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## PERFORMING DEATH AND TRAUMA? PARTICIPATORY MEM(E)ORY AND THE HOLOCAUST IN TIKTOK #POVCHALLENGES

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### Introduction

TikTok is no longer the short-video platform for “silly dances.” Its transition from entertainment to an interest-based platform increased the visual volume of topics like politics, sexuality, identity, and history, enabled by the platform’s rich set of vernaculars that encourage young users’ participation in various socio-political activities (see Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019; Hautea et al., 2021; Abidin and Zeng, 2021). Within this context, the memory of the Holocaust had gained specific attention, especially during August 2020 when a controversial meme-trend emerged under the hashtag #POVHolocaustChallenge, quickly accumulating 895.1 million views. In this challenge, creators (aka “TikTokers”) were encouraged to participate in a point-of-view (POV) performance in which they reenacted fictionalized memories of Holocaust victims. This memetic trend generated a public outcry calling it “trauma porn,” which motivated us to look beyond the voice of criticism and explore the culture of TikTok’s aesthetics (POV) and trends (#challenges) as performative engagements that enable users’ (re)mediation of knowledge on past events and afford them to facilitate personal connections to the memory of the Holocaust via video-memes.

### Memes, Memory and #POVchallenge

This paper unpacks and contributes to the existing body of research about memes, practices of digital remembrance, and TikTok’s participatory culture. Memes on TikTok are complex multimodal structures of content often contextualized in the culture of challenges (Klug, 2020). Challenges focus on users’ gamified participation in social media, motivating content creation via a collaborative play-based task governed by a set of performative rules (text, sound, and movement). Challenges invite users to engage in the mimetic reproduction of popular content trends (Zulli and Zulli, 2020).

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The intensity of imitative content on TikTok increases challenges' frequency, and rewards users with exposure on the platform's individually-curated "for you page" (FYP), where most virality on the platform occurs. This study draws attention to the understudied and unique nature of the POV aesthetic on TikTok, especially via POV challenges as a series of fictional memes that mediate users' self-reflections on various personal and collective issues. Memes related to historical events tend to stir affective reactions, increase engagement with the issues referred to, and articulate emotional attachments to past atrocities or collective traumas (Makhortykh, 2015; Trillò and Shifman, 2021). We argue that this is especially true when combining the creative participatory nature of challenges with the empathetic bent of the POV aesthetic, and thus this subset of memes is crucial to challenging rigid discussions of Holocaust memory online representation.

## Methods

In an attempt to make this work a useful explanatory analysis to profoundly understand young creators' performative engagements with the past, a set of multilayered questions is used. Focusing on the platform, we ask (Q1) how does intensified adoption of the platform's memetic vernaculars in the #POVHolocaustChallenge enables TikTokers to "play" with Holocaust remembrance. Focusing on the participatory culture of TikTok, we ask (Q2) what motivated TikTokers to initiate and respond to #POVHolocaustChallenge? Finally, with a focus on the educational horizon, (Q3) we ask to what extent does the #POVHolocaustChallenge foster an empathetic dialogue about the Holocaust?

The study was conducted as follows: (1) Multimodal thematic analysis of 250 videos manually scraped from the trending #POVHolocaustChallenge between August 20-28, 2020. (2) Fifteen semi-structured in-depth interviews with TikTok users (ages 18-23) who participated in the challenge to learn about their motivations and illuminate their creative choices. (3) Five semi-structured in-depth interviews with educators from Holocaust institutions to understand the platform's potential in enabling, encouraging, and mobilizing users' curiosity about the memory of the Holocaust.

We developed a codebook informed by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2017), and a coding framework inspired by Zeng and Abidin's (2021) considerations of TikTok "meme categorization." We analyzed our sample according to what we see as "memetic structure," tracing the use of the platform's vernacular by means of sound, visual, and performative elements, as well as users' interplay with memory narratives of the Holocaust. We focused on embodied communicative forms like spoken and written language, still and moving images (videos), sound, body posture, and use of space (Jewitt, 2014), and multifaceted modes of communication like metalinguistics (emojis), hypertextuality (hashtags), temporality (looping), and technical choices (editing tools).

## Findings

The multimodal analysis illuminates three imaginative narratives in users' (re)mediations of memories that resulted in a series of memetic POV structures, which we call mem(e)ories. *Testimonial* (n=83). This mem(e)ory structure shows mini "conversations" happening in Heaven as TikTokers welcome the viewers to observe a dialogue with an imagined other that asks how they ended up in Heaven "so young." Given their testimony, in response, they tell the story of an anonymous victim using visceral memory work

composed of a combination of historical facts and imagined fragmented narratives (e.g., “I was sent to the gas chamber”), covered with heavy makeup (Figure 1).

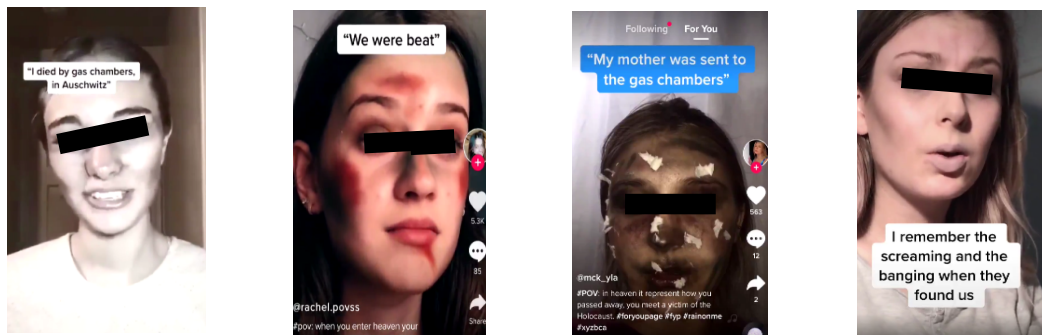


Figure 1: Author screenshots of examples of testimonial mem(e)ories.

*Punitive mem(e)ory* (n=80). This mem(e)ory structure shows TikTokers playing prisoners who are “chained” in the present (2020) and being sent back to tragic events as punishment for their crimes. The video starts with a caption saying, “this one was sent to the Holocaust,” while the TikToker, with the help of the green-screen feature, manipulates a transformation from the present into a Holocaust-related setting like a concentration camps or ghetto (Figure 2).

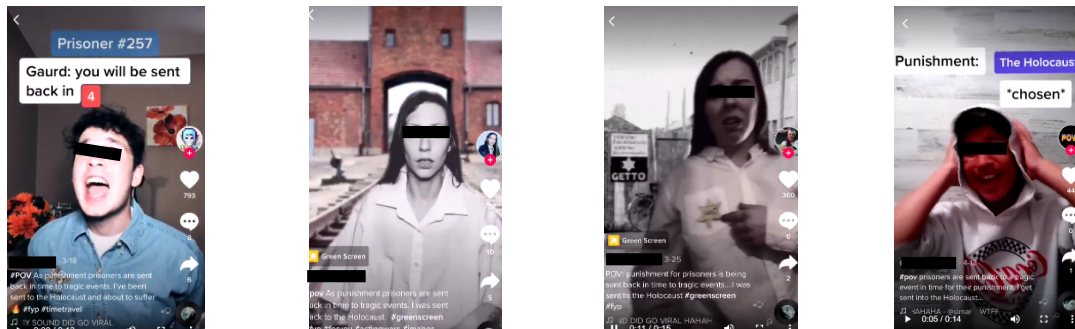


Figure 2: Author screenshots of examples of punitive mem(e)ories.

*Escapist mem(e)ory* (n=87). This mem(e)ory structure shows TikTokers’ use of the platform’s popular narrative of time traveling as they merge the 1940 with and 2020 in a complex temporal interplay with the viewers. TikTokers, acting as victims, get the chance for a momentary escape from their horrifying present of the Holocaust (the viewers’ past) by going to an imagined future (the viewers’ present), but eventually are sent back to find their tragic death (Figure 3).

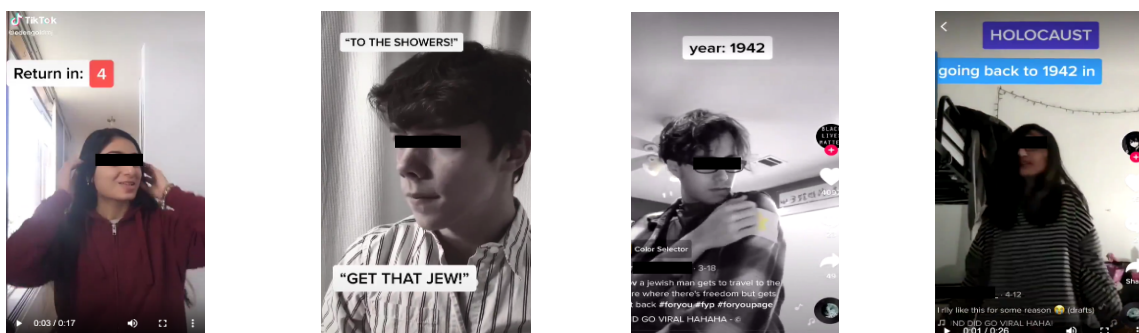


Figure 3: Author screenshots of examples of Escapist mem(e)ories.

In all three mem(e)ories, TikTokers carefully alter their environment to sustain an “authentic” experience of the victim’s story re-enactment. They utilize the platform’s features (like Green Screen) to convey aesthetics that relate to Holocaust memories, such as using Holocaust-related symbols (artifacts, customs, makeup, historical images, etc.), wearing ragged clothes (like concentration camp uniforms with yellow stars), and using makeup mimicking cuts, bruises, exhaustion, and malnourishment.

Interviews with TikTokers raised intriguing motivations and production decisions in their #POVHolocaustChallenge mem(e)ories: (1) TikTokers expressed the sense of importance they felt when engaging with topics like the Holocaust in a “superficial environment” like TikTok; (2) TikTokers emphasized the significance of the POV as an aesthetic that enables creativity and empathetic interpretation; (3) TikTokers mentioned the topic’s relevance as they compared feelings of victimization to their COVID-19 reality and their attempts to combat TikTok’s toxic environment of Holocaust denial.

Interviews with the representatives of Holocaust-related institutions emphasized the platform’s memetic momentum and access to new audiences. Three thematic ideas were raised: (1) Holocaust-related challenges on TikTok as a hook for Gen-Z attention; (2) The #POVHolocaustChallenge as a commemorative act that can foster historical empathy; (3) TikTok as a space for institutionalized Holocaust education and an opportunity for remodeling traditional learning concepts.

## **Conclusion**

Unlike common beliefs that social media of collective remembrance are often embedded in rigid traditional institutional power structures of memory (Kansteiner, 2017), the platform’s plural and memetic nature illustrate TikTok’s potential in Holocaust education and commemoration. Findings show that TikTok’s culture of #POVchallenges fosters complex dialogic modes of digital witnessing of the past, corresponding with Van Alphen’s (2001, p. 69) speculation about whether “there is a place for ‘playing the Holocaust’ in Holocaust remembrance.” The diverse POV aesthetics can beneficially influence users’ empathy as they can imagine, relate to, and share the emotions of others (Vossen & Valkenburg, 2016). This quality of the #POVHolocaustChallenge enabled TikTokers to empathetically “play” with the memory of the Holocaust by using audiovisual memes as vehicles for victim perspectives.

Inserting Holocaust victims into the contemporary digital ecology of TikTok is a gesture that embodies the seemingly insurmountable tension that surrounds Holocaust memorial culture. However, concluding from the interviews with the creators and education practitioners, it seems that the platform’s infrastructural dissemination of Holocaust-related memories enables opportunities for creating historical empathy and consciousness-raising among younger generations. When provided with the educational context, Holocaust institutions on TikTok can spark conversation, interpretation, and reflection among youth reacting to and participating in the creation of user-generated content related to the Holocaust, an outcome hopefully following from this work. The #POVHolocaustChallenge invites the inscription of Holocaust memory and other past atrocities into Gen-Z’s (social media) lives.

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