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EMERGING TECHNO-POLITICAL AFFORDANCES: TRANSFORMATION OF TECHNICAL AFFORDANCES ON TIKTOK DURING PROTESTS IN PERU

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Introduction

When platforms designed for entertainment become weapons of symbolic resistance, a fundamental rupture emerges in the dynamics of informational power. This study analyzes how functional affordances became political affordances during Peru's 2022-2023 protests against Dina Boluarte. In this context of social crisis, TikTok emerged as a key terrain for political expression where citizens, particularly young content creators, actively disputed official narratives that criminalized protest. This research explores how TikTok's technical possibilities gained political significance when intersecting with urgent communicative needs.

Between December 2022 and July 2023, Peru experienced massive protests following President Pedro Castillo's impeachment and Dina Boluarte's rise to power. This period was marked by intense state repression, with at least 49 people killed by security forces (Amnistía Internacional, 2023). Simultaneously, an official discourse framed protesters as "terrorists" or "vandals," amplified by hegemonic media.

In this scenario, this study asks: How did TikTok's functional affordances transform into political affordances enabling symbolic resistance during protests against Dina Boluarte?

Theoretical framework

This research is situated at the intersection of two theoretical perspectives: digital everyday politics (Highfield, 2016) and technological affordances in their relational dimension (Bucher & Helmond, 2017; Zheng & Yu, 2016).

Highfield (2016) conceptualizes everyday politics as political expression embedded in daily social media interactions, often outside institutional frameworks. It is informal, civic, and comes from individuals rather than formal campaigns, based on occasional

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contributions from individuals with personal interests, perspectives, and issues. This perspective helps analyze how TikTok users politicized their personal experiences during protests, intertwining public and private spheres.

Regarding affordances, this study moves beyond functional affordances (Treem & Leonardi, 2012) to a relational perspective. Bucher and Helmond (2018) argue how a platform's material traits enable, suggest, or limit certain actions but emerge from the interaction between users and the technological environment. Zheng and Yu (2016) propose an affordances-for-practice approach, emphasizing that affordances materialize through historically situated sociomaterial practices. Thus, TikTok's affordances were reconfigured by political urgencies rather than being static.

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed methodological approach with three complementary techniques: a technical walkthrough (Light et al., 2018) to identify TikTok's functional affordances; content analysis of 286 videos published by 23 creators between December 2022 and July 2023; and semi-structured interviews with 8 content creators to explore their experiences.

This methodological triangulation allowed capturing both technological and experiential dimensions, avoiding deterministic views to understand how users actively transformed the platform's affordances based on concrete political urgencies.

Findings

The analysis revealed the emergence of two main political affordances when TikTok's technical characteristics met specific communicative needs in the context of protests:

1. *Testimoniability*

The first emerging political affordance identified is *testimoniability* which arises when the technical ease of quickly recording, editing, and publishing videos intertwines with the political need to make repression events visible in real-time. This political affordance enabled creators to document and transmit the protest experience from a situated and embodied perspective.

TikTok's technical capability to record, edit with overlaid text, and share content within seconds transformed protesters into citizen reporters, enabling them to document police abuses in real time. This functional affordance took on a political dimension in this context. In one analyzed video, a creator recorded a group of police officers detaining a healthcare volunteer and confiscating donated medical supplies. The creator employed TikTok's expressive tools: replacing the original audio with the song *Constituyente* by Jilguero del Huascarán, applying a filter that altered the image's color tones, and adding subtitles that stated, "Volunteer detained while trying to help an injured person after police repression." This combination of immediate documentation and TikTok's editing tools functioned simultaneously as denunciation and protection.

As one interviewed creator expressed: “Recording, for example, in the case of detentions, was also a matter of support, so this could help recognize and identify the person being detained. Not only for legal purposes but in case something happened to them”. This urgency of documenting not only sought to inform but also to protect and generate evidence of potential rights violations.

A female creator right when being tear gassed, leveraging TikTok's instantaneous recording and immediate publication affordance, recorded and shared real-time videos about repression during one of the protest days: “We're here, the police have again used the same dynamic of cornering us with tear gas bombs from both sides. They've cornered us and now they've detained a person, and we don't know what condition they're in.” The video shows people making peace signs in front of a police barrier while tear gas clouds surround them, constructing a visual counter-discourse to the official narrative about the “proportional” use of force.

2. Propagability

The second political affordance identified is propagability, which emerges when a functional affordance like TikTok's algorithm that prioritizes content over preexisting connections (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022) meets with creators' frustration at perceived media and social indifference. As one creator recounted: “I wrote a reflection on Facebook about the mobilizations. I wrote it with care and I remember my Facebook post had about two to five likes. So, I decided to make a TikTok video, and that first little video had many views”.

For example, a creator, outraged by the media invisibility of repression in Ayacucho, decided to travel to the region to document direct testimonies. Her first video explaining this decision reached a dissemination she didn't expect: “I thought, 'how can I?' Because informative content doesn't always go viral. And I said, 'so, how can I couple the humorous, the content that goes viral with what I want to convey?’” The creator strategically combined Bad Bunny's “Yonaguni” music with her personal reflection creating a contrast that attracted young audiences.

This affordance operated in a context where traditional media and the government had established a powerful media enclosure. According to Amnesty International (2023), during the protests, the official discourse consistently stigmatized protesters as radical, violent, and even terrorists, without offering reliable evidence to support such statements.

The affordance propagability allowed creators to amplify their messages beyond already convinced audiences and those influenced by the official narrative reproduced in mass media. As one interviewed creator noted, “TikTok can make content go viral even if you don't have many followers,” enabling dissident voices to reach audiences that typically consume information filtered through the government's perspective. In doing so, TikTok users challenged the media monopoly of major outlets and the hegemony of the official discourse.

Conclusions

TikTok's affordances are not simply functional or predetermined but can be radically transformed when actualized in specific contexts of crisis and social mobilization. Testimoniability and propagability emerged as political affordances when the platform's technical possibilities intertwined with urgent communicative needs during protests against Dina Boluarte. In the margins, technology can turn into a political tool of resistance.

These two emerging techno-political affordances enabled an emergent ecosystem of everyday political practices (Highfield, 2016) such as: discursive resignification challenging hegemonic narratives; visibility of police abuse disputing official representations of protest; construction of counter-hegemonic memories claiming victims' dignity; citizen fact-checking questioning misinformation; and production of political pronouncements mobilizing new actors.

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