particularities contribute to feminist activism. However, TikTok’s multi-modal affordances, coupled with its algorithmically driven viral structure, offer a unique environment for (studying) feminist digital activism. The platform’s capacity

for remixing, interaction, and playful engagement creates a space where affect and emotion are central to activism (Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2022; Cervi and Divon 2023).

By examining the #mybodymychoice challenge on TikTok, this study seeks to explore how affect and emotions are harnessed in feminist digital activism on the platform. We focus on how different affective strategies, i.e., affective registers, and TikTok’s multimodal affordances shape contemporary forms of feminist digital activism, particularly concerning contentious socio-political issues like abortion rights. Through the qualitative analysis of the #mybodymychoice challenge as a case study, we develop a typology of affective registers in multimodal media content and examine how they reflect contemporary feminist activism and identity on TikTok.

In the following, we begin by situating our study within the broader context of affective publics and feminist digital activism, followed by an introduction to our methodological approach. We then propose and critically discuss a typology of affective registers employed in the challenge, assessing TikTok’s potential both to amplify feminist voices and to expose them to capitalist commodification and, therefore, depolitisation. Finally, we conclude by discussing the broader implications for understanding contemporary feminist activism in digitally networked societies.

2 Affective Publics and Feminist Digital Activism

Our research adopts a socio-relational approach to affect and emotions as interactive dynamics between bodies—human and non-human (e.g., screens)—that influence one another (Slaby and von Scheve 2019). While emotions can be understood as socio-culturally shaped, elaborated concepts that are experienced reflexively in specific temporal episodes, affect describes a pre-categorical relational dynamic that is perceived as physical intensity. The ability to affect and to be affected thus describes a basic human ability that flows into the formation of emotions and shapes them (Wetherell 2012; Slaby and Mühlhoff 2019).

Social media platforms like TikTok produce affective intensities based on the platform’s affordances and algorithmic curation. Due to real-time interaction and affective user engagement understood as “affective media practice” (Lünenborg et al. 2021), performed emotions are not individual experiences but are shaped and magnified through connective and collective (inter)action, making these platforms ideal sites for investigating feminist digital activism. Through this socio-relational lens, we explore how networked affect—through viral hashtags or challenges—mobilises and contributes to feminist digital activism, while also exposing it to contingencies and depolitisation.

The notion of networked affect is encapsulated in the concept of affective publics, which Papacharissi (2015, 125) has defined as the “networked public formations that are mobilised and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment.” While publics in general can be understood as affectively grounded, the concept of “affective publics” explicitly highlights a departure from dominant Habermasian understandings of the public sphere, which emphasise rational debate and consensus as the primary modes and objectives of deliberation. Instead, focusing on affective intensities and dynamics acknowledges affectivity as fundamental to the formation and very ontology of publics. Following from this, affective publics are characterised by (1) emotions being explicitly mentioned, addressed, or performed, (2) affective relationships between actors—human or non-human—being constitutive for the emergence of publics, and (3) affective intensities and temporal structures marked by immediacy and simultaneity being essential building blocks. Affective publics are thus highly dynamic, fluid, and volatile (Lünenborg and Röttger-Rössler 2024). This contingent nature of affective dynamics carries the risk of publics being hijacked by opposing actors (Adlung, Lünenborg, and Raetzsch 2021; Knüpfer, Hoffmann, and Voskresenskii 2020) or of the formation of alliances in which conflicting ideological positions converge into affective communities (Zahn and Lünenborg 2024).

This understanding of publics as inherently affective is a compelling prerequisite for analysing discourse and activism on platforms like TikTok, where “social media users acquire agency, providing their own emotional interpretations of current issues, but also mobilizing ‘connective action’ around shared emotions” (Medeiros and Makhashvili 2022, 40). Thus, affect is central to the mobilisation of activism and the formation of counter publics, as affective ties and emotional communities (Zink 2019, 290)—based on shared emotions such as anger, grief, solidarity, or hope—can drive individuals to join and sustain social movements. While this holds true for the formation of protests in the streets (Butler 2015), the understanding of digital activism based on mobilisation with and through digital media must account for the temporal, material, performative, and processual nature of the affective formation of publics (Lünenborg and Röttger-Rössler 2024).

Feminist digital activism research, particularly focusing on body politics, emphasises the close entanglement of online and offline articulations and performances (Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller 2019) of emotions, often embodied in (digital) activism. Social media, by facilitating the rapid dissemination of affectively charged content, becomes a key site for these performative acts of resistance, extending them beyond physical spaces into the digital realm. In feminist digital activism, these affective

performances are particularly significant because they blend the personal with the political, centring on deeply personal and embodied issues such as bodily autonomy, reproductive rights, and gender-based violence. Instead of distinguishing categorically between embodied protests in public spaces and “virtual” protests, feminist scholars examine their entanglement as “affective body politics of social media” (Hynnä, Lehto, and Paasonen 2019). Baer (2016, 29) even states that “the precarity of the female body has become an emphatic site of contention in the adaptation and redeployment of contemporary feminist protest movements.”

However, these dynamics are complicated by the rise of newer forms of feminism. With the concepts of “popular feminism” and “neoliberal feminism,” Banet-Weiser (2018) and Rottenberg (2018) critique how feminist activism, particularly on social media, is often commodified and packaged as form of empowerment that, however, aligns more with capitalist exploitation structures than with radical social change. This creates a tension between feminisms that celebrate women’s power and visibility, risking the reduction to a marketable form of empowerment, and feminisms that challenge deeper patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial structures of inequality.

This tension is particularly evident in the digital landscape, where media visibility for feminist issues relies heavily on data infrastructures embedded in capitalist economies, diluting the radical potential of feminist critique, shifting it away from Ahmed’s (2017) “feminist killjoy,” the spoiler of the smooth functioning of hegemonic systems, to post-feminist forms of identity that celebrate women power while commodifying their affective capital. In particular, TikTok’s data infrastructures and algorithmic prioritisation of viral content amplify this tension, potentially shifting feminist activism from a space of radical critique to a commodified form of empowerment. In this context, Lee and Abidin (2023, 3) critically note that “attention, visibility, and fame that function as new currencies in the social media environments are now understood as weapons to galvanize movements.” We thus analyse a memetic performance on TikTok to deeply understand the affective dynamics that allow and encourage mundane forms of fourth-wave feminism in digital media environments.

3 Affect and Emotion in Abortion Discourse on Social Media

Abortion (rights) discourse provides an affective lens for examining feminist digital activism. The highly moralised and deeply personal nature of these debates renders it a particularly affectively charged issue, with both bodily and emotional stakes involved. The affective strategies employed by both pro-choice and anti-choice groups reveal how emotions like empathy, disgust, shame, and guilt are deployed, resisted,

and at times weaponised, generating conflicting narratives about reproductive justice and bodily autonomy. Research shows that pro-choice activism often harnesses emotions such as empathy and empowerment to foster solidarity and inclusive communities (Kim and Lee 2022; Willis 2022), while anti-choice groups rely on disgust, shame, and guilt to morally condemn abortion (Kosenko, Winderman, and Pugh 2019). This dynamic illustrates how affect is not just a tool for mobilisation but also for division and exclusion.

The affective dimension of abortion (rights) discourse is further exemplified by hashtags like #ShoutYourAbortion, where people affectively mobilised personal narratives to destigmatise abortion. Kim and Lee (2022) have shown that emotions and personal stories around abortion are widely utilised on Instagram and how the affective intensity of those directly influences user engagement. However, as Kosenko, Winderman, and Pugh (2019) note, anti-choice groups on Twitter often hijack these hashtags to deploy “disgust cues”—using affective tactics such as performing disgust, labelling something as disgusting, and eliciting disgust—to stigmatise abortion. These strategies demonstrate how emotions like shame, guilt, and disgust are weaponised by anti-choice groups to morally condemn abortion, creating a polarised and affectively charged debate (Sharma et al. 2017).

Similarly, the Twitter hashtag #YouKnowMe has been used to challenge the misconception that women universally regret abortions, providing space for emotional response and fostering solidarity—understood as the affective quality of bonding and belonging. This creates an affectively charged community that shares experiences and provides support (Hunt et al. 2022). This sense of “media solidarity” (Nikunen 2019; 2018), in which shared narratives cultivate communal ties, is key to the affective power of feminist digital activism. Willis (2022, 145–46) expands on this by describing digital abortion storytelling on Twitter as a global practice for “personal catharsis or mental well-being; connecting with others for collective empowerment; and destigmatising across the wider population.” Gerbaudo (2022, 13) suggests that the affective intensity of personal stories facilitates collective identity, surpassing what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have labelled connective action, but also creates a unique tension: “Th[e] tension between the intimate character of personal stories and circumstances and the fact that they are aired so publicly is perhaps also what makes these campaigns so contagious and viral.”

While the affective intensity of personal stories can foster collective identity and affective communities, it also creates vulnerabilities, as shown in the hashjacking of #ShoutYourAbortion on Twitter (Kosenko, Winderman, and Pugh 2019). While these stories become sources for journalists—with bravery, solidarity, and love being the

dominant emotions in reporting (Bouvier 2022)—the openness of these platforms also exposes pro-choice advocates to online hate and backlash. This is evident in research on Twitter in Chile, where pro-choice female politicians face high levels of hostility (Pérez-Arredondo and Graells-Garrido 2021). This exposure of feminist digital activists to hostility and surveillance adds a layer of vulnerability.

In sum, scholarship has shown that storytelling is a crucial affective strategy in feminist abortion discourse, with social media platforms enabling individuals to share deeply personal experiences that foster solidarity and community-building. However, there is a critical gap in understanding how collective emotional expressions influence feminist activism and identity, making memetic performances in the realm of challenges on TikTok particularly interesting to study. Additionally, the existing literature predominantly centres on Twitter and Instagram, which limits our understanding of how abortion is affectively negotiated and contested on TikTok. This oversight is significant given TikTok’s unique affordances and its potential to shape feminist activism differently from traditional social media platforms. Therefore, our study aims to address these gaps by examining the role of affectivity and collective affective performances in feminist digital activism specifically within the TikTok context.

4 TikTok and the Virality of Affect

TikTok, as “a unique storytelling environment that promotes a sense of belonging” (Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin 2022, 887), transcends being merely a “fun platform,” instead blending “the boundaries of entertainment, marketing, and political activism in often bizarre and unsettling ways” (Otto 2023, 7). With its short-form video content, remix functions and interaction capabilities, and its comparatively younger user base, TikTok offers a unique platform for studying the affective dimensions of feminist digital activism—particularly in relation to bodily autonomy and abortion rights.

TikTok’s algorithm prioritises and amplifies affectively resonant content that elicits affective responses—whether through repeated consumption driven by captivation and fascination, approval expressed via likes and shares, or engagement fuelled by annoyance and irritation. This rapid dissemination of affectively charged content encourages users to express emotions dynamically—often in highly affective, creative, and playful ways—fuelling viral trends such as challenges while also shaping collective identities and mobilising affective publics. This makes TikTok a particularly powerful tool for activist mobilisation (Cervi and Marín-Lladó 2022).

TikTok’s distinct “playful affordances” (Cervi and Divon 2023, drawing from Songer and Miyata 2014)—its creative functions and editing tools—enable a performative, visceral, and embodied form of activism, often hinging on a “unique interplay between visual and auditory components” (Otto 2023, 11, our translation) and “empowering the participation of ordinary users in emerging socio-political events” (Cervi and Divon 2023, 2). Users can integrate bodily presence and affective states, encouraging specific editing and bodily practices such as transitions—surprising edits and sharp cuts, seamlessly merging distinct video clips into a unified creation. In this context, the platform’s affordances privilege specific practices while marginalising other, thereby regulating their affective dynamics. For example, TikTok’s duet and remix functions enable users to interact with each other’s content, creating the platform’s own “emotional architecture” (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 147).

Moreover, “memetic templates for affective creation” (Cervi and Divon 2023, 3) shape users’ engagement with challenges and memes as cultural and participatory artifacts that can “both politicise and depoliticize conflict and divert attention to and from the issues at stake” (Mortensen and Neumayer 2021, 2367), functioning as tools for “satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity” (Wiggins 2019, 11). One particularly important element in this context is that TikTok integrates audio templates alongside visual filters and hashtags as markers of participation in or contribution to specific memes and challenges. In this sense, Abidin (2020, 80) notes, “where visual social media such as Instagram tend to focus on images over text, TikTok privileges sounds over images,” defining “audio memes” as the “organising principle for how content is catalogued into repositories on TikTok, and how users navigate the platform to seek new trends and contents.”

Finally, it is the tension between users’ creativity to find their own affective modes of articulation and the prefigured templates structuring their multimodal performative and narrative activity that characterises the potential for affective mobilisation. This makes TikTok an especially interesting platform to study the affective dimension of feminist digital activism, particularly in relation to the #mybodymychoice challenge.

5 The #MyBodyMyChoice Challenge on TikTok

The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* sparked widespread outrage, rapidly and simultaneously gaining visibility and engagement both offline and across digital platforms. One of the most prominent examples of feminist digital activism on German language TikTok during this time was the #mybodymychoice challenge—a highly contested memetic performance, commonly referred to in German-language media as *Kleiderbügel-*

Trend (coat hanger trend) (Coerschulte 2022). This “music challenge” (Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin 2022) served as a microcosm of the broader feminist digital activism around abortion rights at the time and became a viral space for affective mobilisation, with thousands of users engaging in a range of memetic performances. Rather than viewing these performances as competitive, we conceptualise them, following Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin (2022, 887), as modes of feminist storytelling, often intersecting with feminist politics of the body. This makes the #mybodymychoice challenge a critical and exemplary site for the analysis of affective dynamics within mundane feminist digital activism on TikTok.

At the heart of the challenge lies a repetitive pattern involving choreographed rhythmic body as well as lip movements, synchronised with a powerful audio template. The original audio template—first posted in France on June 27th, 2022—features an edit from Billie Eilish’s performance at a Texan festival in October 2021, where she forcefully and audibly declares, “My body, my motherfucking choice,” while defiantly raising her middle finger. This is combined with a snippet from the song “Power” by Little Mix, with the lyrics “you’re the man [...] but I got the power,” and multiple portraits of Brett Kavanaugh, one of the four Republican-appointed U.S. Supreme Court justices who voted to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and has also faced multiple sexual assault allegations (Marcus 2020).

The earliest TikTok video examined as part of our data set showcases a woman¹ lip-syncing to the described audio template. She begins by standing, then sits down on a chair while brandishing a coat hanger, circling it around her finger before raising it high in the air (see first row of screenshots in Figure 2). Initially depicted in a dishevelled outfit, she undergoes an abrupt transition into a meticulously styled ensemble, wearing a red dress in the blink of an eye, all the while retaining grasp of the coat hanger. As this memetic audio and performance template began circulating on TikTok as a #mybodymychoice challenge, users employed it in varied ways, offering surprisingly different interpretations, making the case particularly suited for the study of affect and emotion in feminist digital activism on TikTok.

¹ We shall speak about individuals perceived as, for instance, “women” according to their appearance in the video.

6 Method

The overarching research questions we pose are the following:

- (RQ1) How does TikTok’s algorithmically driven, viral structure amplify or constrain the affective intensity of the #mybodymychoice challenge?
- (RQ2) Which affective strategies of content creators participating in the challenge are collectively used and facilitated by the platform’s affordances?
- (RQ3) How does the challenge’s affective dimension foster and privilege certain forms of feminist digital activism?

To answer these questions, we implement a methodological approach suited to the specifics of the “affective designs” (Brown, Pini, and Pavlidis 2024) of TikTok as a digital platform, its multimodal content, and embodied forms of feminist digital activism.

Data Collection

For this study, we focus on the challenge’s distinct audio template, which relates singular memetic performances to one another (Abidin and Kaye 2021). To collect the data, we leveraged TikTok’s Research API (2024) alongside a custom Python script (version 3.10) in JupyterLab (version 4.0.12) to gather videos associated with the audio’s Music ID².

Data collection commenced on February 1, 2024, focusing on videos posted within six months after the emergence of the #mybodymychoice challenge (June 27 – December 27, 2022)³. The preliminary data set consisted of 7,304 videos. However, an initial rough systematisation and visualisation of posts per day indicated that the #mybodymychoice challenge disseminated primarily during the first month. Consequently, the dataset was refined to a time frame spanning from June 27 to July 27, 2022 (n = 6,332).

Each video was annotated with metadata such as video ID, username, create time, region code, and engagement metrics (share, like, and comment count), hashtags, and

² The Music ID is 7113895655193594630. The audio page as well as the original audio itself are no longer publicly available. However, the original video edit with an altered version of the sound can be found here: <https://www.tiktok.com/@my.body...my.choice/video/7113895626106047750>. Collecting data based on the Music ID is still possible.

³ Collecting data from a dynamic, fast-paced social media platform like TikTok for a widely contested challenge presents inherent challenges, especially since data collection took place 1.5 years after the initial circulation. The deletion of numerous videos due to criticism or for other reasons over time must therefore be taken into account.

captions, providing a foundation for analysing the challenge’s dissemination and engagement—i.e., the affective intensity generated by TikTok’s platform logic. Economically driven, the platform’s architecture is designed to intensify and maximise users’ engagement, which can initially be assessed in quantities and frequencies of user activities on a given topic.

Descriptive Analysis

All 6,332 videos in the data set were descriptively analysed to offer insights into the ways in which TikTok’s algorithmically driven, viral structure shapes the affective intensity of the #mybodymychoice challenge (RQ1) and to allow for the implementation of a well-reasoned sampling strategy. Engagement, temporal, and spatial dissemination were systematically analysed and visualised. Key questions included: How does the challenge and its affective intensity develop over time? Is the challenge of transnational nature or is its circulation restricted to a specific regional context? These general patterns provide crucial contextual insights for the subsequent qualitative analysis and interpretation.

Data Sampling

The sampling for qualitative analysis was twofold. First, we identified videos surpassing specific interaction thresholds—namely, a minimum of 1000 likes, 50 shares, and 50 comments—yielding a subset of 184 videos. This ensured that our sample comprised content that garnered significant interaction, reflecting the popularity and visibility of certain videos. Second, to ensure the inclusion of videos with intense engagement on specific days, the ten videos with the highest engagement for each day from June 27 to July 15, 2022 (when engagement metrics uniformly declined), were retained. This second sampling procedure led to a subset of 181 videos. After removing the duplicates, the final corpus for qualitative analysis comprised 250 videos in total, providing a corpus that offers nuanced insights into the #mybodymychoice challenge and its affective dynamics over time and across borders.

Qualitative Analysis of Affective Registers

These 250 videos were then analysed to explore the affective strategies collectively leveraged by content creators participating in the challenge in order to understand how affective states become recognisable in different memetic performances in the multimodal content and how platform affordances influence this dynamic emergence (RQ2). To empirically capture this role of affect in the analysis of the multimodal material, the concept of “affective registers” (Lünenborg et al. 2021) proves useful, as it

highlights the ways in which both human and non-human subjects engage on (smartphone) screens.

Affective registers—akin to registers in music—refer to “those formal-aesthetic and content-related narrative elements aimed at physically and sensually moving viewers and evoking sensations of connection with other bodies or separation” (Töpper 2021, 44, our translation). Drawing on film theory, the concept allows to reconstruct how affect is controlled and regulated toward users or viewers. On TikTok, strategies of affective address become recognisable as affective registers.

Three analytical levels have been distinguished: (1) the performative emergence of bodies, (2) practices as doings with artefacts, and (3) the production of meaning through discourse. Applying these levels to the analysis of TikTok, the platform’s affordances privilege specific practices and regulate their affective dynamics. To unveil the affective registers relied upon in the challenge, all videos underwent abductive coding along these analytical dimensions, with a focus on how TikTok’s affordances are leveraged at each level.

Next, drawing on Grittmann’s framework (2018) for integrating Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and iconographic image type analysis, a typology of “recurring motifs” (Grittmann 2018, 197) was developed to untangle the types of affective registers. The goal was to achieve internal homogeneity on the level of the type while maximising external heterogeneity on the level of typology (Kelle and Kluge 2010, 85). Following this, our analysis aimed at identifying different types of affective registers that organise user engagement and mobilise for feminist issues in divergent and sometimes unexpected ways.

7 Results

In the following, we aim to examine and then discuss the varying affective intensities and divergent affective registers in the memetic performances of the #mybodymchoice challenge. We begin with the findings from descriptive analysis of the data to grasp and contextualise the challenge in its affective intensities to answer RQ1. This is followed by a qualitative analysis of the sampled videos, to unveil the specific recurring motifs in bodily and editing practices, as well as discursive elements, forming the basis of the challenge’s affective registers (RQ2). Ultimately, we untangle the affective registers in order to condense the findings into distinct types, allowing us to then discuss the spectrum of feminist activism and identity formation the particular case study brings about (RQ3).

7.1 Affective Intensity: Exploring Engagement, Temporality, and Spatiality

TikTok users engaged actively and intensely with the #mybodymychoice challenge, as reflected by the 5,916 unique accounts contributing within its first month of circulation and the collective accumulation of 22 million likes, 179.5 million views, over 212,000 shares, and nearly 270,000 comments across the 6,332 videos analysed. These metrics not only illustrate broad participation but also reveal the affective intensity underpinning the challenge.

The temporal distribution of posts and engagement metrics per day reveal clear fluctuations in affective intensity over time (Figure 1). The challenge surged in popularity just four days after the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* on June 24, 2022. Engagement peaked in the first ten days, with its apex on July 6, reaching 599 posts, highlighting how TikTok’s viral structure facilitated an immediate and intense affective response to the socio-political context. Engagement matrices reflect this surge, with July 3 witnessing the highest view (nearly 27 million) and like (approx. 3.2 million) counts, while July 5 saw peaks in comments (50,332) and shares (35,766). The rapid rise in posts and interactions underscores how TikTok’s viral dynamics channel collective affective performances, converting individual expressions into mass-mediated phenomena in the form of challenges.

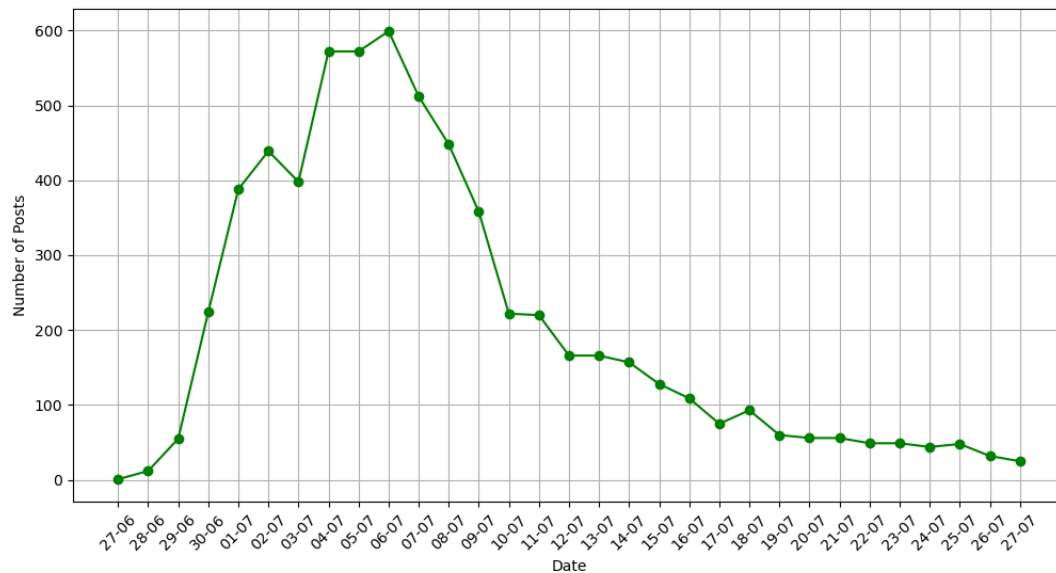


Figure 1. Temporal Distribution of TikTok Posts

However, this intensity was short-lived, with contributions dropping to roughly one-third of the initial rate by July 10 and dwindling to fewer than 100 posts per day by July 17. This decline was consistent across all interaction parameters too, with rates reaching their lowest point uniformly by July 15 the latest. Such a steep decline in participation as well as engagement, confined to a brief span of approximately two

weeks, mirrors the platform’s ephemeral nature, where digital activism takes on a fleeting, wave-like form as illustrated by Figure 1. Despite the massive early momentum, the challenge’s sustained impact is questionable, suggesting that while TikTok facilitates momentary peaks in affective intensity—akin to transient protest forms like flash mobs—these surges may not necessarily translate into long-term engagement or structural change. This raises questions about the nature and sustainability of the challenge’s impact, its broader political significance, and, more generally, the fragility and volatility of such publics and digital activism on platforms driven by algorithms that prioritize virality.

In terms of spatial distribution, the challenge spread globally, with videos being posted from 104 different countries. However, Central Europe emerged as a focal point, hosting 95 percent of all contributions, with the largest volumes of posts coming from Germany (2,115) and France (1,769). The significance of the challenge in Germany was already evident when we looked into the German-language abortion discourse on TikTok. To gain preliminary insights, we gathered TikTok posts from the two weeks following the repeal of Article 219a and the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* (June 24 – July 8, 2022) using the German-language keyword *abtreibung* (abortion). In total, we retrieved 318 videos, with 44 percent of them linked to the #mybodymychoice challenge—informing about, discussing, critiquing, or participating in it—and more than every fourth video employing the distinct audio template.

The concentration of engagement in Europe suggests a geographically specific affective resonance, potentially reflecting the broader cultural and political climate surrounding reproductive rights in these regions during this time. This is particularly relevant within the context of the widely observed shift to the right (*Rechtsruck*) and a pronounced strengthening of conservative, traditionalist, and authoritarian values in EU and national politics. Germany, as mentioned earlier, the same day *Roe v. Wade* was overturned in the United States, repealed Article 219a from its Criminal Code (Oltermann 2022), providing a foundation for debate on abortion. France, long considered one of the countries with the most progressive abortion rights, in March the same year, even became the first nation worldwide to enshrine the right to abortion in its constitution (Wright 2024). Thus, while the challenge originated in response to a U.S. political event, its affective and political stakes clearly extended beyond this context, indicating TikTok’s potential for mobilising affect transnationally, albeit unevenly.

Outside Europe, engagement was minimal. South America, Asia, Africa, and North America combined only accounted for 230 posts, with many countries (75 in total) contributing fewer than 10 videos. This uneven spatial distribution underscores how digital activism—while ostensibly global in scope—often remains localised to specific

regions or communities where it resonates with particular historical, socio-cultural, and temporal-spatial affective arrangements, while at the same time stressing that there is no longer necessarily a close relationship between the physical and political territory (the USA as a political context in which legal abortion is fundamentally questioned) and the spatial localisation of users. Moreover, the minimal participation from countries in North America, the so-called Global South, and Global East—even though some of them host the largest TikTok audiences worldwide (DataReportal, We Are Social, and Meltwater 2024)—points to possible algorithmically driven exclusion based on factors such as language or geographical location. Thus, while TikTok’s affordances can amplify affective engagement across borders, they do not operate uniformly in every case or context.

This first descriptive analysis lays the groundwork for a more in-depth qualitative examination of the intensity of the affective dynamics at play within the challenge’s content. Therefore, in the next sections, we will delve into the specific affective registers of the challenge, first focusing on which of TikTok’s specific affordances and practices are significant for our case study, and which particular affective dynamics they produce in what ways in order to also specify the categories along which we conducted the abductive coding (RQ2). Following this, the analysis will delve into more detailed examples of how affectivity in the memetic performances’ affective registers manifested to further unravel different types of affective registers and how they shape the performance of a spectrum of feminist identities (RQ3).

7.2 Unveiling Affective Registers: Lip-Syncing, Transitioning, Referencing

At the heart of the #mybodymychoice challenge, two key features—heavily shaped by the challenge’s audio—stand out when examining the affective registers’ dimension of practices. On the one hand, lip-syncing as a significant means of conveying emotions in a codified manner (Rettberg 2017, 2) is present in most videos in the analysed corpus. Lip-syncing to audio memes, for instance, involves engaging with, contradicting, or ridiculing song lyrics, sound, rhythm, and music in order to creatively and often playfully produce one’s own intended mood and affective dynamic, to express one’s own emotions and tell a story (Abidin 2020, 80). Some videos in the material feature highly expressive lip-syncing, fully synchronised with phrases like “my body my fuck-ing choice” or “I got the power,” accompanied by coordinated body movements, while others take a more subdued approach, with smiles or passive lip movements forming only single words. This diversity of remixed and repurposed elements results in each performance having its own unique affective intensity, representing a specific emotional interpretation. Instances of non-lip-syncing are rare.

On the other hand, using sophisticated and clever editing techniques, known as transitions, is another significant practice in the challenge. These transitions vary across the entire sample, with the pre-transition and post-transition physical and affective states of the person being performed in various ways to narrate a specific storyline, highlighting a variety of affective engagements. Similar to television makeover shows, these transitions create moments of surprise and anticipation, inviting viewers to empathise with the transformation (Moseley 2000, 313). Just as makeover shows offer a “‘surprise’ moment of pleasurable spectacle” (Moseley 2000, 304), transitions in challenges provoke curiosity and are thus a frequently used stylistic device.

Closely intertwined with the dimension of practices, the level of bodily engagement reveals a dynamic wherein individuals employ their bodies as multifaceted instruments. Not only do they serve as canvases for projection and representation, but they also become powerful conduits for affective engagements and emotional expression (Töpper 2021, 122–29). Through different forms of bodily engagement, participants of the challenge weave intricate narratives and convey a spectrum of emotions from anger to sadness to happiness. Bodies of different sizes, ages, and genders perform their lip-syncing performances, using intricate choreographic elements, deliberate movements, powerful gestures, and nuanced facial expressions, incorporating different props. This bodily involvement is particularly intriguing in its portrayal of the body’s transformative journey, facilitated and enhanced by strategically placed cuts that juxtapose different physical and emotional states.

Lastly, within the realm of discourse, the challenge is charged with contradicting meanings, “leaving the viewers to derive meaning from their own knowledge” (Hautea et al. 2021, 2). While hashtags such as #mybodymychoice—used 1,133 times—and #cecinestpasuncintre (#thisisnotacoathanger)—used 211 times—as well as the audio template link the videos fairly unambiguously to some sort of feminist pro-choice discourse and activism, other discursive references are more ambiguous or even contingent. In particular, the coat hanger assumes multifaceted significance, serving as a potent symbol laden with affect. On the one hand, it is used as a poignant signifier and discursive protest prop, emblematic of illegalised and consequently perilous abortions, extending beyond the issue of bodily autonomy and self-determination and highlighting the unequal impact of abortion bans across society (Rosen 2012). On the other hand, the coat hanger morphs into a versatile empty signifier—a signifier without a signified (Laclau 2001, 405)—capable of carrying a plethora of meanings. In some instances, it serves as a mere prop in the act of getting ready. The coat hanger then becomes a sign for the self-determined clothing of women who defy conventions and powerfully show off their own bodies—a differing meaning of #mybodymychoice.

The disconnectedness or detachment from the original meaning of the coat hanger is also evident in the fact that wooden or even plastic hangers are used. Overall, the coat hanger emerges as a pivotal discursive element, embodying both historical weight and discursive flexibility.

7.3 Untangling Affective Registers: A Typology of Memetic Performances

By examining these dimensions—practices of lip syncing and transitioning, embodied engagement, and discursive referencing—this study identifies four distinct types of affective registers within the #mybodymychoice challenge: The Angry, The Shocking, The Supportive, and The Joyful.

The Angry: Expressions of Female Fury and Strength

In the earliest video and in approximately 30 percent of TikToks in total, gestures, expressions, and performances reflect an affective register of both anger and frustration (Figure 2). In this type, “The Angry,” women widely move beyond passive or playful lip-syncing, instead often verging on or escalating to outright shouting, especially during the key phrases “my body my fucking choice” and “I got the power.” These moments underscore the respective meanings of the verses, highlighting intensified expressions of frustration regarding the infringement of bodily autonomy.

Bodily postures are assertive: performers lean forward on a chair, engaging in expansive, space-claiming gestures such as stretching the arms tensely away from the body, supporting the lip-syncing angrily with a clenched fist. Their vivid facial expressions—strongly contracted eyebrows, narrowed eyes, and tense jaws—further intensify the display of rage. This affective intensity is underscored by symbolic gestures like raising a middle finger or flexing a tense bicep towards the camera, conveying strength, defiance, and self-determination (see first or third row of screenshots in Figure 2). These movements can be understood, following Rettberg (2017, 9), as “a set of codified hand signs to amplify and interpret the words sung in the song they are lip-syncing” in order “to augment video-based communication.”

The uniformity in affective practice and bodily expression of anger is coupled with discursive contingency. While a semblance of feminist pro-choice discourse is evident across all videos, they narrate varied stories. While certain videos portray individuals defiantly wielding a wooden coat hanger in a protesting movement above their head, seamlessly transitioning from relaxed attire to sophisticated garments, others subvert the use of the coat hanger as a mere prop by destroying or abandoning it altogether—a symbolic rejection of unsafe abortions—emphasising the intensity of the fury displayed (see second row of screenshots in Figure 2). These actions highlight the dual

perception of the coat hanger—as both a feminist protest symbol, embedded in feminist history and struggle, and, simultaneously, as haunting reminder of past and possibly future reproductive oppression and thus an object that should never again be associated with self-induced abortion as a way to go due to a lack of adequate, legal, and safe options.



Figure 2. Variations of The Angry. Source: Screenshots taken and anonymised by authors.

The Shocking: Performances of Vulnerability and Pain

The second type, “The Shocking,” seen in 16 cases, portrays *affective registers of profound vulnerability, suffering, and pain* (Figure 3). Female performers depict themselves attired in prison garb, bound in handcuffs, with mouths tightly sealed shut, or

displaying physical injuries with nuanced postures, such as clutched, slumped, or collapsed bodies. Similar to “disgust cues,” as discussed by Kosenko, Winderman, and Pugh (2019, 9), these visuals function as “shock cues,” aiming to provoke emotional discomfort and affectively address users’ vulnerability, urging them to feel the pain and discomfort, confronting them with brutal realities. As shown by Schankweiler and Straub (2023) for image protests in the Iranian context and Cervi and Divon (2023) for memetic performances of Palestinian resistance, these “shock cues” aim at and lead to a “filter clash” (Pörksen 2018, 25), which refers to the “intrusion of disturbing and brutal realities into one’s comfortable ‘filter bubble’ and everyday routine” (Schankweiler and Straub 2023, 106).

The performers’ bodies become a moving canvas, embodying what Cervi and Divon (2023, 6) aptly characterise as a “physical template for politically charged artistic expressions.” In these poignant displays, lip-syncing often takes a backseat or is only subtly hinted at, allowing the raw imagery to speak volumes with a striking juxtaposition emerging between the empowering audio, exemplified by the lyrics “I got the power,” and the visual portrayal of individuals grappling with what appears to be a profound loss of agency. For instance, one performer, dressed in all black, stands before what is meant to be a police line-up wall, mimicking an arrest (see second row of screenshots in Figure 3). After a transition, she reappears in prison attire, bleeding heavily, suggesting a self-induced abortion using the coat hanger in her hands. Her screams convey helplessness and shock, spotlighting the brutality of reproductive oppression. These shocking performances do not merely reflect pain but spotlight the brutality of societal oppression and the threats to reproductive rights, while serving as potent acts of resistance, reclaiming the performers’ narratives and amplifying collective indignation.

This type aligns with what Willis’s (2022) notion of “digital abortion storytelling,” yet these narratives appear theatrical, representing imagined pasts, presents, or futures rather than personal accounts, since in the context of the challenge’s circulation, namely Germany and France, abortion is (more or less easily) accessible. This use of cinematic, point-of-view aesthetics transforms these performances “into political spectacles to raise awareness about and visibility for victims of controversial issues, such as gender and race” (Cervi and Divon 2023, 4).

On a discursive level, these performances take a highly critical and committed stance, directly addressing the criminalisation of abortion and its devastating consequences—ranging from physical harm and imprisonment to death by haemorrhage. While many performers focus on this critique, others adopt a more agency-centred narrative by presenting a kind of speculative foresight, depicting performers as

wounded and violated pre-transition but emerging post-transition as empowered and emancipated figures, a subversion of the conventional victim narrative.



Figure 3. Variations of The Shocking. Source: Screenshots taken and anonymised by authors.

The Supportive: Demonstrations of Solidarity and Empathy

In “The Supportive” type, identified in 16 instances, mostly male participants engage in the challenge, performing allyship through *the affective register of support, solidarity, and empathy* (Figure 4). Instead of the original phrase “my body my fucking choice,” participants adapt the audio and lip-syncing to a “YOUR body YOUR motherfucking choice” and “YOU got the power,” redirecting the focus towards women’s autonomy. This adaptation is further emphasised through visual display like the use of

hand gestures, such as addressing the viewer directly by pointing at the camera, or textual overlays incorporated into the video with the words “YOUR” highlighted, a visual reinforcement of their supportive stance (see first row of screenshots in Figure 4). Others add overlays like “to all the women” or questions such as “where are the supporting men?”

Although many participants hold coat hangers, transitioning from a lazy to a chicer outfit, their gestures seem more *playful than political*, sometimes grinning or dancing. Thus, the ambiguity of their performances on a discursive level raises questions as it remains open which understanding towards the theme of #mybodymychoice prevails: Do they refer to abortion rights, or are they advocating for women’s broader empowerment, such as through personal style choices? Is their performance to be understood as an expression of solidarity or is it free-riding to also circulate as part of the challenge?

However, some videos deviate from this pattern. In one instance, a drag performer discards a coat hanger in protest, replacing it with a sign reading “Their Body Their Choice,” pointing to it angrily (see second row of screenshots in Figure 4). After the transition, the person appears without the drag but with bruises on the face instead, leaning forward expressively and adding the textual overlay “we will win this fight in all countries,” indicating a more explicit political commitment. In other videos, the individuals entirely omit lip-syncing and the transition process; instead, they break the coat hanger with their knee and display the words “educate yourself” in the video. This type, though varied, strives to express solidarity but remains discursively contingent.



Figure 4. Variations of The Supportive. Source: Screenshots taken and anonymised by authors.

The Joyful: Celebrations of Transition and Girl Power

“The Joyful,” reflecting approximately 40 percent of the analysed material, is the most prevalent type, *harnessing the affective register of joy, ease, and celebration* (Figure 5). Initially depicted in casual attire, performers undergo a transition to a more glamorous attire, regularly donning chic dresses, high heels, and extravagant makeup, while often including playful elements like twirling coat hangers, suggesting a carefree, confident attitude. Some videos even replicate the initial video, discussed above and depicted in the first row of screenshots in Figure 2, closely imitating the choreography and attire choices like the red dress. Notably, smiles and grins are consistently present on the faces of performers, conveying a sense of uncomplicated happiness. Some videos incorporate humorous attempts and fails at circling the coat hanger around the finger, adding a light-hearted element. Unlike “The Angry” and “The Shocking” types, dance movements are regularly included post-transition.

Central to this type is not the discursive reference to abortion rights, digital abortion storytelling, shock cues, nor personal catharsis or performance of solidarity, but mainly the stylistic and skilful aspects of transformation—the production of a seamless transition between two videos and the initial and transformed states they represent, accen-

tuating the contrast between before and after as a stylish variation—and self-expression and empowerment through personal choices. While many performances do feature individuals holding a wooden, plastic, or metallic coat hanger, it becomes more of a requisite linked to, in a narrow sense, the transition into a dress, which might have hung on it just shortly before, or, in a broader sense, a symbolic marker of belonging to the meme community rather than a protest prop linking it to abortion discourse. This type reinterprets the challenge, associating it with the freedom to make empowered, personal fashion choices as well as the trope of girl or women power being at the heart of “popular feminism” (Banet-Weiser 2018), which emphasises visibility and commodifies joy and empowerment. This interpretation risks depoliticising the challenge’s original or intervening intent, as the coat hanger, once a symbol of feminist protest, becomes a mere fashion accessory, detached from its historical and political significance.

Variations within this type include videos featuring couples, where a male partner hands the coat hanger to a woman, before both transition into styled appearances with both smiling at the camera, hinting at his support to his girlfriend’s independent style choices. One video showcases a woman pre-transition and then a man post-transition, while other videos subtly allude to reproductive rights. For instance, a scene with a child sitting on its mother’s lap post-transition may suggest the freedom to choose between motherhood and abortion, yet avoids taking a clear stance in the otherwise polarised debate on abortion.



Figure 5. The Joyful. Source: Screenshots taken and anonymised by authors.

Finally, of the 250 sampled videos, 55 could not be categorised into these types. Of these, 25 offered metacommentary without direct participation, 8 were related but did not directly engage in the challenge (e.g., image compilations about feminism and protest or tutorials on filming the challenge), and 12 used the audio template merely as background, with no thematic connection.

8 #MyBodyMyChoice Digital Activism: Between Feminist Killjoys and Happy Feminists

So far, we have explored the affective dynamics—i.e., intensities and registers—of the #mybodymychoice challenge, identifying four distinct types of affective registers. These types range from what has been termed “happy feminism,” prevalent in the “The Joyful” type, to critical feminist interventions, which Ahmed (2017) might call “feminist killjoys,” exemplified in performances of “The Shocking” and “The Angry.” Additionally, “The Supportive” type, primarily performed by male content creators, reflects varying readings of solidarity and allyship. Now, we aim to examine how the challenge’s affective dynamics influence contemporary forms of feminist digital activism (RQ3).

The distinct types reveal both aesthetic and narrative patterns in the multimodal material aimed at affectively addressing users. The contrasting affective registers enacted in these videos offer insights into the broad spectrum of feminist articulations within digital activism. The most common type observed, “The Joyful,” follows the logic of “popular feminism” (Banet-Weiser 2018), leveraging media attention to empower through visibility. This commodifies affects of joy and passion, creating what Ahmed (2010) describes as the “promise of happiness.” The playful re-signification of the coat hanger—from a symbol of illegal abortions to an “empty signifier” (Laclau 2001)—follows the capacity of social media as “affect generators” (Reckwitz 2017) and allows for the celebration of femininity.

However, amidst the highly polarised discourse between pro-choice activists and anti-choice groups, these playful performances risk diluting the serious political nature of abortion rights by focusing on personal empowerment while not revealing their (collective) agency and privileging normalised, heteronormative female bodies. Some users sidestep political conflict entirely by not directly positioning themselves in the videos or accompanying captions, thereby staying discursively contingent. This discursive openness risks political indifference or de-politicisation, as the celebration of “happy feminism” commodifies the agency of girls and women within the TikTok ecosystem.

Along the same lines, symbols such as the coat hanger risk losing their political and affective charge, becoming mere props of embodied attractiveness instead of feminist body politics. This mirrors French activists’ use of the hashtag #cecinestpasuncintre (#thisisnotacoathanger), referring to the difference between signifier and signified as a reference to Magritte’s famous painting “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (This is not a pipe). This hashtag is used to reflexively deal with the conditions of digital protest within the challenge, where the majority of users completely detach symbols such as the coat

hanger from its meaning as bloody danger, transforming them into playful dance requisites. Thereby the hashtag highlights the detachment of the memetic performances in the “The Joyful” type from its historical and political roots, potentially diluting the gravity of their historical context.

In contrast, “The Shocking” and “The Angry” types serve as direct political interventions, mobilising embodied affects of anger, rage, and shock. These performances harness TikTok’s affordances to underscore the threats to reproductive rights, using the platform to “get in the way of happiness of others, or [of happy, playful, funny TikTok], ruining [...] the atmosphere” (Ahmed 2024, 1) and thus directly affect other users in order to mobilise against the massive threat to women’s rights by far-right, conservative, and patriarchal politics.

Here, TikTok’s multimodal affordances allow users to engage with these debates in ways that feel more embodied and immediate than on other platforms. The platform’s focus on multimodal content enables users to convey emotions through facial expressions, music, text, filters, and visual effects, making their performances more playful, intimate, and vivid. As Cervi and Divon (2023, 4) argue, audio templates here become potent catalyst for affective engagement and the expression of emotion in memetic performances. This fosters a form of affective solidarity, where individuals share their stories, express their emotions, and mobilise others to action—though this action may be confined to the participation in or interaction with a TikTok challenge, thus blurring the line between political intervention and commodified affect.

Yet, these forms of affective performances do not come without limitations, since they are also constrained by the platform’s logic. Following Kay’s critique (2020) in discussion with Lorde (1981), there is a need to question whether “celebritised anger,” popularised in the context of #MeToo, can translate into sustained political action with transformative power or whether it becomes a mere “individualised, cathartic release that makes us feel better” (Kay 2019, 591), a fleeting experience that may feel emotionally satisfying without leading to concrete political outcomes. Thus, anger and shock mobilisation in this context, though powerful, risks being constrained by TikTok’s platform logic.

Similarly, technologised solidarity as “acts of good citizenship” (Nikunen 2018, 16) and as represented by the “The Supportive” type, may improve participant’s moral image and gain visibility. However, the performances can also be understood as free-riding on a political issue. Solidarity in this case may blur the lines between the empowerment of girls and women and the fight for abortion rights, again raising questions about the sustainability and political effectiveness of these performances. As Nikunen

(2018) warns, such forms of digital activism often conform to the platform's economic incentives, prioritising virality and visibility over deeper political engagement.

Moreover, the affective intensity of this challenge in the Central European context suggests that the resonance of *Roe v. Wade* and the opportunities for emotional expression within the specific realm of the #mybodymychoice memetic performances may have found a more receptive audience due to the specific political climate and social environment. The affective registers probably aligned with the affective zeitgeist on TikTok in Central Europe, where expressions of anger, shock, or solidarity around the issue of abortion rights were well received and reflective of broader public and affective arrangements.

However, the challenge has been widely criticised on TikTok as well as other platforms and media for its perceived insensitivity or ignorance toward the violent realities that come with the criminalization of abortion. The limited participation in the challenge from users in other regions of the world might point to similar sentiments and differing local affective responses and socio-political realities, limiting its global reach. The affective registers tied to the #mybodymychoice challenge may not have resonated as strongly in contexts, where performances of anger or joy around abortion rights are perceived as inappropriate, embarrassing, and disgraceful, or out of touch with local realities.

9 Conclusion

This research has delved into the realm of feminist digital activism on TikTok, specifically focusing on the #mybodymychoice challenge, to examine the intricate role of affect and emotions in shaping contemporary feminist activism and identity formation on social media. Recent scholarship stresses the centrality of emotions like shame, disgust, hate, solidarity, and empathy in discussions surrounding abortion discourse, particularly accentuated by social media platforms, which not only amplify existing emotions but also generate new ones while fostering communities based on networked affect (e.g., Kosenko, Winderman, and Pugh 2019; Kim and Lee 2022; Willis 2022; Pérez-Arredondo and Graells-Garrido 2021). Expanding upon these insights, our paper argues that contemporary publics and feminist activism are deeply shaped by the interplay between affective bodily performances and the specific affordances of platforms. On TikTok, with its viral, algorithm-driven structure and playful modes of engagement, feminist digital activism can spread rapidly, dynamically, and often unpredictably, transcending borders and facilitating often creatively performed socio-political narratives.

Our findings suggest that the ephemeral and quite localised success of the #mybodymychoice challenge within the polarised debates on abortion rights lies in its discursive contingency, enabling a spectrum of digital (abortion) storytelling and embodied affects ranging from joy to anger that resonate with particular historical, socio-cultural, and temporal-spatial affective arrangements and play into the algorithmically driven virality of the platform. However, the very nature of this platform also poses risks: feminist activism can become commodified, oversimplified, or diluted, leading to de-politicisation.

This calls for a critical examination of and reflection on whether TikTok's playful and performative activism may sometimes eclipse more serious political contributions to discourse and long-term feminist advocacy or if it fits within a broader feminist tradition of body politics and storytelling—or both at the same time. While the affectively charged, playful character of participation in the challenge broadens the spectrum of potential supporters, the radical, sharp, and clear character of feminist protest is lost at times.

While acknowledging the limitations of our study—particularly its focus on one of many challenges which neither forms a discourse itself nor fully represents abortion discourses in general or TikTok activism specifically—it suggests a discernible trend and growing concern. Feminist digital activism on TikTok risks being co-opted and absorbed into the broader affective economy of digital platforms, where engagement with activism can become a means for personal gain, visibility, and algorithmic recognition, rather than sustained feminist advocacy.

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