

Silvia-Diana SCHECHTER<sup>1</sup>

## THE GAMIFICATION OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE FREE PALESTINE MOVEMENT

---

**Abstract.** The purpose of this paper is to familiarize the readership with the phenomenon of gamification, defined as the use of game design elements in non-game contexts, its characteristics and impact on citizens' trust and political participation. The re-emergence of the Free Palestine Movement on October 7, 2023, which coincides with the resumption of the armed conflict between Israel and the Hamas-led Palestinian militant groups in the Gaza Strip, throws into relief the increasing relevance of political mobilization through digital mediums. This paper seeks to re-energize scrutiny into the role of digital technologies in enhancing citizens' political participation and the production of alternative knowledge. On TikTok, gamification is an emerging phenomenon with an upward trend that incentivizes the user to engage in political activities under a veneer of gamefulness. Amid the loss of trust in political institutions worldwide, the migration of political activism towards the digital space instils a sense of renewed optimism. In the present study, I attempt to synthesize the existing knowledge centered around gamified political participation, extract findings through game analytics and social media mining, and use other academics' theories as springboards to answer the question: "What is gamification, and how did it manifest in the Free Palestine Movement?"

**Keywords:** Free Palestine Movement, gamification, political participation, social networking sites, TikTok ban bill

---

<sup>1</sup> Silvia-Diana Schechter is a PhD student in Political Science at the University of Bucharest (schechter.silvia-diana@fpub.unibuc.ro). ORCID: 0009-0003-8611-3224.

## Introduction

In recent years, gamification has become a buzzword among concept enthusiasts, digital natives and scholars.<sup>2</sup> Although deft at substantiating their claim that digital games are disarmingly important, ludologists did not fail to notice the trivialization that gamification has been subjected to over the years, on reasons that digital games are not “legitimate objects of study,” and “serve no cultural or social function.”<sup>3</sup>

The Free Palestine Movement offers a glimpse into the phenomenon of gamification of political participation, and the decisive role of digital technologies in public opinion-making. By addressing the question, “What is gamification, and how did it manifest in the Free Palestine Movement?,” this paper interrogates the role of gamification, explores its awareness raising and fund-raising effects, and challenges the claims that it reduces political participation to performative engagement. At the same time, this paper explores how the movement’s digital migration opened new cognitive spaces for the interrogation of dominant narratives in the context of the Israeli – Palestinian conflict. In tandem, the concept of political trust in relation to the U.S. censorship of TikTok is discussed.

Since October 7, 2023, two social networking sites emerged as leaders in the digital mobilization movement for Palestinians: TikTok and X (formerly Twitter). On TikTok alone, between December 15 and December 22, 2023, out of the total U.S. views on content related to the Israel-Hamas war (Figure 2), 98.6% targeted pro-Palestinian hashtags, such as “#freepalestine,” “#freegaza,” “#standwithpalestine,” “#fromtherivertothesea,”

---

<sup>2</sup> Jens Seiffert-Brockmann and Howard Nothhaft, “The Gamification of Democracy. Computer Games as Strategic Communication Tools and Cultivating Forces,” in *Strategic Communication, Social Media and Democracy: The Challenge of the Digital Naturals*, eds. W. Timothy Coombs, Jesper Falkheimer, Mats Heide and Philip Young (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2015), 130, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315732411>.

<sup>3</sup> Gonzalo Frasca, “Simulation versus Narrative. Introduction to Ludology,” in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, eds. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003), 221-236; Brigid Costello and Chris Chesher, “Why Media Scholars Should Not Study Computer Games,” *Media International Australia* 110, no. 1 (2004): 5-9, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0411000103>; Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007).

and “#prayforpalestine.”<sup>4</sup> Game filters where users must collect enough watermelon seeds before time expires became fundraisers for the Palestinians caught in the Gaza crossfire. One of these filters, referred to as the “Filter for Good,” quickly became one of the fastest-growing in-app features, achieving an impressive half a million uses. While the creator had set a goal of 200,000 uses, people “maxed out the [number] of rewards generated from a single filter and raised \$14,000.”<sup>5</sup> All proceeds resulting from this remarkable fusion of humor and humanitarianism were donated to Doctors Without Borders and used to purchase telecommunication services to keep Gazans connected to the rest of the world.

While gamification has been studied in relation to fields such as education and marketing, its application to political participation in the context of the Free Palestine Movement remains rather underexplored. As such, the author believes that this paper can enrich the existing knowledge on gamification and point to innovations in the field. In terms of structure, one by one, the article (1) introduces the phenomenon and adjacent concepts to the readership through literature review; (2) narrows the research to the Free Palestine Movement, exploring how users engage playfully with politics to drive humanitarian outcomes; (3) investigates users’ interrogation of the TikTok ban, perceived as a deterrent to producing alternative knowledge on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; (4) provides an analysis of the collected data and trends; (5) synthesizes the research and casts projections on the potential of gamification on political engagement.

## Methodology

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks in communication and gamification studies, the author uses game analytics and social media mining to investigate

---

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Goldbloom, “TikTok Needs to Be Sold or Banned before the 2024 Election,” *Time*, March 7, 2024, accessed August 14, 2024, <https://time.com/6836078/tiktok-sold-banned-2024-election/>.

<sup>5</sup> TikTok, @xojourdanlouise, “Part 13 | Replying to...,” November 16, 2023, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGeTDgNNv/>.

and deepen the readership's understanding of the studied phenomenon. Game analytics refers to the analysis of data from games, their users, and game companies. In recent years, researchers from sociology, education, and politics have expressed mounting interest in the "*what*," "*when*," and "*how*" of gaming behavior. The author uses data mining tools to understand who is playing the studied games, how they are playing them, and why.<sup>6</sup>

The following textual analysis demonstrates that gamified political participation in support of the Free Palestine Movement adds to offline activism and is just as salient in the movement's communicative, emancipatory and fund-raising efforts. With respect to the research corpus, this consists of two hundred individual accounts across TikTok and X, whose comments were chosen based on the criteria of their algorithmic order, belonging to the Anglophone digital space, and popularity. This was measured in the number of likes under posts and videos that touched on the war in Gaza, the TikTok fundraising filter for the Palestinian civilians in Gaza, and the TikTok ban bill.<sup>7</sup> Half of the total number of comments were extracted from TikTok, and the other half were taken from X. As of September 4, 2024, all the selected comments exceed 100 likes.

The author acknowledges the possibility that any of these accounts may become abandoned, inactive or throwaway accounts at some point in time. This is due to either loss of interest or the intent to preserve one's anonymity in the long term. Due to privacy reasons, personal information about the collected accounts is limited. However, from these accounts' profile information, the author was able to establish that seventy-four of the accounts belong to women, thirty-two belong to men, ten belong to non-binary individuals, and the remaining eighty-four are unidentifiable (Figure 1). Both TikTok and X require its users to be at least thirteen years old. If users' compliance with the social networking applications' regulations is respected, then we can assume that all the accounts surveyed belong to users who are over thirteen.

This study acknowledges its methodological challenges and limitations in using social media data as a source for understanding

---

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Dawson, *A-Z of Digital Research Methods* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 134.

<sup>7</sup> TikTok, @noahglennccarter, "People are using tjis [sic] tik tok filter to help the people of Gaza," November 9, 2023, accessed June 8, 2024, <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGeUP3t2q/>.

conversations around the gamification of political participation. The author plans to expand on the impact of social networking sites on participatory democracy in future works.

## Literature Review

Our point of departure is communication sociologist Manuel Castells' prediction that set the tone for research on the role of digital technologies in contemporary democracies. In 1998, he professed that humanity stands on the precipice of a brilliant future: "[The] dream of Enlightenment," he said, "that reason and science would solve the problems of humankind is within reach."<sup>8</sup>

From its inception, the Internet has been closely linked to democratic freedoms and the process of democratization. According to the International Telecommunication Union<sup>9</sup> (ITU), the democracy inherent to the Internet derives from its unrestricted sharing of information through independent channels of communication. The utopianism in the incipient stage of Internet distribution gave birth to the liberation technology theory – "an unimpeded, transnational communication" that can "disrupt authoritarian regimes and promote freedom around the world."<sup>10</sup> Liberation technology has the potential to expand rights, encourage protests, and enlarge movements. Keeping in mind these characteristics, a significant number of voices around the world recognize social networking sites (SNS) or social media as the contemporary mouthpiece of liberation technology. Social media can be described as the totality of social networking sites, where users can create, communicate and share content.

---

<sup>8</sup> Manuel Castells, *End of Millennium: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 359.

<sup>9</sup> Regina A. List, Marcel Hadeed, Rafael Schmuziger Goldzweig, and Jessica Leong Cohen, *Online Participation in Culture and Politics: Towards More Democratic Societies?, Second thematic report based on the Indicator Framework on Culture and Democracy* (Council of Europe, 2018), 29.

<sup>10</sup> Nathaniel Persily and Joshua A. Tucker, *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1.

A new model of participatory democracy has emerged with the ascent of social media that is invariably intertwined with freedom of expression. Individuals who have been or felt excluded from political decision-making have turned to social media to nurse their grievances and expose their daily realities riddled with injustices. State authorities' failure to protect and represent their citizens has startled netizens into a worldwide digital mobilization, which aims to educate stakeholders, wrest back decisional power and influence policymaking.

While fully regarded as a participatory mechanism, social media has become an independent and ever-changing entity, giving rise to grassroots activism in the form of awareness campaigns, boycotts, crowdfunding, petition-making, and protests. The origin of social media can be traced back to the early 2000s, when the first distribution of Web 2.0 functionalities propelled the World Wide Web into a new era of sociality. According to Jonathan A. Obar and Steven S. Wildman,<sup>11</sup> all social networking services have four common features: (1) Web 2.0 Internet-based applications, (2) user-made content, (3) regulations for platform specific profiles, and (4) social networks between users.

The rise of social media platforms like Facebook (which surpassed two billion users as of January 2022, per Statista), X, and TikTok led to the creation of a new type of social interaction. What makes these platforms distinct is their functional and integrative make-up, oftentimes combining media (*e.g.*, audiovisual content) and information technologies (*e.g.*, webpage) with communication technologies (*e.g.*, comments section, message box).

Up until the ascent of information and communication technologies (ICT), the evolution of social movements could be traced to their emergence, convergence, bureaucratization, and decline.<sup>12</sup> In the last decade, innovations in social mobilization cropped up under the name of "flash movements." Characteristics such as size, speed, and recruitment, even the social effect of physical gatherings identified by Gustave Le Bon, are all thought to

---

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan A. Obar and Steven S. Wildman, "Social Media Definition and the Governance Challenge: An Introduction to the Special Issue," *Telecommunications Policy* 39, no. 9 (2015): 745-750, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2015.07.014>.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Addison-Wesley, 1978); Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Methods* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969).

have transferred to the online space. Like in person communities, virtual communities or

“social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace,”

generate feelings of affiliation, and like-minded-ness.<sup>13</sup> The sociality of social media emerges from three fundamental functions: cognition, communication, and cooperation.<sup>14</sup> Individuals use their cognition to create and process information, and their communication to share and debate information in cyberspace. These two factors eventually establish cooperation among users and a fertile ground for virtual community building.

Demographically, digital natives represented the most optimistic cohort about digital democracy's capacity to foster deliberative public spheres and virtual electoral participation.<sup>15</sup> Among the digitally deft, Gen Y (1977-1996), and Gen Z (1997-2012) stand out. Anthropologist Brian Solis notes,

“Gen Y and Z were born with digital in their DNA. While that may seem like a given, it is the very detail that separates them from their parents, teachers, businesses, governments, and any organization other than those already run by Gen Y and Z.”<sup>16</sup>

Gen Y and Z Internet users were the first to pioneer the idea that media technology could advance democratic participation worldwide. Lincoln

---

<sup>13</sup> Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Trotter and Christian Fuchs, *Social Media, Politics and the State: Protests, Revolutions, Riots, Crime and Policing in the Age of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 4.

<sup>15</sup> Lincoln Dahlberg, “Cyber-Libertarianism 2.0: A Discourse Theory/Critical Political Economy Examination,” *Cultural Politics and International Journal* 6, no. 3 (2010): 6, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174310X12750685679753>.

<sup>16</sup> Brian Solis, “New Digital Influencers: The Coming Youthquake,” *briansolis.com* (blog), May 14, 2013, accessed February 15, 2024, [www.briansolis.com/2013/05/new-digital-influencers-the-coming-youthquake](http://www.briansolis.com/2013/05/new-digital-influencers-the-coming-youthquake).

Dahlberg writes that this “enthusiasm comes from a surprisingly diverse array of political interests, ranging from government officials to anti-government libertarians.”<sup>17</sup>

Social media has been credited for enhancing people’s political awareness, broadcasting alternative streams of knowledge and news, and influencing people’s relationship with political institutions. Evidence suggests that citizens no longer content themselves with the mere consumption of media technologies; instead, they adopt, alter and harness media technologies to a greater extent than ever before to enhance their political agency, express themselves politically, and influence policymaking.<sup>18</sup> Interactive features such as commenting, liking, and sharing created a new form of political engagement and language of endorsement that is one click away as opposed to one ballot or one demonstration away.

Facebook posts, livestreams and tweets coming directly from protesters on the ground provide extremely rare and useful footage that would be otherwise difficult to obtain. For example, through Palestine’s wired civil society, local injustices rapidly became “national narrative[s] of outrage” in cyberspace.<sup>19</sup> Ericsson reported that in 2016, there were approximately 3.7 billion smartphone users globally. The number of smartphone users has doubled in 2024, recording a staggering 7.1 billion. By studying smartphone users’ data, we can approximate that over 7 billion citizens across the globe benefit from information and communication technologies (ICT) that can enhance democracies.<sup>20</sup> Thanks to these new

---

<sup>17</sup> Lincoln Dahlberg, “Re-Constructing Digital Democracy: An Outline of Four Positions,” *New Media & Society* 13, no. 6 (2011): 855, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810389569>.

<sup>18</sup> Glas René, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Joost Raessens, and Imar de Vries, *The Playful Citizen: Civic Engagement in a Mediatized Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Scott Wright, “Politics as Usual? Revolution, Normalization and a New Agenda for Online Deliberation” *New Media & Society* 14, no. 2 (2011): 244-261, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811410679>; Brian Loader and Dan Mercea, “Introduction. Networking Democracy? Social Media Innovations and Participatory Politics,” in *Networking Democracy?: Social media innovations and participatory politics*, special issue, *Information Communication and Society* 14, no. 6 (2011): 757-769, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2011.592648>; Andrew Chadwick, “Web 2.0: New Challenges for the Study of E-Democracy in an Era of Informational Exuberance,” *Journal of Law and Policy for the Information Society* 5, no. 1 (2009): 9-41, <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9006.003.0005>.



and pocketable devices, citizens can now document abuses and crises around the world.

While social media is hailed as the voice of the people, it has become a persistent source of anxiety for state authorities. Historically, measures like restricting Internet access and communication services have been implemented in conflict zones to disrupt mobilization efforts. Internet use is credited with the deconstruction of mainstream media and the mobilization of support for the Palestinian cause. It is on social media where scattered international energies come together to vociferously demand the ceasefire in Gaza and the human rights of Palestinian children, women and men.

The emergence of digital communication technologies and the proliferation of affordable social media platforms, such as Facebook, X, and YouTube, have profoundly affected politics and civil society, transforming civic activism, electoral debates and political participation as they were previously known. In addition, the newfound availability of information on the Internet resulted in the complete makeover of the international landscape for political commentary, rendering it “more fast-paced, more decentralized, and more open to new voices and social entrepreneurs than ever before.”<sup>21</sup>

Unsurprisingly, not all societies have adopted liberation technology to the same degree, if at all. In countries such as Russia, China and Iran, the freedom of cyberspace as an extension of the freedom of speech is restricted to maintain the state’s monopoly on information. Authoritarian governments traditionally target the foundational elements of political participation by imposing strict limitations on channels operated by political opponents, preventing citizens from organizing policy and advocacy groups.

Political participation includes a wide range of activities aimed at influencing the decision-making process of people’s governing. These activities include campaigning, deliberating, demonstrating, lobbying, voting, and other forms of participation at various levels of government or in other institutions. Citizens’ low political participation can be attributed to their lack of trust in public institutions, minimal interest in

---

<sup>21</sup> Larry Jay Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, *Liberation Technology: Social Media and the Struggle for Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), X.

politics, skepticism about how the government uses citizen input, and cynicism when politics do not represent the views of the broader community.<sup>22</sup> When democracy has a positive connotation “as something fun and engaging,” the likelihood of the masses’ political participation increases.<sup>23</sup> However, when democracy has a negative connotation as “an unpleasant civic chore,”<sup>24</sup> it becomes an exclusively professional endeavor.

In this research, gamification occurs at the intersection between technology and participatory politics, in societies where the public vetting of the political, economic and cultural subsystems occurs in the media sphere.<sup>25</sup> To ensure the subsystems’ survival, there is considerable pressure to appease the media logic.<sup>26</sup> In fact, some argue that the breadth of the media sphere is such that “social movements that do not make it into the media do not really exist.”<sup>27</sup> When pinpointing the paradigm shift that playful media brings, Gonzalo Frasca contends that this represents “the first complex simulational media for the masses.”<sup>28</sup>

The definitions of gamification are many, varied and ever-changing, to reflect the evolving nature of the phenomenon itself. Like the mythological hydra, when one definition becomes obsolete, another springs back to replace the outdated knowledge. Gamification is an umbrella term for “the use of game elements to improve user experience and user engagement in non-game contexts.”<sup>29</sup> Other definitions have been provided along the

---

<sup>22</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Josh Lerner, *Making Democracy Fun, How Game Design Can Empower Citizens and Transform Politics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 205.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Jens Seiffert-Brockmann and Howard Nothhaft, “The Gamification of Democracy. Computer Games as Strategic Communication Tools and Cultivating Forces,” in *Strategic Communication, Social Media and Democracy: The Challenge of the Digital Naturals*, eds. W. Timothy Coombs, Jesper Falkheimer, Mats Heide and Philip Young (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 130, DOI: 10.4324/9781315732411.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Mark Deuze, *Media Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Frasca, “Simulation versus Narrative,” 224.

<sup>29</sup> Sebastian Deterding, Rilla Khaled, Lennart Nacke and Dan Dixon, “Gamification: Toward a Definition,” Gamification Workshop Proceedings, May 7-12, 2011, Vancouver, BC, Canada, accessed May 10, 2024, <http://gamification-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/02-Deterding-Khaled-Nacke-Dixon.pdf>.

years to supplement its understanding. Gamification is “the process of adding games or game-like elements to something (e.g., a task) so as to encourage participation”<sup>30</sup> or the interplay of “role play, story, and agency.”<sup>31</sup> Gamification is a “democratic innovation,” which uses games as strategic communication mediums to enhance citizen participation in the political decision-making process.<sup>32</sup> This occurs when users believe in the voluntary pursuit of a non-trivial objective through a different behavioral approach than one under normal circumstances.<sup>33</sup>

In recent years, experts from various fields have begun to recognize the merits of games in politics. In political science, academics understand games as metaphors for political ideology and “methodological models for analyzing decisions.”<sup>34</sup> One such model is game theory, through which one can better understand the decisions that govern the interactions between competing actors.

Games are inherently democratic as they involve collective participation, decision-making and rules by design. In democracies, the decision-making process is crucial in the managing of national resources and appointing of leaders. In games, this is crucial in the managing of in-game resources and the pursuit of in-game goals.<sup>35</sup> Both democracies and games function based on a set of rules, which can be described as “internal formal structures that limit or dictate what a player [or citizen] can do.”<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “Gamification,” accessed May 18, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gamification>.

<sup>31</sup> Subhodeep Jash, “Civic Futures 2.0: The Gamification of Civic Engagement in Cities,” *The Promise of Public Interest Technology: In India and the United States*, New America (2019): 123, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19980.12>.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>33</sup> Richard N. Landers, Elena M. Auer, Andrew B. Collmus, and Michael B. Armstrong, “Gamification Science, Its History and Future: Definitions and a Research Agenda,” *Simulation & Gaming* 49 (May 21, 2018): 315-37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878118774385>.

<sup>34</sup> Josh Lerner, *Making Democracy Fun, How Game Design Can Empower Citizens and Transform Politics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 4.

<sup>35</sup> Greg Costikyan, “I Have No Words and I Must Design (Excerpts),” LABoral, January 26, 2024, accessed July 3, 2025, <https://laboralcentrodearte.org/en/publications/article/i-have-no-words-and-i-must-design-excerpts/>.

<sup>36</sup> Josh Lerner, *Making Democracy Fun, How Game Design Can Empower Citizens and Transform Politics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 61.

The multipurpose nature of games has been studied for a long time. Both Alan Gershenfeld, the Chairman of Games for Change and MacArthur Foundation, noted that games can enhance civic engagement.<sup>37</sup> Pioneering games like *Play Spent* and *Darfur is Dying* were among the first to use gameplay as a tool for raising humanitarian awareness. Through their stimuli, video games immerse players in a virtual world based on “challenges, sensory and imaginative levels” that reflect the current state of the world.<sup>38</sup>

The ascent of gamified politics did not happen in a vacuum, but in a “phase of history characterized so much by play that we can deem it a play world” or “ludic century.”<sup>39</sup> Play and playfulness are universal realities, inherent in both man and animal kind, with distinct roles in socialization and learning. Despite the omnipresence of play and playfulness in most cultures, this element did not become indispensable to everyday activities until the spread of new digital technologies and playful media culture in the 1960s. Since then, the influence of playful media on politics has increased citizens’ production of information and culture. Engagement with playful media and digital technologies provided new opportunities for citizens to act politically, as argued in the political socialization theory, which views games as socializing agents in the political participation process.<sup>40</sup>

In her research on the potential of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), Kristal Curry assessed games as third

---

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Kahne, Ellen Middaugh, and Joseph Kahne, *The Civic Potential of Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>38</sup> Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä, “Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience: Analysing Immersion,” *Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views: Worlds in Play* (2005), <https://doi.org/10.26503/dl.v2005i1.119>.

<sup>39</sup> James E. Combs, *Play World. The Emergence of the New Ludic Age* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000), 20; Eric Zimmerman, “Manifesto for a Ludic Century” in *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications*, eds. Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015), 19-22.

<sup>40</sup> Valerie Frissen, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Jos de Mul and Joost Raessens, *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015); Wan Ying Lin, Pauline Hope Cheong, Yong Chan Kim and Joo Young Jung, “Becoming Citizens: Youths’ Civic Uses of New Media in Five Digital Cities in East Asia,” *Journal of Adolescent Research* 25, no. 6 (2010): 839-857.

places for civic engagement, after classrooms, peer circles and communities.<sup>41</sup> In a digital world such as ours, the relevance of “imaginary spaces” and “imagined communities” is on the rise.<sup>42</sup> Nowadays, play and day-to-day life are “understood as inextricably intertwined” and epitomized in catchphrases like “work hard, play hard,” which give a sense of peoples’ outlook on life.<sup>43</sup>

John Hartley speaks about the emergence of “a silly citizenship” in the middle of a mediated political landscape saturated with playful media content. For one to engage in such politics, one must fulfil the following: (1) the rights prerequisite, (2) the informational prerequisite, (3) the digital literacy prerequisite.<sup>44</sup>

According to Jose P. Zagal, digital literacy entails having the ability to play games, to understand meanings with respect to games, and to make games.<sup>45</sup> Digital media scholar Alex Gekker considers that contemporary political participation is less about “fully fledged participation” and more about “the playful and casual types of engagement.”<sup>46</sup> Forms of political action apparent in playful digital media include boycotts, calls for mobilization, fundraisers, manifestos, petitions, strikes and others.

The rise in digital activism among younger generations can be explained through their casual acquaintance with political issues via social media. Instead of the rigid, top-down dissemination of information and practices,

---

<sup>41</sup> Kristal Curry, “Warcraft and Civic Education: MMORPGs as Participatory Cultures and How Teachers can Use Them to Improve Civic Education,” *The Social Studies* 101, no. 6 (2010): 250-253.

<sup>42</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London: Verso Books, 2013); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1983).

<sup>43</sup> Joost Raessens, “The Ludification of Culture,” in *Rethinking Gamification*, eds. Mathias Fuchs, Sonia Fizek and Paolo Ruffino (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2014), 91-114.

<sup>44</sup> John Hartley, “Silly Citizenship,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 7, no. 4 (2010): 233-48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2010.511826>; Joakim Ekman and Erik Amnå, “Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology,” *Human Affairs* 22, no. 3 (2012): 283-300, <https://doi.org/10.2478/s13374-012-0024-1>.

<sup>45</sup> Jose P. Zagal, *Ludoliteracy: Defining, Understanding, and Supporting Games Education* (Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press, 2010), 23.

<sup>46</sup> Glas René, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Joost Raessens, and Imar de Vries, *The Playful Citizen: Civic Engagement in a Mediatized Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019): 277.

Ingrid Hoofd claims that video games can raise awareness about civic and political issues in a more effective manner.<sup>47</sup> Video games are “microcosms of larger, socially oppressive, and unequal arrangements” that establish a rapport with political realities around the world and appeal to the Millennial and younger generations, who advocate for a more experimental and social approach to learning.<sup>48</sup> The digital activism of younger generations for political and humanitarian causes has become impossible to ignore. On the war on Gaza, political scientist Norman Finkelstein highlighted the younger generations’ interest in the humanitarian crisis, arguing that

“Gaza has become a metaphor for all the downtrodden people in the world, who are pushed around and beaten by this horrible, heartless system. A lot of the support from young people comes from a kind of instinctive identification with the underdog. When you hear about mass famine, half the people are younger than you. It’s the same heartless system which refuses to give your generation your future.”<sup>49</sup>

In similar fashion, Eric Gordon and Stephen Walter argue that the “meaningful inefficiency” found in play facilitates participatory action as it opens a way of “expanding technological civic systems to accommodate more than just the «good user» of systems, but also the marginalized, the emergent, and the playful.”<sup>50</sup> Games like *Roblox* have become important nuclei of digital activism for those who would otherwise be politically inactive. In 2021, Malaysian gamers took over *Roblox* in staggering numbers to demonstrate their support for Palestine. Two years later, it was recorded that Roblox players, half of which were twelve years old or younger,

---

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 142.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 152; Diana Oblinger and James L. Oblinger, “Is it Age or IT: First Steps Toward Understanding the Next Generation” in *Educating the Net Generation*, eds. Diana G. Oblinger and James L. Oblinger (n.p.: Educause, 2005).

<sup>49</sup> TikTok, @gucci\_pineapple, “Norman Finkelstein on why Gen Z overwhelmingly supports liberation,” March 29, 2024, accessed June 8, 2024, <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGeQS6e2V/>.

<sup>50</sup> Glas René, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Joost Raessens, and Imar de Vries, *The Playful Citizen: Civic Engagement in a Mediatized Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019): 276.

hosted virtual protests with an attendance of over 275,000.<sup>51</sup> While several studies have been made about *Roblox*, its role in teaching youth about natural selection, and consumerist culture, its impact on research in basic and in higher education, little to no attention has been paid to its role in generating political activism in three dimensional environments.<sup>52</sup>

Gekker proposes the notion of “casual politicking” to define citizens’ enticement to participate in playful politics. As in all games, sociability is the driving force of casual politicking, and all proponents of casual politicking exhibit “the tendency to orchestrate political action as social and collaborative.”<sup>53</sup> While collaborative actions may lack in centralization or hierarchization, these compensate in reactivity and prowess.

The spread of information and communication technologies (ICT) fostered a “culture of convergence” made up of “connective actions” and networks.<sup>54</sup> Within this framework, digital activism itself constitutes a form of “connective action.”<sup>55</sup> The repetition of “connective actions” can lead to the construction of virtual “trust communities.”<sup>56</sup> This is evident in

---

<sup>51</sup> Al Jazeera, “Gamers Are Attending Pro-Palestine Protests on Roblox | AJ #shorts,” *YouTube*, October 27, 2023, accessed June 8, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZq7mhS6DS4>; Hayden Field, “Kids Are Attending Pro-Palestinian Protests on Roblox,” *CNBC*, October 26, 2023, accessed June 8, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/26/kids-are-attending-pro-palestinian-protests-on-roblox.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Aishat Balogun and Amber Dehner, “Using Roblox to Explore Natural Selection,” *Journal of Technology-Integrated Lessons and Teaching* 3, (2024): 65-72, <https://doi.org/10.13001/jt.ilt.v3i1.8483>; Gemma Blackwood, “Roblox and Meta Verch: A Case Study of Walmart’s Roblox Games,” *M/C Journal* 26, no. 3 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2958>; Sumin Hong, Taeyeon Eom and Juyoung Park, “Exploratory Study on the Learning Activities Data in Virtual Worlds Through a Scoping Literature Review: Focusing on Roblox,” June 30, 2024, accessed July 15, 2024, 861-884, <https://doi.org/10.15833/KAFEIAM.30.3.861>; Khaled Alhasan, Khawla Alhasan and Sama'a Al Hashimi, “Roblox in Higher Education: Opportunities, Challenges, and Future Directions for Multimedia Learning,” *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning* 18, no. 19 (2023): 32-46, <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v18i19.43133>.

<sup>53</sup> Glas René, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Joost Raessens, and Imar de Vries, *The Playful Citizen: Civic Engagement in a Mediatized Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019): 403.

<sup>54</sup> Gianluca Sgueto, *Technology, Innovation and Access to Justice: Dialogues on the Future of Law, Gamified Digital Advocacy and the Future of Law* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 166.

<sup>55</sup> Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>56</sup> Irene Wu, *Forging Trust Communities: How Technology Changes Politics* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2015).

bottom-up activist campaigns with a significant social media presence, such as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter and the Free Palestine Movement.

### Case Description

The Free Palestine Movement makes for a compelling case study, shining a spotlight on the emerging trends of digital mobilization and gamified political participation. The high engagement with the studied TikTok filter points toward an increased level of trust in its ability to generate impact.

When studying the benefits of gamification inside the movement, several examples spring to mind. For one, weaving game elements, such as points, rankings and rewards, into democratic activities renders political participation more enjoyable. The TikTok filters in support of the civilians in Gaza blend the humorous with the humanitarian in the sense that each competitive tap, each gleeful gameplay translates into a donation for the people caught in the crossfire.<sup>57</sup> Substantial evidence here suggests that gamification can pose a solution to the democratic problem of political absenteeism.<sup>58</sup> Play can teach attitudes and skills necessary for democratic participation, such as cooperation, negotiation, persuasion and strategizing.

According to Gianluca Sgueo, the elements that are indispensable in a gamified system are the players, their interaction, the environment, its rules, its challenges, its goals, the measurable outcomes, the negotiable consequences, and the emotional experience.<sup>59</sup> In this literature, the term *player* is interchangeable with *user* or *netizen*. When collecting in-game watermelons – a symbol closely associated with the Palestinian cause – users strive to inform on the plight of Gazans, raise money, and

---

<sup>57</sup> Jash, “Civic Futures 2.0.”

<sup>58</sup> Yu-Shan Tseng, “Rethinking Gamified Democracy as Frictional: A Comparative Examination of the Decide Madrid and vTaiwan Platforms,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 24, no. 8 (2023): 1324-1341, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2022.2055779>.

<sup>59</sup> Gianluca Sgueo, *Technology, Innovation and Access to Justice: Dialogues on the Future of Law, Gamified Digital Advocacy and the Future of Law* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 164.



network.<sup>60</sup> This experience alone evokes a complex mix of emotions, including camaraderie, compassion, and a sense of collective purpose. In the face of the conflict, the filter's game mechanics mitigate users' feelings of helplessness.

The transfer of political participation to the digital space opened new forms of social organization. When looking at the pro-Palestine protests, we see that "Twitter and other virtual technologies have [not] led to a disembodiment of the public sphere," but rather to its expansion to cyberspace and other networked media.<sup>61</sup> This expansion theory is supported by the language associated with Internet use (e.g., "to go to a website," or "to get on the Internet") that "implies a certain spatiality" and the resultant activist networks made up of netizens.<sup>62</sup>

In fact, "network-based forms of social movement organization are nothing new."<sup>63</sup> Since the Arab Spring, the world has come to witness the full revolt-stirring potential of social media unfold in the pro-Palestine protests. While Western mainstream media offered limited coverage of human rights violations in Gaza, social media users provided minute-by-minute updates of the on-the-ground situation. When representing South Africa's case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), Irish lawyer Blinne Ní Ghrálaigh expressed that the war on Gaza was:

"[The] first genocide in history where its victims are broadcasting their own destruction in real time in the desperate, so far vain hope that the world might do something."<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Sgueo, *Technology, Innovation and Access to Justice*, 172.

<sup>61</sup> Judith Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," *Transversal: A Multilingual Web Journal*, 2011, accessed April 13, 2025, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>; Eric Zimmerman, "Manifesto for a Ludic Century," 19-22.

<sup>62</sup> Mark Graham, "Geography/Internet: Ethereal Alternate Dimensions of Cyberspace or Grounded Augmented Realities?," *The Geographical Journal* 179, no. 2 (2013): 179, <https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12009>.

<sup>63</sup> Jeffrey S. Juris, "Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: Social Media, Public Space, and Emerging Logics of Aggregation," *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 2 (May 2012): 259-279, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2012.01362.x>.

<sup>64</sup> Adrienne Varkiani, "The Five Most Powerful Moments in the Hague's Israel Genocide Case," *The New Republic*, February 5, 2024, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://newrepublic.com/post/178024/five-powerful-lines-israel-genocide-case-hague-south-africa-gaza>.

Adila Hassim, another lawyer representing South Africa's case, developed on this, saying that:

"[Genocides] are never declared in advance, but this court [had] the benefit of the past thirteen weeks of evidence that shows incontrovertibly a pattern of conduct and related intention that justifies a plausible claim of genocidal acts."<sup>65</sup>

Social media's omnipresence has shifted news consumption habits, with people now relying more on platforms to receive their news than on mainstream media, which was previously considered to have an edge. Unlike mainstream media, which communicates through specific channels, the user-generated information avalanche is impossible to rein to a single outlet, often circumventing official communication channels and censorship. Social media has maximized people's receptivity to ongoing events in the same vein as public and private telecommunications channels. While official telecommunications channels maintain a distance from the broadcasted subjects, social media has changed the relational dimension between the movement and its observers. Engagement with any social media platform entails engagement with what Fuchs calls "a participatory culture."<sup>66</sup> By using unifying language, such as "we the people," social media prompts the spread of protests to other countries where individuals have similar grievances, similar political goals and "a [similar] sense of justice."<sup>67</sup>

Another advantage of the gamification of political participation is its affordability and efficiency in mobilization. Gamification lowers the barrier to activism by cutting transportation costs entirely, replacing them with the minimal expense of an Internet plan. The ascent of digital political participation led to the reconsideration of activists' non-physical presence, previously perceived as a weakness, into a strength. Thanks to

---

<sup>65</sup> Varkiani, "The Five Most Powerful Moments."

<sup>66</sup> Mathias Fuchs, Sonia Fizek, Paolo Ruffino and Niklas Schrape, *Rethinking Gamification* (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2014).

<sup>67</sup> Noelle Aarts, "Castells, Manuel (2012). *Networks of outrage and hope – social movements in the Internet age*," book review, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 25, no. 3 (Autumn 2013): 398-402, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edt020>.

peer-to-peer connectivity, digital activists can spread information from their on-the-ground counterparts at an incredible speed, circumventing firewalls, police brutality, and the limitations of in person protesting.<sup>68</sup> In addition, the permanence of the message is higher in cyberspace due to the decreased likelihood of message loss. There is a greater trust in the digital mobilization environment and policing system as the chances of power abuse and the physical dangers associated with in person protests are lower. This advantage is diminished by the risks tied to exposing personal information. The more one engages with social networking sites, the more information they must provide to customize their experience and establish credibility online.

When discussing gamification's downsides in this context, accessibility, specifically digital literacy, persists as the key hurdle. Digital literacy involves:

"abilities to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies, and competencies to interpret the multiple meanings and messages generated by media texts."<sup>69</sup>

Factors such as age, background, political awareness, Internet access and geographical location continue to hinder digital mobilization efforts.

Conversely, not all digital mobilization efforts translate into tangible change. High engagement levels may have limited impact. Scholars warn that initiatives such as *Click to Help a Cause* and *Help the Palestinian People with a Click* can manipulate people into a false sense of political participation, dubbed "slacktivism" or "clicktivism."<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, gamified political participation may not solve the overall problem of political disengagement. Gamification can incentivize political participation only among certain demographic cohorts, who tend to be more digitally deft,

---

<sup>68</sup> Glas René, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Joost Raessens, and Imar de Vries, *The Playful Citizen: Civic Engagement in a Mediatized Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019): 381.

<sup>69</sup> Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, Name of the publication 26, no. 3 (2005): 372.

<sup>70</sup> Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011); Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

risking uneven or exclusionary participation. Despite their high speed, digital technologies may still lack in their wide reach due to algorithm biases. The algorithm is a system that filters, selects, and recommends content to users depending on their preferences, previous content consumption, and personal information. In this sense, someone unlikely to seek out content on Palestine would have had a lower probability to engage with the fundraising filters.

Last, skepticism toward the role of technology in politics has been long acknowledged in the scientific community. An inquiry into its impact raises more questions than it can answer. This quandary is exacerbated when public figures, including President Trump, single out social media as a disinformation avenue. Recent international developments have proven that the trivialization of the role of technology can stifle open and scholarly conversations about a new genre of political expression that is on the rise, neglecting knowledge that would otherwise prove valuable to the discourse. People worldwide are repurposing games, and information and communication technologies (ICT) to evoke alternative meanings to the extent that the convergence between digital technologies and democracy prompted people to rethink what political participation is. Had democratic freedom not been available in cyberspace on such a scale, the actualization of citizens' rights through digital means would not have been possible, nor citizens' new understanding of their rights in relation to media technologies.<sup>71</sup>

The Internet's transformation into a hotbed for active and open debates raises questions about its capacity for political emancipation.<sup>72</sup> The digitalization of democracy has made it possible for individuals to connect based on collective concerns and exert collective actions on collective issues, including censorship and the limitation of basic freedoms. Censorship is one of the many deterrents to achieving political trust. In the broadest sense, this refers to the trust that citizens place in the political institutions of a country. The final evaluation

---

<sup>71</sup> Hartley, "Silly Citizenship;" Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, "Alternative Citizenship Models: Contextualising New Media and the New «Good Citizen»" *New Media & Society* 19, no. 11 (2017): 1890, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817713742>.

<sup>72</sup> Aidan Ricketts, *The Activists' Handbook: A Step-by-Step Guide to Participatory Democracy* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 155.

should be positive enough to secure the citizens' trust, legitimize the government and ensure a functioning democratic society.

In the context of the latest escalation of the Israeli – Palestinian conflict, Israel's clamp down on Al Jazeera for its alleged connection to Hamas highlights the growing tensions between press freedom and national security narratives.<sup>73</sup> Outside of Israel, pro-Palestine figures, such as Dr. Ghassan Abu Sitta and former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis face international bans for their stance on the conflict.<sup>74</sup>

At the forefront of the world's counter-response to the war on truth stand generations of digital natives, who seek to reflect on the information media they are expected to engage with.<sup>75</sup> In an increasingly digital world such as ours, the overspill of politics into every area of life has reiterated the importance of questioning, dismantling, and mobilizing the masses against systems of oppression and their tactics. These transgressions of the freedom of press and freedom of expression are not only a threat to the democratic values of the world, but a threat to humanity itself.

A new type of engagement with the truth has emerged. Society's new political task is

“to criticize the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent, to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence that has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them.”<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> Lauren Said-Moorhouse, “Israel Orders Shut down of Al Jazeera in the Country, Seizes Equipment in ‘Dark Day for Democracy’,” *CNN*, May 6, 2024, accessed July 1, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/05/05/middleeast/israel-al-jazeera-closure-intl/index.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Twitter, @GhassanAbuSitt1, “I am at Charles De Gaulle airport,” May 4, 2024, accessed August 10, 2024, <https://twitter.com/GhassanAbuSitt1/status/1786673587673239605>; Democracy Now!, “Yanis Varoufakis Banned from Germany as Berlin Police Raid & Shut down Palestinian Conference,” April 16, 2024, accessed August 10, 2024, [https://www.democracynow.org/2024/4/16/germany\\_palestine](https://www.democracynow.org/2024/4/16/germany_palestine).

<sup>75</sup> Lincoln Dahlberg, “Cyber-Libertarianism 2.0: A Discourse Theory/Critical Political Economy Examination,” *Cultural Politics* 6, no. 3 (2010): 331-356, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174310X12750685679753>.

<sup>76</sup> Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate: On Human Nature* (New York: New Press, 2006).

Digital natives appear to have internalized this very message and seized the mantle of the fight for political change. One TikTok user states that “Gen Z’s fervor and [no nonsense attitude] are showing older generations how to be bold.”<sup>77</sup> Social media has become instrumental in digital mobilization, an emerging phenomenon that treats technology as a toolkit for the mobilization of individuals around key issues. Since October 2023, student demonstrations, whether offline or online, marching or seated, silent or loud, spread to campuses, lecture halls and other buildings in North America and Europe, demanding their universities’ disassociation with Israeli settler companies, and the cessation of all hostilities in Gaza.

In the fight against the war on truth, the new-found transparency in amateur content has made possible the identification of information inconsistencies and language biases in headlines, such as “Gaza doctor dies in Israeli prison.”<sup>78</sup> The mobilization power of social media is in part owed to the algorithm, which provides personalized content across technologies.<sup>79</sup> Jodi Dean raises the importance of digital networks as “affective network(s), eliciting feelings of community” that facilitate the creation of mediated relationships:

“Affect [...] is what accrues from reflexive communication, from communication for its own sake, from the endless circular movement of commenting, adding notes and links, bringing in new friends and followers, layering and interconnecting myriad communications platforms and devices [...]. Every little tweet or comment, every forwarded image or petition, accrues a tiny affective nugget, a little surplus enjoyment, a smidgen of attention that attaches to it, making it stand out from the larger flow before it blends back in.”<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> TikTok, @cmondawgtightenup. “Stitch with iCronicUsername...,” May 1, 2024, accessed June 10, 2024, <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGeQU3exP/>.

<sup>78</sup> Al Jazeera, “Doctor from Gaza’s al-Shifa Hospital,” May 5, 2024, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/5/3/doctor-from-gazas-al-shifa-hospital-dies-in-israeli-prison>.

<sup>79</sup> Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>80</sup> Glas René, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Joost Raessens, and Imar de Vries, *The Playful Citizen: Civic Engagement in a Mediatized Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019): 377; Jodi Dean, “Affective Networks,” *Media Tropes eJournal* 2, no. 2 (2010): 21.

Displays of support for Gazans have become a quintessential part of the movement, permeating the digital space from advertisements to students' graduation videos.<sup>81</sup> Visual evidence and recordings of the casualties in Gaza signal a new era of information communication transparency. Due to the extent of mobilization on social networking sites and other media, governmental bodies around the world were startled into action.

In April 2024, the U.S. Congress propelled into the public eye the issue of data privacy and security. Amid the escalation of tensions between the United States and China, and the rise in concerns that Chinese platforms could be used to monitor and manipulate American citizens, the U.S. Congress passed legislation to ban or force the sale of the Chinese-owned application TikTok. While this action may seem surprising, it is not unprecedented. Four years earlier, U.S. President Donald Trump issued an executive order to ban TikTok if its parent company, ByteDance, did not sell it within forty-five days. Unlike present times, the order did not pass the federal courts on grounds that the government did not provide enough evidence of the application's threat to national security. Moreover, during a CNBC interview in March 2024, President Trump changed his position on banning TikTok, arguing that banning it would only strengthen Facebook – “the enemy of the people.”<sup>82</sup>

The duress under which TikTok is placed makes us question its origins, its implications and the alleged threat it poses. Despite U.S. lawmakers' concerns, ByteDance, TikTok's parent company, has consistently stated that it has never shared data of U.S. users with Chinese authorities. In response, U.S. lawmakers argued that under Chinese law the company could be obligated to provide information to its government.

Over the years, TikTok has attracted mixed opinions regarding its role as digital content curator and platform for dissenting voices. By puncturing TikTok's reputation with data privacy leak allegations, the

---

<sup>81</sup> Twitter, @OnlinePalEng. “Palestine is present...,” May 4, 2024, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://twitter.com/OnlinePalEng/status/178683273192348067>.

<sup>82</sup> Chris Vallance, “TikTok: Donald Trump Joins App Despite Past Criticism,” BBC News, June 3, 2024, accessed July 8, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cyjj08vvz43o>.

U.S. Congress thought that the American public would be persuaded to renounce their TikTok membership. The opposite happened as the measure seemed to only strengthen people's conviction that the U.S. government recognizes the revolt stirring potential in TikTok and is intent on banning it for its threat to destabilize the status quo. The conviction that TikTok has the power to interrogate information, deconstruct national narratives, and make the population less controllable is found in over half of the surveyed subjects' opinions. Many users perceive this measure as an attempt to undermine trust in political discourse on social media and discourage digital activism. As exemplified earlier, this vilification is not a novelty.<sup>83</sup>

In a past statement, Jonathan Greenblatt, the director of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), commented that TikTok "is the 24/7 news channel of so many of our young people, [...] amplifying and intensifying antisemitism and anti-Zion[ism] with no repercussions."<sup>84</sup> In the same recording, Greenblatt talked about the generational problem in the public opinion polls:

"Independent polling suggests that this is not a left or right gap. The issue of the United States' support for Israel is young and old. These are numbers of young people who think that Hamas' massacre was justified. [It] is shockingly and terrifyingly high, so we really have a TikTok problem, a Gen Z problem. We've been chasing this left-right divide [and] it's the wrong game."<sup>85</sup>

Last, he observed "a dramatic change in the language of the activists in America on October 8, 2023, the language of groups that have long been problematic like *Students for Justice in Palestine* and *Jewish Voices for Peace*, likening it to Iranian propaganda."<sup>86</sup> In this line, several netizens have

---

<sup>83</sup> Twitter, @AustenMarieTV, "I don't care if you use TikTok or not...", March 13, 2024, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://twitter.com/AustenMarieTV/status/1767936901712097389>.

<sup>84</sup> Twitter, @HotSpotHotSpot, "We have a major TikTok problem...", March 13, 2024, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://twitter.com/HotSpotHotSpot/status/1768011079785894144>.

<sup>85</sup> TikTok, @masavenya2000, "Tehran Times leaks a confidential recording," November 14, 2023, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://www.tiktok.com/@masavenya2000/video/7301404868886023457>.

<sup>86</sup> Twitter, @expatvibes, "ADL (Anti-Defamation League) Director Jonathan Greenblatt...", November 16, 2023, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://twitter.com/expatvibes/status/1725269484565381215>.



expressed their belief that the TikTok ban is not for security purposes, but another aspect of the war on truth:

“This isn’t about TikTok,” a user comments, “it’s about censorship. TikTok has become incredibly effective in educating the public on topics main news outlets won’t even cover. It’s an accessible way for people to share crucial information in a digestible format. They want to censor that.”<sup>87</sup>

Another user agrees:

“The TikTok ban is not about national security. It’s about closing a channel that the Deep State can’t control, because it isn’t owned by one of their big tech puppets. You find truth on TikTok that has long been banned on Facebook and Google. That’s why it has to go and X is next.”<sup>88</sup>

The consensus from social media users is that the ban on TikTok has been in the talks for years, “but [authorities] only actually got the support together for a ban once people started using it to talk about what’s happening in Gaza.”<sup>89</sup> Even if people do not care for TikTok, users believe they should care about this ban because of its infringement of free speech by “using Red Scare logic.”<sup>90</sup>

Users believe that, instead of passing this ban bill, the Congress could propose “an actual American data privacy bill that protects user data.”<sup>91</sup> However, the prevailing view is that this crackdown stems from TikTok hosting ten times more pro-Palestinian content than pro-Israel

---

<sup>87</sup> Twitter, @Lex\_cat11, “This isn’t about TikTok...,” March 13, 2024, accessed June 10, 2024, [https://twitter.com/Lex\\_cat11/status/1767929202752323942](https://twitter.com/Lex_cat11/status/1767929202752323942).

<sup>88</sup> Twitter, @KimDotcom, “The TikTok ban is not about national security...,” March 14, 2024, accessed June 10, 2024, <https://twitter.com/KimDotcom/status/1768047651701096777>.

<sup>89</sup> Twitter, @pblest, “They’ve been talking about banning...,” March 13, 2024, accessed June 10, 2024, <https://twitter.com/pblest/status/1767928073192640817>.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Twitter, @MaceAhWindu, “The fact that they won’t try...,” March 13, 2024, accessed June 10, 2024, <https://twitter.com/MaceAhWindu/status/1767947510952210862>.

material. By banning TikTok, the U.S. Congress could establish a precedent that would enable them to ban “all websites and apps that they see as a threat in the future.”<sup>92</sup>

## Results

In this research, data was collected through two methods: game analytics and social media mining. *Game analytics* refers to the process of “extracting and examining data from games, users of games and game companies” for the purpose of “tracking and measuring behavior[s] and interaction[s].”<sup>93</sup> *Social media mining* is the process of collecting information from social media sites, “including posts, comments, likes, images and tweets” for the purpose of studying attitudes and behavior patterns pertaining to the topic of interest.<sup>94</sup>

Extracting words as relevant data requires human intervention to be understood. Dictionary or lexicon-based approaches to textual analysis rely on identifying specific words as being positive or negative, and calculating the message of a text based on those scores. With the help of precompiled opinion lexicons, such as Minqing Hu and Bing Liu’s, the author achieved the qualitative interpretation of the 200 comments from TikTok and X.<sup>95</sup> Words such as “advocate,” “empowers,” and “peace” count as positive, while words such as “attack,” “betrays,” and “condemns” count as negative. Comments with more positive than negative words are treated as positive, while comments with more negative words than positive are treated as negative. This research does not consider neutral comments, where negative and positive words cancel one another out or do not contain indicative words. The 200 users were chosen based on the criteria of their belonging to the Anglophone digital space and

---

<sup>92</sup> Twitter, @jakeshieldsajj, “TikTok has 10 times more pro-Palestinian...,” March 13, 2024, accessed June 10, 2024, <https://twitter.com/jakeshieldsajj/status/1768005667980542417>.

<sup>93</sup> Dawson, *A-Z of Digital Research Methods*, 133.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Minqing Hu and Bing Liu, “Mining and Summarising Customer Reviews,” *Proceedings of the ACM SIGKDD International Conference on Knowledge Discovery and Data Mining (KDD-2004)*, August 22-25, 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1145/1014052.1014073>.

popularity of their comments, measured in likes under posts and videos that touched on the war in Gaza, the TikTok fundraising filter for the civilians in Gaza, and the TikTok ban bill.<sup>96</sup>

Out of the 200 Internet users, a staggering 165 across TikTok and X have used negative words to indicate their mistrust in the U.S. government regarding the bill that bans TikTok due to national security concerns. Out of 200 users, 165 believe that the TikTok ban is driven not by concerns about data privacy, but rather by the platform's growing support for Palestine, its reduced backing for Israel and the U.S. government's intent to curb users' free speech. Users consider that social networking sites are platforms that enable free political expression and participation.

According to game analytics, the filter was used over 12.2 million times as of August 28, 2024. The creator of the filter announced on November 16, 2023, that after over 5 million uses, the filter had reached its maximum reward of \$14,000.00.<sup>97</sup> It is unknown whether revenue continued to be collected after November 16. The total sum was donated to the people of Gaza through international non-governmental organizations, such as *Doctors Without Borders* and *Connecting Humanity* (also known as *eSims for Gaza*). These results achieved through gamified political participation are on par with those of the Red Cross, Islamic Relief Worldwide, and Save the Children.

According to the analysis of the 200 comments, more than half of the users engaged with pro-Palestine content on the premise that "a click," "a gameplay," or "a minute" is all that is required for a good act. The remaining thirty-five users on TikTok and X expressed their approval of the TikTok ban bill, citing their trust in the government's decision and mistrust in the application's management of their data and pro-Palestine content.

The research sample and their responses point to multiple trends. First, we identify citizens' higher degree of trust in social networking sites as platforms for unhindered political expression and a lower

---

<sup>96</sup> TikTok, @noahglennccarter, "People are using [this filter] to help the people of Gaza," November 9, 2023, accessed June 10, 2024, <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGeUP3t2q/>.

<sup>97</sup> TikTok, @xojourdanlouise, "Filter For Good I Donations Update!," December 15, 2023, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGeUPtBms/>.

degree of trust in state authorities' receptivity to citizens' political opinions. We do not know the impact that the TikTok ban bill has had on this trend, but we assume that it is significant. Moreover, the high levels of distrust among respondents regarding the U.S. government's reason for banning TikTok points to perceived ulterior motives. The general belief among users is that, instead of prioritizing "raising the minimum wage, lowering healthcare, housing and childcare costs"<sup>98</sup> or safeguarding citizens' "freedoms while [people] work [a minimum wage job to] survive a forty-year high inflation, while witnessing a genocide on a planet that's burning," the U.S. Congress prioritizes the infringement of its citizens' free speech.<sup>99</sup> In short, respondents believe that citizens' freedom of expression on the digital space is trampled under the guise of state paternalism.

Second, the analysis reveals respondents' strong attraction to gamified political participation. Their justifications, drawn from comment data, cluster around four key *Es*: easier access, more efficient, entertaining and engaging, translating into instant reward redolent of "feel good activism," and connecting users into an affective network of like-minded people. These findings validate earlier scholars' theories on gamification and game studies, which we have previously used as springboards in our research.

Third, digital activist efforts for a free Palestine are not alienated from the on the ground activist efforts. On the contrary, these exist in mutual complementarity, enhancing each other's prowess through mutual support. The digital efforts help raise awareness, mobilize support, and amplify the messages of those working directly on the ground, creating a synergistic relationship between the two.

---

<sup>98</sup> TikTok, @ninaturner, "The House of Representatives just passed a bill that could ban TikTok. Not raising the minimum wage. Not lowering healthcare costs. Not lowering housing costs," March 13, 2024, accessed June 10, 2024, <https://twitter.com/ninaturner/status/1767920972592493017>.

<sup>99</sup> Twitter, @ThiaBallerina, "The American gvmnt will protect you from TikTok...", March 13, 2024, accessed June 10, 2024, <https://twitter.com/ThiaBallerina/status/1767912213455773780>.

## Conclusion

Over the last decade, concern about the impact of digital technologies on democracy has increased exponentially. Research has proven that the breadth of the Internet's influence on political opinion-making has never loomed larger. The spread of affordable Internet and related technologies has produced profound social, political and economic change, perhaps to the same extent as the invention of the printing press.<sup>100</sup>

In the context of the Free Palestine Movement, we can catalogue several salient examples of gamified political participation. On TikTok, "Filter for Good," a game which uses watermelon imagery, a symbol closely associated with the Palestinian cause, was able to generate \$14,000 for humanitarian relief in Gaza in record time. Beyond its fundraising success, the ludic framing of political action achieved three distinct outcomes: (1) the increase of visibility of human rights violations in Gaza; (2) the emergence of a platform-mediated Palestinian solidarity movement; (3) the promotion of knowledge and narratives on Palestine outside dominant media.

The last outcome ties into the second part of this research, which addresses the public discourse on the TikTok ban (Figure 4) and users' interpretation of this restriction as an attempt to suppress freedom of speech rather than protect user privacy. As demonstrated, gamified processes do not attract passive or unknowledgeable users in the digital space, but users who actively engage in and shape participatory culture to raise funds for the people in Gaza, profess their support for Palestine on digital platforms and promote alternative streams of knowledge on the Israeli – Palestinian conflict.

The participatory nature of games has made possible the transfer of political wills into cyberspace. The extent of this transfer differs from game to game as each game differs in scope, format and freedom. We note that the integration of democratic expression in digital platforms and game features – like interactive speech systems, levels, rewards, and friendship requests – occurs to raise awareness on human rights issues and create an alternative to in-person advocacy.

---

<sup>100</sup> Timothy Coombs, Jesper Falkheimer, Mats Heide and Philip Young, *Strategic Communication, Social Media and Democracy: The Challenge of the Digital Naturals* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 1.

The findings of this study validate the status of TikTok as a conduit for the gamification of users' political participation in the Free Palestine Movement. By political participation, we understand actions that include political expression, political fundraising, politically motivated boycotting and others. Contemporary research supports our findings that digital technologies, particularly social networking sites, can enhance the success of fundraising campaigns for social and political issues.<sup>101</sup> The interweaving of digital technologies and game-based elements for the achievement of social change is still unfolding and new information about this phenomenon comes to surface every year.

At the beginning of this research paper, the author expressed the intent to define what gamification is and explain how it manifests in the pro-Palestine movement. Using the corpus of academic literature, game analytics, and social media mining techniques, we have learned what gamification is and how it became an important feature in the mobilization for the Palestinian cause. In relation to the TikTok ban, we have learned that users place a higher trust in social networking sites for their unrestricted freedom of expression.

For the sake of symmetry and in keeping the prophetic tone of this research paper's introduction, which debuted with Manuel Castells' prediction, digital media scholar Alex Gekker asserts that the future of democracy is in *gamocracy*, a form of political organization based on "modes of engagement so characteristic of games and their audiences."<sup>102</sup> Is this to say that we can expect to see more of the blend between playfulness and politics, MMORPG and protests, idle clicking and casual democratic participation?

One thing is certain – "TikTok is causing people to participate in Democracy and the government is not having it."<sup>103</sup> Political participation, as we once knew it, is past the precipice of change.

---

<sup>101</sup> Helen Flannery, Rob Harris and Carol Rhine, "2008: DonorCentrics™ Internet Giving Benchmarking Analysis," Blackbaud, 2009.

<sup>102</sup> Glas René, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Joost Raessens, and Imar de Vries, *The Playful Citizen: Civic Engagement in a Mediatized Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019): 377; Jodi Dean, "Affective Networks," *Media Tropes eJournal* 2, no. 2 (2010): 410.

<sup>103</sup> Twitter, @LisaA311, "TikTok is causing people to participate in Democracy and the government is not having it," March 13, 2024, accessed June 10, 2024, <https://twitter.com/LisaA311/status/1767986435464823049>.

Appendix

Table 1

Advantages and disadvantages

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Gamification can make political participation more affordable, efficient and enjoyable.	Digital literacy requirements may inadvertently exclude certain demographic cohorts.
Gamification can enhance political participation under a veneer of gamefulness.	Age, background, political education, Internet access, and geographical location may hinder gamified efforts.
Gamification can teach attitudes and skills necessary for democratic participation.	Gamification can manipulate people into a false sense of political participation (e.g., clicktivism, slacktivism).
Gamification can provide governments with new means of communication with their citizens.	Gamification might not translate into tangible changes.
Gamification can increase citizens' trust in the digital mobilization environment and policing system.	Gamification might not solve the overall problem of political disengagement.

Source: Silvia-Diana Schechter (2025)

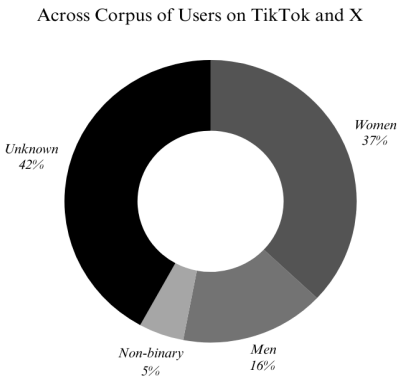
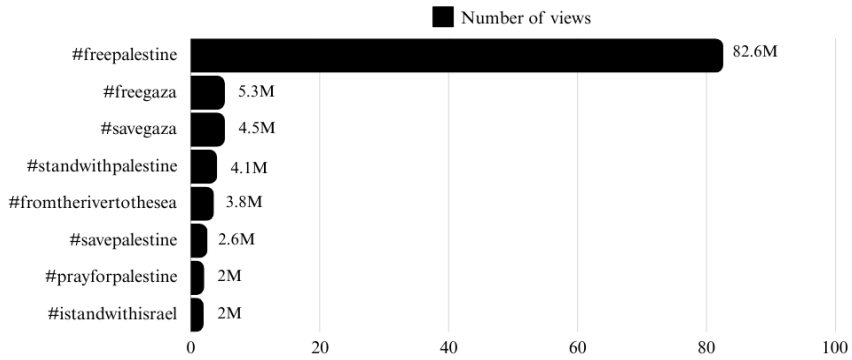


Figure 1. Gender Distribution (Source: Silvia-Diana Schechter, 2025)

### TikTok Hashtags, December 2023



Number of U.S. views on top Palestine-related TikTok hashtags  
between December 15th and December 22nd, 2023

Figure 2. U.S. views on top opinionated Israel-Hamas (Source: Silvia-Diana Schechter, 2025)

### Distribution of TikTok Users Worldwide Age and Gender, July 2024

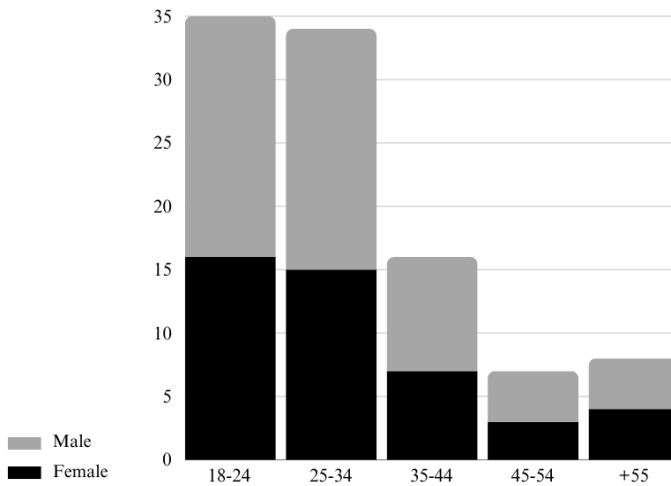


Figure 3. Distribution of TikTok Users Worldwide (Source: Silvia-Diana Schechter, 2025)



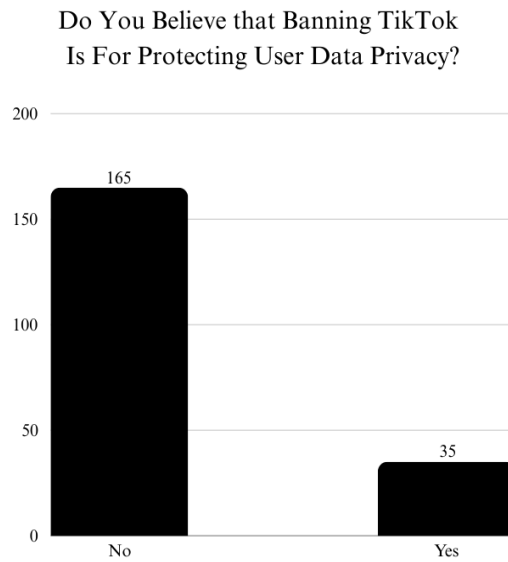


Figure 4. Banning TikTok (Source: Silvia-Diana Schechter, 2025)