**BDS on TikTok: No Israel Counter‑Memes and Israel’s Digital Abjection**

This study offers the first systematic examination of how BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) activists deploy TikTok’s popular formats, memetic templates and affordances to construct, shape and spread Israel’s digital image. Using a qualitative content analysis of high-engagement videos posted between 2021 and 2022, we extend scholarship on Palestinian digital activism by critically analyzing two major strategic deployments among the most popular BDS clips on TikTok: the first is anchored in TikTok’s popular “how to” format, and the second revolves around the platform’s audio-based memetic templates. Our findings reveal how BDS clips function as political counter-memes that appropriate TikTok’s native features to erode Israel’s symbolic capital. We contribute to the literature on Palestinian digital activism by revealing how, in the BDS/TikTok context, pro-Palestinian “bonds of sentiment” operate within Kristeva's framework of abjection, converging around Israel's symbolic expulsion. More broadly, our findings contribute to media theory by demonstrating that under the platform logics of virality and remixability, TikTok counter-memes may function as powerful mechanisms of systematic symbolic delegitimation. We conclude by advocating for utilizing TikTok's participatory and performative affordances to foster digital dialogue that transcends existing polarizing dynamics.

**Key words:** BDS, TikTok, Palestinian Digital Activism, Counter-memes, Abjection

**Introduction**

The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement has emerged as one of the most polarizing social movements in recent decades.**[[1]](#footnote-1)** Anyone encountering the discourse surrounding the movement for the first time would likely be struck by the sharp divisions it provokes (Bass et al. 2024; Culcasi 2016; Erakat 2010; Fisher & Blau 2024; Ghabra & Hasian 2018; Lustick & Shils 2022; Maria 2018; White 2020; Yi & Phillips 2015). Some view BDS as a beacon of progressive, anti‑hegemonic politics – a movement that seems to carry the hopes not only of the Palestinian people but also of marginalized groups worldwide (Bakan & Abu-Laban 2009; Barghouti 2011, 2021; Dawson & Mullen 2015; Mislán & Shaban 2019; Mullen 2021; Munayyer 2016; Qumsiyeh 2011; Sukarieh 2024; Takriti 2019; Wiles 2013). Others see it as emblematic of the intellectual and social malaise affecting post‑industrial democracies, a force that weaponizes culture, consumption and academia in ways that threaten open democratic debate (Brahm 2021; Cannon 2019; Cohen and Avraham 2018; Diker 2016; Efrati 2017; Elman 2020; Farber 2024, 2025; Fishman 2012; Harris and Shichtman 2018; Nelson 2016, 2024; Nelson & Brahm 2015; Olesker 2022; Quer 2020; Rodin & Yudkin 2010; Steinberg 2023).

The questions at stake cut to the core of contemporary political life: What role should academia play in public discourse (de Shalit 2016; Farber 2025; Hallward & Shaver 2012; Harris & Shichtman 2018; Kramer 2021)? How do we understand the nature and limits of knowledge (Butler 2006; Fisher et al. 2024; Nelson 2019; Nelson & Brahm 2015)? What are the moral foundations of consumer society, and where might democracy be headed (Clarno 2017; Cooper & Herman 2020; Erakat 2010; Lutz 2022)? Supporters tend to frame BDS as a nonviolent grassroots struggle for freedom, justice, and equality. Critics often counter that it resorts to ethnic scapegoating of Israel and erodes democratic norms.

While existing research has documented BDS's historical genealogy and engaged with its normative debates, it has overlooked what has become one of the movement's most potent arenas: TikTok. This oversight seems surprising, particularly given the extensive literature on the role social media have played in mediating the Israel-Palestinian conflict, especially on Palestinian activism on TikTok (Cervi & Marín-Lladó 2022; Cervi & Divon 2023; Siapera et al. 2015; Ward 2021). Our study attempts to address this gap through two key interventions. First, we conduct a systematic analysis of BDS-related content on TikTok from 2021 to 2022. Second, rather than focusing exclusively on how BDS activists articulate “narratives of resistance” – as in most leading studies of Palestinian activism – we shift our analytical lens to how Israel itself is represented in these clips.

Our analysis focuses on two major strategic deployments among the most popular BDS clips on TikTok: the first is anchored in TikTok’s popular “how-to” format, and the second revolves around the platform’s audio-based memetic templates. As we show below, each of these deployments harbors multiple variations and discursive strategies shaped by platform conventions and affordances, current TikTok trends, and creators’ own preferences. Based on these findings, we theorize that some of the most viral BDS clips on TikTok function as “counter-memes” that systematically appropriate the platform's most popular formats and memetic templates to undermine Israel's symbolic value.

In broader terms, the analysis extends existing work by tracing the role of “No-Israel” counter-memes in shaping how pro-Palestinian Gen Z users articulate, perform, and communicate their collective identity. Building on recent work exploring the roles of “memetic protest” (Olesen, 2018) and “weaponizing memes” (Peters & Allan, 2022) in the formation of “shared collective identities or cohesive groups” (Katz & Shifman 2017; Mortensen & Neumayer, 2021; Shaw 2016; Zeng & Abidin 2023; Zulli & Zulli’s 2022), we theorize that the “No Israel” counter-memes contribute to the construction of Palestinian “counter-narratives” (Najjar 2009) and pro-Palestinian “bonds of sentiment” (Cervi & Divon 2023; Mühlhoff 2015; Siapera et al. 2015), as they emerge through BDS-related TikTok clips.

Our investigation unfolds in four stages. We begin with a brief survey of the burgeoning literature on Palestinian digital activism. Next, we outline our methods: a purposive sample obtained via web scraping of high-engagement videos posted under hashtags associated with boycotting Israel. Our findings are presented in two sections, each devoted to one of the two strategic deployments identified above. Finally, we theorize the role of “No Israel” counter-memes as collective symbols around which the pro-Palestinian identity of Gen Z users is articulated, performed and conveyed. Drawing on calls for more constructive engagement, we argue for repurposing TikTok’s affordances to foster Bakhtinian dialogism, enabling polyvocal participation that charts a path beyond current polarizing dynamics.

**Palestinian Digital Activism**

A substantial body of work has developed over the last two decades documenting the pivotal role of social media platforms in what Siapera et al. identify as the thirdstageofthe"mediatization" of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, where user-generated content circulates and mutates globally (Siapera et al. 2015). From "Intifada 3.0" (Tawil-Souri & Aouragh 2014 Add to bibliography) to the "TikTok intifada" (Ward 2021 Add to bibliography), scholars have elucidated how social networks have been employed as effective "tools of resistance"(Cervi & Marín-Lladó 2022) that catalyze new modes of online insurgency (Mühlhoff 2015). As Siapera et al. noted early on, these "acts of resistance" are not mere extensions of traditional resistance but constitute a qualitatively distinct form of struggle that emerges from and responds to digitally mediated forms of oppression (Siapera et al. 2015; Tawil Souri & Aouragh 2014). While Doerr et al. (2013, p. 22) label digital networks as "sites of struggle," Li and Prasad describe them as an all-out "war zone" (Li & Prasad 2018; see also Berenger 2013 - Add to bibliography).

Yet, social media have proved central not merely to mediating the conflict but, at a deeper level, to articulating and conveying Palestinians’ contested identity. Through "counter-narratives" (Najjar 2009) circulating globally, Palestinian activists claim ownership of their own stories rather than having their experiences mediated by external perspectives (Mislán & Shaban 2019). This is particularly evident among Palestinian youth who deploy networked tools as acts of "wired citizenship," negotiating identity formation under conditions of contested sovereignty (Nabulsi 2014 - Add to bibliography). Social media platforms have also served as "transnational springboards" for the cultivation and performance of diasporic identity, enabling scattered Palestinian communities to maintain cultural and political connections across geographic boundaries (Kumar 2018; Nabulsi 2014 - Add to bibliography).

Scholars including Aouragh, Siapera, and Mühlhoff have shown that Palestinian "bonds of sentiment" emerging in virtual terrains are particularly oriented toward expressing empathy and solidarity, thereby mobilizing acts of resistance (Siapera et al. 2015). By engendering "emotional resonance” among users scattered across the world (Mühlhoff 2015), Palestinian counter-narratives channel fragmented voices into transnational pro-Palestinian protest ecologies (Aouragh 2011; Ward 2021; Hitchcock 2016).

Particularly interesting in the context of this research are works that turn their attention to TikTok and its distinctive affordances as a site of pro-Palestinian mobilization. TikTok is a video-sharing platform launched by Chinese internet company ByteDance in September 2016 in China (as Douyin) before spreading globally (Klug 2020; [Kaye](https://haifa-primo-exlibrisgroup-com.ezproxy.haifa.ac.il/discovery/search?query=creator%2Cexact%2CKaye%2C%20D.%20Bondy%20Valdovinos%20%2CAND&tab=Everything&search_scope=MyInst_and_CI&vid=972HAI_MAIN%3AHAU&lang=he&mode=advanced&offset=0) et al. 2021; Zulli & Zulli 2022). Since then, It has since emerged as one of the fastest-growing social media platforms, surpassing five billion mobile downloads worldwide by 2025[[2]](#footnote-2). The platform’s impact lies less in its user numbers and more in how its intuitive editing tools – Duet, Stitch, green-screen effects, and dynamic filters – work alongside its AI-driven “For You” feed to shape cultural trends, especially among Gen Z (born 1995–2010) (Zeng & Abidin 2021; Cervi & Marín-Lladó 2022; [Kaye](https://haifa-primo-exlibrisgroup-com.ezproxy.haifa.ac.il/discovery/search?query=creator%2Cexact%2CKaye%2C%20D.%20Bondy%20Valdovinos%20%2CAND&tab=Everything&search_scope=MyInst_and_CI&vid=972HAI_MAIN%3AHAU&lang=he&mode=advanced&offset=0) et al. 2021; Zhao & Abidin 2023). Simultaneously, TikTok’s recommendation algorithm analyzes users’ interactions – likes, watch time, shares – to spotlight and amplify viral content, rapidly transforming everyday content into global phenomena. In contrast to follower-based platforms, TikTok’s focus on creative editing tools and algorithmic amplification makes it a preeminent trendsetter in today’s social media landscape (K[arizat](https://haifa-primo-hosted-exlibrisgroup-com.ezproxy.haifa.ac.il/primo-explore/search?query=creator%2Cexact%2CKarizat%2C%20Nadia%20%2CAND&tab=haifa_all&search_scope=blended&vid=HAU&lang=iw_IL&mode=advanced&offset=0) et al. 2021; Divon & Ebbrecht-Hartmann 2022; Anderson 2021).

In the present context, Cervi and Marín-Lladó’s (2022) recent analysis of the #FreePalestine hashtag on TikTok, highlights how the platform’s distinctive performative and playful affordances, originally designed to create an entertaining experience, have proved particularly effective in mediating pro-Palestinian activism. In their analysis, they show how pro-Palestinian activists useTikTok’s "playful" audio overlays, dynamic filters, and choreographed sequences to generate microcosms of resistance, directing global public opinion toward Palestine. Building on this analysis, Cervi and Divon (2023) develop the notion of "playful activism," arguing that TikTok hashtag challenges operate as "memetic performances of resistance" that blur the boundary between protest and popular culture. This blurring proves strategically significant, as it enables pro-Palestinian activists to reach audiences who might not otherwise engage with traditional forms of Palestinian activism, thereby expanding the potential for empathic engagement beyond the typical pro-Palestinian circles.

Despite these valuable contributions, what remains conspicuously absent from this literature is a systematic analysis of how Israel is represented within Palestinian digital activism on TikTok, as well as on the other social media platforms. How do Palestinian activists deploy social media platforms to construct and circulate representations of Israel? What discursive and visual strategies are employed to position Israel within pro-Palestinian narratives of resistance? To what extent do these representations shape the formation of transnational solidarity networks and empathic engagement with the Palestinian cause? These questions are imperative given that political protest and identity formation are processes that always entail prescribing the boundaries of self and the significant others ([Hall](https://haifa-primo-exlibrisgroup-com.ezproxy.haifa.ac.il/discovery/search?query=creator%2Cexact%2CHall%2C%20Stuart%2CAND&tab=Everything&search_scope=MyInst_and_CI&vid=972HAI_MAIN%3AHAU&lang=he&mode=advanced&offset=0) & [du Gay](https://haifa-primo-exlibrisgroup-com.ezproxy.haifa.ac.il/discovery/search?query=creator%2Cexact%2Cdu%20Gay%2C%20Paul%20%2CAND&tab=Everything&search_scope=MyInst_and_CI&vid=972HAI_MAIN%3AHAU&lang=he&mode=advanced&offset=0) 2011 - add to the bibliography; Hejlová et al. 2019; Tsai 2013). Leaving these questions unanswered risks yielding a one-sided account of these processes, one that illuminates Palestinian self-representation while obscuring the equally important dynamics of alterity construction. The following analysis seeks to complement the extant literature by examining how BDS activists deploy TikTok's memetic templates to construct Israel’s digital persona.

**Methods**

This study proceeded in four phases: framework development, data collection, sampling, and multimodal analysis, drawing on established approaches in digital media research (Cervi & Marín‐Lladó, 2022; Hautea et al. 2021; Highfield 2016 - Add to bibliography; Karizat et al. 2021; Phillips & Milner 2017- Add to bibliography; Siapera et al. 2015; Sandelowski 1995- Add to bibliography).

Our analytical framework treats BDS clips on TikTok as “political memes,” as conceptualized by Shifman (2014), and later developed by Highfield (2016) and Zeng & Abidin (2021). While regular memes are a “group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content and/or stance that were created with awareness of each other,” (Shifman 2014, p. 7), political memes are interlinked digital items through which the “normative debates about how the world should look and the best way to get there” (Shifman 2014, p. 120) are articulated, negotiated and performed. In this regard, TikTok’s native collection of standard memetic templates and built-in features are particularly effective in facilitating the rapid spread of political memes. Special effects, audio snippets, and soundtrack options serve as participatory tools that enable users to effortlessly adapt trending formats and to convey their immediate, unfiltered emotional reactions to political events.

We focus our analysis on clips posted in 2021-2022. These years were marked by a sharp intensification of pro-Palestinian digital activism on TikTok following the events of Sheikh Jarrah, the May 2021 Operation Guardian of the Walls, and interethnic unrest within Israeli cities, all of which triggered a wave of affective, memetic, and highly politicized content production. Notably, in early 2021, TikTok also introduced a change in its “‘For You’ feed” mechanics to avoid repetitive content loops and enhance content-moderation capacity (K[arizat](https://haifa-primo-hosted-exlibrisgroup-com.ezproxy.haifa.ac.il/primo-explore/search?query=creator%2Cexact%2CKarizat%2C%20Nadia%20%2CAND&tab=haifa_all&search_scope=blended&vid=HAU&lang=iw_IL&mode=advanced&offset=0) et al. 2021). This coincided with a tightening of policies toward political content and the expansion of automated detection tools for keywords, symbols, and imagery identified as violating community guidelines. Rather than vanishing, pro-Palestinian and other activists adapted to the platform’s logics of visibility, leveraging its seemingly neutral formats to shape political affect and public perception. This context also informed the inclusion of 2022, a year in which such formats became further established and widely circulated. While 2021 marked an eruption of visibility and protest, 2022 extended this momentum, as users continued to embed “No-Israel” messaging into viral formats and everyday aesthetics.

Using Apify, we scraped all public TikTok videos tagged with the following hashtags: #boycottisrael, #boycotisrael, #boycottisraelproducts, #boycottisreal, #BDS, and #boycott\_Israel. Hashtags were first identified using the TikTok mobile app (Siapera et al. 2015). After deduplication of reposts and compilations, the dataset comprised 2,904 unique videos. For each item, we logged each video’s URL, hashtags, and engagement metrics (likes, shares, views, and comments) at the time of capture.

From the full corpus, we selected 114 videos that met the following inclusion criteria: **Engagement:** ≥ 3,000 likes and ≥ 100 shares; **Clarity:** narrative and visual elements intelligible to general audiences without external context; and **Novelty:** non-routine use of TikTok affordances to produce affect-laden depictions of Israel.

Following Phillips & Milner (2017), we employed purposive sampling (see also Anderson & Kanuka 2004) to foreground information-rich cases and salient variations relevant to Israel’s digital representation.

We analyzed the selected clips across three dimensions identified as pivotal to understanding how Israel is portrayed (Hautea et al., 2021):

1. **Technical features:** in-app tools, filter types, sound usage and overlay mechanics;
2. **Adaptations of popular content formats** (e.g., “how-to” tutorials, beauty-tutorial inversions, POV setups and challenge routines).

3. **Affective elements:** performative gestures, sound cues, and visual symbols that elicit emotional responses and assign cultural meaning.

All clips meeting our criteria were documented in a research log containing the following metadata: (1) video URL, (2) hashtags, (3) counts of likes, shares, comments, and views.

Each of us independently applied the analytic scheme to all items, producing parallel segment sets. We then compared and reconciled our annotations. A thematic analysis followed, from which two strategic deployments emerged: (1) clips anchored in TikTok’s “how-to” format and (2) clips organized around audio-anchored templates. These deployments describe how creators leverage affordances, formats, and templates to elicit emotional reactions and ascribe cultural value (and disvalue) to Israel. While not exhaustive, this design provides a transparent, replicable account of how BDS activists mobilize TikTok’s formats, templates, and affordances to produce, configure, and circulate Israel’s digital image.

**Findings**

As noted above, the analysis focuses on how BDS activists deploy TikTok’s familiar genres, memetic templates and affordances to construct, shape and spread Israel’s digital image. We identify two major strategic deployments among the most popular BDS clips on TikTok: the first is anchored in TikTok’s popular “how-to” format, and the second revolves around the platform’s audio-based memetic templates. As we show below, the two strategic deployments harbor multiple variations and exhibit various discursive strategies, depending on the platform conventions and affordances, current TikTok trends and the personal inclinations of the BDS activists who deploy them.

***“How-To” Boycotting Memes***

TikTok’s how-to format typically features short videos in which users narrate their consumer experiences, signaling the perceived value of products, brands, and other consumer goods and services. Beyond advice, how-to clips also function as sites where Gen Z users perform and communicate their personal inclinations, tastes and ethical commitments (Highfield 2016, p. 3; see also Zhao & Abidin 2023).

A notable cluster of “how-to” boycott memes consists of BDS activists filming themselves as they stroll through streets, supermarkets and malls. In a viral clip (with 258,600 likes and 5300 shares) created by the Egyptian TikTok star Ahmed Sabry (aka “Daily Sabry”) shows him walking through local supermarkets and streets. The video opens with a spoken statement in Arabic: “The brands of the Zionist occupation are in every supermarket”. From this point on, the camera adopts a POV shot, with Sabry moving through the aisles, and out onto the streets, pointing at familiar brands (see Figure 1a) indicating whether to boycott them.

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# *Figure 1a Everyday POV Boycotting Memes*

# Another high-engagement video (3,330 likes; 144 shares) simulates an ordinary shopping experience: the camera pans and zooms as if reflecting a shopper’s gaze – choosing a soft drink on the street or picking a restaurant in a mall (Figure 1b). When the shot settles on an Israeli‐affiliated brand (e.g. Coca-Cola, Nestlé coffee, Danone yogurt, Pampers diapers, McDonald’s, KFC, or Costa Coffee), an on-screen hand performs a gesture – sometimes a simple point, at other times a point followed by a rejection motion. In alternate cuts, the camera then shifts to a non-Israeli brand and the rejection gesture becomes a thumbs-up endorsement. On-screen text, e.g. “Stand Against Apartheid” and “Stand Against Zionism” - reinforces the boycott choice.

# These “how-to” boycotting clips recast routine consumer practices as political acts, valuing products and brands not for their intrinsic qualities but for their perceived affiliation with Israel. These videos also function as hands-on tutorials, showing viewers what to look for, how to identify these products, and how to refuse them. In doing so, the “how to” format is retooled as a ritualized performance of refusing Israel. Encounters with targeted items are punctuated by standardized gestures (push-away, discard, turn-the-label) and annotation layers of “no” stickers, crossed-out emojis and emphatic captions that signal the rejection of Israel.

# On a deeper level, these “how-to” clips establish a visual and symbolic pairing between global corporate brands – such as Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, and Nestlé – and Israel as interconnected manifestations of the same global system of power. They expose Israel's alleged influence as extending beyond territorial occupation into the intimate realm of consumer taste and daily consumption. With each POV gesture, they invite viewers to see Israeli-affilated products as inseparable from a global order of injustice built on inequality. In this framing, the simple act of reaching for an Israeli-affiliated soda is recast as a world-changing gesture that fuels global injustice. Conversely, shunning these products transforms individual acts of boycotting Israel into acts of resistance against global injustice.

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# *Figure 1b Everyday POV Boycotting Memes*

# A widely circulated 2021 “how-to” clip (15,200 likes; 1,121 comments) depicts a man placing a phone order, with the Palestinian flag displayed above him (Figure 1c). Each item he orders appears at the bottom of the screen. Each time he orders an item - e.g., a Coca-Cola can, a bag of Lay’s chips - part of the flag transforms into blood, which begins to drip onto the man’s head. Initially, he tries to ignore the dripping blood, but by the third item (a KitKat bar) he can no longer do so. He then looks at the camera in shock as he realizes the consequences of his seemingly trivial choices. The clip employs relatively simple features - green-screen effects, text overlays, and stickers - to explicitly visualize the link between Israel, global corporate brands, and bloodshed. The visual metaphor equates consumer choices with bloodshed, encoding the BDS movement’s boycott message that each purchase of Israeli-affiliated products directly results in violence. The clip thus offers a visceral representation of how purchasing everyday Israeli-affiliated products perpetuates violence and bloodshed.

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# ***Figure 1c Everyday POV Boycotting Memes***

# A second cluster of “how-to” clips consists of creative spins on the popular TikTok beauty-tutorial videos. In conventional beauty-tutorial clips, products are either applied or, less frequently, discarded – each gesture dramatizing personal expression based on the product’s beautifying potential and alignment with a broader lifestyle (Abidin 2020, 2021). The most viral BDS beauty-tutorial clip posted in 2021, with over 30,000 likes and 1,228 shares, features a feminine hand holding cosmetic products and fashion accessories up to the camera. In the first cut, a label appears stating "Brands to Boycott," followed by multiple emojis of Palestinian flags and raised-fists emojis. The first scene is followed by a sequence of cuts in which cosmetic products and then fashion accessories are thrown into a trash bin. One after another, top-shelf lipsticks, mascaras, moisturizers, and shampoos by Estée Lauder, L'Oréal, Lancôme, NYX, Jo Malone, Essie and Aveeno are disposed of in trash bins (see Figure 3a).

# **A hand holding a set of black lipsticks AI-generated content may be incorrect.**

# ***Figure 3a Audiovisual Vilifying Memes***

# Another clip emulating the beauty-tutorial format delivers the same message in even a more grotesque register. Garnering 58,200 likes and 2,900 shares, the clip adopts the familiar convention of using rejection emojis – X marks and thumbs-down symbols – to vet cosmetic products held up to the camera. Yet as soon as Israeli-affiliated items appear, the video shifts register: it deploys snarling cat faces, hissing snakes, and other bestial emojis – each coupled with symbols of physical revulsion – to signal visceral disgust toward any brand that is linked to Israel. When a CeraVe moisturizing cream is shown, an emoji pinching its nose appears. A Neutrogena gel-cream is then paired with a vomiting emoji on one side and a poop emoji on the other. Next comes Differin Gel accompanied by a cat emoji and a red, sweating-face emoji indicating distress. Finally, another CeraVe product – a vitamin serum – is coupled with a snake emoji (see Figure 3b).

# The effectiveness of these beauty-tutorial adaptations rests on subverting the beauty-tutorial format, transforming it from a genre designed to celebrate products' beautifying properties into a vehicle for systematically depicting Israeli-linked products as visceral repulsive and warranting physical disposal. As such, they employ the familiar format to foreground the view of Israel, and any brand affiliated with it, as morally corrupt and fundamentally toxic. More importantly, these clips transform the ritualized disposal of Israeli-affiliated products into aesthetically appealing, shareable, algorithmically amplifiable content circulating within contemporary TikTok culture.

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# ***Figure 3b Audiovisual Vilifying Memes***

# ***Soundscape Boycotting Memes***

# Over the years, music has served as a potent medium for articulating Palestinian grievances (Massad 2003; Brehony 2018 - add to bibliography; Ghabra 2020 - add to bibliography; Mislán & Shaban 2019). Building on this tradition, a prevalent strategy in BDS TikTok content is the use of audio-based memetic templates – lip-syncs, hashtag challenges, and duets – that infuse representations of Israel, including Israeli-affiliated products and symbols, with emotional resonance and cultural currency.

# A large number of clips feature the track “Jalebi Baby,” released by Tesher in 2020. A large number of clips feature the track “Jalebi Baby,” released by Tesher in 2020. The common challenge involves users displaying two emojis, such as a heart for love and a dollar sign for money, to represent opposing concepts. When the lyric “Baby let me eat it, I just want to see it… Jalebi, baby” begins, they dance toward one side of the screen to indicate their chosen option (see Cervi & Marín-Lladó 2022, p. 425). In the BDS adaptation of the challenge, users respond to paired images of Palestinian and Israeli flags, products, and other symbols displayed on opposite sides of the screen. With a single movement, leaning, stepping, or gesturing, they signal approval by moving toward Palestinian-affiliated items and rejection by turning away from or “discarding” Israeli icons.

# A more sophisticated use of TikTok's performative audio features involves lip-sync challenges. In the common lip-syncing challenge, users imitate or silently articulate the words of a preexisting audio track while recording themselves (Abidin & Kaye, 2021). In the BDS version of the challenge, activists mime "no" while gesturing toward or displaying Israeli-affiliated brands. In this context, a viral lip-syncing clip, which received 124,800 likes and 4,306 shares, features a young female BDS activist lip-syncing the romantic phrase "لا لا" ("No, no") from a viral Arabic love song while gesturing toward stickers of boycott-targeted brands (Figure 2a). The clip opens with the camera focused on the activist's face as she wears a traditional keffiyeh, a symbol of Palestinian resistance. At the top, a title reads "Companies we're boycotting to free Palestine." The upbeat love song plays in the background. Then, brand logos appear in pairs just under the title, including AXA Insurance, HP, Puma, SodaStream, Pillsbury, Ahava, and Sabra Hummus. When each pair of logos appears, the activist makes a disapproving expression coupled with a dismissive gesture with her finger while lip-syncing the "no, no" lines of the song playing in the background.

# As with clips that use the “Jalebi Baby” track, the sound here serves as a vehicle for imparting negative connotations to Israel. BDS activists align the track’s infectious, cross-cultural beat with scenes that reject Israeli brands or elevate Palestinian symbols. Each beat drop is timed to a symbolic refusal of Israeli-affiliated goods, reinforcing the narrative that Israel is fundamentally illegitimate. The visceral appeal of the song’s rhythm functions as a performative enactment of Israel’s repudiation. The clip suggests that anyone drawn to the music—and compelled to lip-sync along—should likewise reject Israel and everything associated with it.

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# ***Figure 2a Soundscape Boycotting Memes***

# Another notable stream of BDS clips adapts the "Stand Up" track – widely used by Black Lives Matter activists – to convey the boycott-Israel message. The clips feature Cynthia Erivo’s 2019 song “Stand Up,” which appears on the soundtrack of the biographical film *Harriet*, in which Erivo portrays the abolitionist and activist Harriet Tubman. In a viral clip uploaded in 2021, a female Israeli soldier lip-syncs Erivo’s anthem. She is heavily armed, with an Israeli flag patch centred on her vest, as she stands behind a concrete wall. She lip-syncs “Stand up, take my people with me” as an expression of Israeli pride. Moe Zein, a Palestinian-Lebanese singer, subsequently remixes the original clip with footage from Palestinian demonstrations: his side of the split-screen shows marching protesters, waving flags, and scenes of everyday life under occupation, timed precisely to Erivo’s climactic line, “And I’ll fight with the strength that I got until I die.” Whereas Cynthia Erivo sings “I’ll stand up with you” (implicitly addressing any oppressed group), Zein instead mouths “I’ll stand up for Palestine,” inserting the proper noun to explicitly align the anthem with Palestinian liberation. He also intersperses an Arabic refrain, “Falastini, Falastini” (“Palestine, Palestine”), between Erivo’s lines, shifting the song’s universal call to resistance into a pointed cry for solidarity with the Palestinian people.

# BDS clips that incorporate the “Stand Up” track can be classified into two principal variations. In the first, simpler variation, the original track by Erivo is played under selected footage of street demonstrations. A typical example is a clip that gathered 5,538 likes and 102 shares, depicting footage from a street demonstration in Manchester, UK, in 2022 (Figure 2b). The first cut - showing protesters waving Palestinian flags - begins midway through the song, when Erivo intones, in a slow-burning, gospel-tinged voice, a climatic line: “I’ll fight … until I die.” As the video progresses, scenes of protesters holding signs – “Glory to Palestine,” “Freedom Fighters,” and “Resistance Is a Duty” – are intercut with the music that swells in dramatic intensity up to the chorus, which affirms standing up, leading “my people,” and moving toward a “brand new home.”

# While the clips discussed thus far stress the present-day links between Israel and global power structures, this category of videos demonstrates the flip side of this dynamic by positioning the protest against Israel as the affective catalyst around which an “affective public” of oppressed people coalesces (Papacharissi 2015). This positioning is double layered: On the first level, the song’s lyrics and dramatic tone imbue the demonstrations against Israel with collective belonging and empowerment, as viewers witness anti-Israel protest footage unfolding in rhythm with the music. Solidarity emerges through the synchronization of the anthem’s emotional cadence with images of demonstrators, turning the protests’ rallying cry against Israel into a shared affective experience. On a second, more historically inflected level, the use of the track closely associated with Black activism functions as a cultural marker that links the protest against Israel to historical anti-racist struggles. The track signals to platform algorithms and to audiences that the protest against Israel is the latest link in the struggle against pro-slavery and racist regimes, thereby effectively positioning Israel as analogous to historical systems of racial domination.

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# ***Figure 2b Soundscape Boycotting Memes***

# The second variation of the “Stand Up” duet meme juxtaposes the Israeli soldier with Zein, alongside users' personal commentary (see Figure 2c). The Israeli soldier lip-syncs to Erivo’s original audio, while creators use POV shots to display facial expressions and hand gestures that signal disapproval. The clips typically cut abruptly and switch to Zein’s version of the song. This transition is accompanied by a shift in creators’ POV reactions - a smile, aV-sign, or simple head-nodding - signal approval of the change. Unlike the Israeli soldier, Zein performs in his own voice.

# This variation of the “Stand Up” meme also erodes Israel’s cultural value, albeit through a different mechanism. It does so by conflating cultural “originality” with “strategic authenticity” (cf. Goffman’s dramaturgical model of front stage/back stage dynamics, as discussed in Shifman 2014).

# Although the Israeli soldier uses the original soundtrack, she is positioned as representative of a military apparatus appropriating Black activism. At the opposite pole of the authenticity-artifice spectrum, Zein's version appears to genuinely represent the lived realities of Palestinians on the ground. In this framing, Israel is shown to be a military power engaged in performative co-optation. Although the Israeli soldier uses the original audio track, she is positioned as representative of a military apparatus appropriating Black activism. At the opposite pole of the authenticity–artifice spectrum, Zein’s version appears to authentically represent Palestinians’ lived realities. In this framing, Israel is depicted not just as a military power but one that is engaged in performative co-optation.

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# ***Figure 2c Soundscape Boycotting Memes***

# Another highly popular clip features a novel blend of TikTok’s audio and visual affordances to generate representations of Israel that are clearly inspired by classic antisemitic imagery. In a clip posted in 2022, which garnered 38,400 likes and 660 shares, six cartoon panels, drawn by alt-right illustrator Ben Garrison, provide vile depictions of Israel (see Figure 3d). We focus on the first image, titled “Terrorism, Zionist Style,” which depicts three grotesque “components”: “Financial,” “Domestic,” and “War Inc.” Each is personified by a monstrous figure bearing Israeli symbols. The Financial component appears as a kippah-clad Jewish man with a pronounced nose, brandishing a machine gun, while a backpack-mounted printing press stamped “Federal Reserve: printing press must stay on!” spurts dollar bills. To his right, the Domestic figure wears a Homeland Security uniform emblazoned with an Israeli flag and grips a stun gun. To the left, the War Inc. component is embodied by a charity box marked with a Star of David and a cap bearing a UN logo, clutching both a globe labeled “Europe’s children” and a rocket. These “monsters” trample the earth, its “economy” crushed under the Financial figure’s boot, while tiny, indistinct humans flee in terror.

Crucially, the clip overlays this montage with the “Grinch” sound meme by Trippie Redd, a track whose beat drop has become a ubiquitous TikTok cue for dramatic reveals and ironic reversals. By invoking the Grinch, a character whose original narrative arc moves from theft to reluctance, the clip retools the audio track to underscore the malevolence of the figures representing Israel and to ratchet up viewers’ disgust.

# As with the previous clips, this video transforms the familiar memetic conventions – cartoon caricature and rap-culture audio – into vehicles of systematic vilification, this time directed squarely at Israel. By recasting trendy visual motifs and the Grinch beat-drop, portrays Israel not merely as employing violence against Palestinians but as a clandestine puppet master orchestrating a global takeover. Clearly the clip leverages the aesthetic appeal of Garrison’s animation alongside the dramatic onset of the meme soundtrack, to create what Brown et. al call an “affective design” (2022) that echoes traditional antisemitic tropes, depicting Israel as a Jewish state engaged with economic subversion and war profiteering. In this framing the #boycottisrael becomes a rallying cry against a purported global existential menace that threatens the moral foundations of the international community. By packaging this hate-filled narrative within a shareable, algorithm-friendly format, the clip normalizes exclusionary impulses and primes viewers to endorse Israel’s symbolic – and potentially literal – abjection from the global body.

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# *Figure 3d Audiovisual Vilifying Memes*

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# **Discussion and Conclusions**

# This analysis provides insight into the distinctive way in which BDS activists deploy TikTok’s familiar genres, memetic templates and affordances to construct, shape and spread Israel’s digital image. In her foundational analysis of how digital memes function, Limor Shifman conceptualizes “counter-memes” that “… alter … icons in ways that charge them with new subversive meanings …” (2014, pp. 130–132; see also Milner 2016; Zulli & Zulli 2022). Our findings indicate that BDS clips on TikTok commonly function as counter-memes, leveraging platform formats (e.g., how-to, beauty-tutorial), audio and visual memetic templates (POV, lip-sync, challenge tracks), and affordances (Duet, Stitch, green-screen effects, filters, text overlays, stickers, emojis) to pair Israeli symbols and products with representations of exploitation, violence, and cultural appropriation.

# Leveraging TikTok’s participatory and performative affordances to generate negative imagery of Israel is strategically effective, given the role these affordances play in how information spreads within the platform’s ecosystem. In the most-engaged BDS clips, we see a systematic linking of negative portrayals of Israel with the affective audiovisual and stylistic elements that make TikTok content appealing and shareable. In practice, users who feel compelled to dance to the cross-cultural **“Jalebi Baby”** beat, sense empowerment through the **“Stand Up”** anthem, seek consumer advice, or engage with beauty tutorials are bound to encounter representations of Israel as complicit in economic exploitation, cultural appropriation, colonialism and bloodshed. Thus, BDS activists strategically deploy TikTok’s distinctive capacity to blur the boundaries between entertainment and politics, to ride the platform’s memetic flux, and to inject “No-Israel” counter-memes directly into TikTok’s information bloodstream. By embedding negative audiovisual representations of Israel within the platform’s most engaging and shareable genres and memetic templates, these clips ensure that negative associations with Israel circulate alongside—and through—the very content that drives user engagement and algorithmic amplification.

# This strategic deployment of TikTok’s popular genres and templates aligns with classic “anti-branding” techniques that appropriate corporate branding to undermine rather than build brand equity (see Klein 2000). The BDS counter-memes embody what we term a “No-Israel” logic, borrowing Naomi Klein’s terminology, in which familiar audiovisual repertoires are repurposed to taint the image of Israel. Just as culture jammers hijack advertising aesthetics to expose corporate malfeasance, BDS activists exploit TikTok’s popular genres and memetic templates to corrode Israel’s symbolic value (see Lasn 2000). Each memetic iteration functions as a form of digital culture jamming that reappropriates TikTok’s trend mechanics against Israel’s perceived brand value, thereby signaling to platform algorithms and viewers that Israel is morally contaminating any brand or product associated with it.

# As noted in the opening section, multiple works have highlighted the role that social media plays in shaping identity formation among pro-Palestinian Gen Z users. While this study focuses exclusively on BDS content on TikTok, similar counter-memes are pervasive under #FreePalestine, #FreeGaza, and other pro-Palestinian hashtags. Our findings, then, suggest tracing the place of “no Israel” counter-memes in the formation of pro-Palestinian “narrative of resistance” (Cervi & Divon 2023, p. 1) and Palestinian “counter-narratives״ (Bamberg 2004; Najjar, 2009; Jayachandiran et al., 2016) described in the existing literature. They indicate that the “emotional resonance” evoked among geographically distant individuals (Mühlhoff 2015; Cervi & Divon 2023) helps constitute an “imitation public” (Zulli & Zulli 2022, p. 3) through the systematic pairing of Israeli symbols with negative stimuli. In the case of BDS clips, the “No Israel” counter-memes appear to function as collective symbols around which the “we sense” of pro-Palestinian Gen Z users is shaped and performed (Zeng & Abidin 2021).

# This process of identity-formation may be theorized through Julia Kristeva’s notion of *abjection*. That is, the foundational act of identity formation through the symbolic expulsion of that which threatens coherence and order (Kristeva 1982). In the case of BDS clips on TikTok, Israel is cast as an abject - the entity that “disturbs identity, system, order,” and must be expelled to preserve the moral integrity of the self (Kristeva 1982). What we observe in these clips is not simply narration of Palestinian suffering or showcasing acts of resistance, described in the extant literature, but performative rituals of exclusion in which the BDS “affective public” is called into being by the very act of positioning Israel beyond the bounds of moral acceptability – a contaminating entity that must be repudiated.

# These should not be understood as the only strategies for deploying TikTok’s distinctive features and formats in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Monshipouri and Prompichai (2018) call on Palestinian resistance to “come to terms with the emancipatory and simultaneously confounding potential of social media” (Monshipouri & Prompichai 2018, p. 53). By the same token, Ghabra and Hasian (2018) urge BDS activists to move beyond “the love and hate binaries that animate exclusionary nationalistic rhetorics” and instead to work on “creating bridges and alliances through the production of cosmopolitan narratives.” They envision Palestinians evolving “their national project in more community-based, humanistic, and effective methods” that transcend purely oppositional frameworks (Ghabra & Hasian 2018, p. 355).

# This analysis joins these works in stressing the importance of reimagining TikTok not merely as a battleground for oppositional identities but also as a space where polyvocal narratives can coexist and where dissent does not foreclose discourse. Doing so will require activists across camps to devise ways to deploy the participatory, performative, and playful affordances of TikTok’s memetic templates to counter prevalent Kristevan abjection with Bakhtinian dialogism that fosters reciprocal understanding among divergent voices (Kristeva 1982; Bakhtin 1984). Such an approach may offer a way forward in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, countering the effects of viral antagonism by enabling multivoiced engagement and fostering digital dialogue that acknowledges the complexities and shared humanity of all parties involved.

**Statement regarding AI**

We have read and agree to comply with the Taylor & Francis AI Policy. We confirm that I have used ChatGPT (5 version)solely for editing purposes, including correcting typos and grammatical errors. All intellectual contributions, analyses, and arguments in this manuscript are our own.

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1. The origins of the BDS movement are commonly traced to the NGO Forum held alongside the UN-sponsored World Conference against Racism (Durban I, September 2001). While the forum did not use the term BDS, it adopted language urging the “complete and total isolation of Israel as an apartheid state,” including comprehensive sanctions and the cessation of all links (NGO Forum Declaration; *Durban Declaration and Programme of Action* 2001). The phrase “boycott, divestment, and sanctions” first appeared in a World Social Forum statement (Porto Alegre, 10 February 2005) and was adopted five months later by the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) in its 9 July 2005 call endorsed by a coalition of unions, NGOs, and civil society groups (Barghouti 2011; Maria 2018). The subsequent creation of the BDS National Committee (BNC) in 2007 formalized the coordination of campaign activities. These moments are widely treated as the movement’s watershed consolidation (Munayyer 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *TikTok Statistics*, Business of Apps, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/tik-tok-statistics/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)