"You know what that tastes like? Like a company that doesn't support genocide:" Thematic analysis of TikTok users' boycott of Starbucks Coffee during the Israel-Hamas conflict

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Suggested Citation:
Haislett, R. L., & Lancaster, A. L. (2025). "You know what that tastes like? Like a company that doesn't support genocide:" Thematic analysis of TikTok users' boycott of Starbucks Coffee during the Israel-Hamas conflict. *Utah Journal of Communication, 3*(1), 34-40. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15312571

Abstract
As the Israel-Hamas conflict raged in the Gaza Strip, the world saw numbers of individuals and corporations offer competing support to the two sides. As the conflict spanned over a year, more individuals took to social media to spread messages decrying the war and the companies that were identified as purportedly supporting Israel. In this study, we conducted a thematic analysis of boycott messages targeting Starbucks on TikTok, examining how protesters crafted content to persuade viewers to join the campaign against the coffee giant. The results of our analysis indicated a creation of messages rooted in rhetoric that placed the content creators and those who support them in a position of moral superiority to anyone who did not agree with their message or did not comply with the implied demand to stop patronizing Starbucks. This echoes the work of Dalakas et al. (2022) in the categorization of boycott messages and the work of Zulli and Zulli (2022) in finding reinforcement with mimetic replication of content and the establishment of "imitation publics." This work also explored the implications of social media boycotting messages and the power of viral content to influence behavior and financially affect businesses.
Keywords: Social media activism, Starbucks boycott, Outrage culture, Imitation publics, Thematic analysis

Soon after the commencement of the Israel-Hamas conflict, individuals took to social media in response to reported corporate stances on the war, specifically those from companies purporting to support Israel. Although many companies issued statements about the conflict, none faced as much backlash and subsequent protest as Starbucks. Calls for an immediate boycott emerged, with critics alleging that Starbucks' perceived support for Israel equated to endorsing genocide against Palestinians. The boycott movement snowballed, spreading through social media platforms and traditional media outlets within days. TikTok, a social media platform that hosts 1.5 billion monthly users (Singh, 2025), became one of the primary spaces where people voiced their concerns and directed their ire at Starbucks. At the height of the boycott, Starbucks reported a loss of 11 billion dollars (Smilguis, 2023), prompting the coffee giant to engage in a goodwill campaign to win back its customers, as well as the ousting of the chief executive, Laxman Narasimhan, in August, 2024 (Woolfson, 2024).

Though certainly not novel, the act of boycotting took on a new feature through TikTok, allowing users to spread their disgust with Starbucks internationally. Protesters leveraged TikTok's popularity, with each post amplifying the unified boycott message to a broader audience. Here, we explore the behaviors included by protesters in the boycott TikToks and the themes that emerged from an analysis of these short video posts.

Literature Review

Social Media and Social Movements

Social media has long served as a tool for social movements due to its accessibility, extensive reach, and ability to connect diverse communities. These platforms provide a "salience of connectivity" (Mundt et al., 2018, p.11) and a unique opportunity for people with similar views, experiences, and cultures to discuss and disseminate thoughts, ideas, and criticisms freely. Social media also entices users with the possibility of going "viral," in which any post can potentially "gain unimaginable popularity and attention and break through time, spatial, and geographical boundaries globally" (Bebić & Volarevic, 2018, p. 44-45). However, scholars have also examined the limitations of social media as a platform for political communication and activism. Widespread social media activism campaigns that have seen tangible results in the past include the #BlackLivesMatter and the #MeToo campaigns. #BlackLivesMatter found its foothold during the Ferguson protests of 2014 and after the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020. The #MeToo campaign of 2017 encouraged survivors of sexual harassment and assault to share their stories to increase solidarity and support. This campaign led to the public downfall of figures like Harvey Weinstein, legislative changes addressing workplace harassment, and increased awareness of gender-based violence.

The occurrence of simplifications, extreme points of view, and moral rages (Bouvier & Machin, 2021) can result in the spread of misinformation and abandonment of critical thinking, as well as creating disproportionate levels of indignance. People "bring in their own understanding of history and culture to direct their anger at an authority they deem responsible for the crisis" (Sharma, 2023, p. 40), even if this understanding and/or blame is misplaced. Sharma discussed the role of emotion in online activism in a study focusing on India's 2020 migrant crisis, finding that digital moral outrage and collective guilt were significant in garnering collective action on Twitter. High emotion has been suggested to affect—even skew—the outcome of a social media movement. Additionally, "online activism has been variably described as 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism,'" (Bhatia & Ross, 2022, p. 119); that is, it has been criticized as a front for true activism, presenting the opportunity for people to say a lot but do little.

Social Movements on TikTok

Lee and Abidin (2023) described TikTok as "a locus of contestation for social (in)justice and politics" (p. 2). They explored the aspects of TikTok that make it so useful and appealing in this area, including its "unique tools for creativity" and "playful meme culture" (p. 3). The platform's broad participatory affordances and the ease—as well as risk—of public shaming, are also discussed as notable features that allow users to congregate around themes or movements. "Many users have found meaningful ways to engage with the platform and its cultures by leading and participating in a variety of activist initiatives for global awareness, social change, and civic politics" (Lee & Abidin, 2023, p. 1).

Virtue Signaling

According to James Bartholomew, virtue signaling, a term introduced in 2015, is the open expression of moral values or positions to improve one's self-image or social status rather than advancing any real cause or issue (Bartholomew, 2015). It is a development widely seen nowadays within the territory of social media, where individuals use platforms to demonstrate their loyalty to some moral values or beliefs in public. The prevalence of virtue signaling in online discourse prompts concerns about its genuineness and impact, overshadowing the diversity of its manifestations. Because of its ease in

voicing support with no real commitment or action required, it has also earned the name "slacktivism" for its low-effort activities online rather than being actively engaged or putting in significant effort (Muslic, 2017).

A boycott is a unique version of consumer activism and collective endeavor that is directed toward changing corporate conduct or enunciating political disapproval. The "playful meme culture" of TikTok, as noted by Lee and Abidin (2023, p. 3), and public humiliation dynamics of the platform, provide a ground for a boycotting event. Nevertheless, the way users employ these platform features to disseminate the boycott messages is unexplored. In addition, virtue signaling on social media is the main reason why hope about activities related to boycotters is tarnished and their influence in real life questioned. Although virtue signaling can push some issues to the forefront of the public opinion agenda, there are doubts about whether it leads to anything other than simple low-energy "slacktivism." Here, exploring how users of TikTok communicate boycott messages provides insight into the level of involvement and the possibility of the platform as an agent of change. Answering this question will deepen the understanding of contemporary consumer activism, the interaction between virtual discussion and on-the-ground activism, and the special characteristics of TikTok that influence these activities.

RQ1: How are content creators using TikTok videos and their text captions to send messages about boycotts on TikTok?

Method

Sample

This study used purposive sampling (Miles et al., 2014) by the researchers for 100 of the most popular TikTok videos (TikToks) using the hashtag "#boycottstarbucks" that were posted between October 2023 and March 2024. Some TikToks appeared multiple times in the top 100 list due to reposting by other users. These duplicates were removed from the sample and replaced with less popular posts further down the list.

Thematic Analysis

Four themes were identified by classifying boycott behavior posts on the TikTok video platform. These existing categories were *Informational, Stand for Justice, Holier than Thou, and In the Trenches*. Each category increased in emotional attachment to the message and the more direct actions taken in the TikToks. Informational TikToks directly conveyed information about the context of the situation and represented both sides of the conflict. *Stand for Justice* featured people feeling conflicted about their decision to ultimately give up Starbucks purchasing in all forms. *Holier than Thou* showed people actively bragging about their boycott behavior and belonging to the boycott efforts with pride. Some videos would also condemn and shame others not participating in the boycott. *In the Trenches* showed imagery of protests and overt acts of disruption to others beyond individual boycotting behavior. These TikToks also showed organized acts of defiance and protest, either with a group of people or alone.

Two coders reviewed and categorized each TikTok video into one of four themes. To measure intercoder reliability, Cohen's Kappa test was conducted. The test results indicated substantial reliability among the coders (k = 0.78; see Viera & Garrett, 2005).

Results

Of the 100 videos sampled, 60 of the posts were sorted into the third category: *Holier than Thou*. These videos were characterized by text, speech, and/or visuals that depicted the poster espousing their moral superiority because they supported the cause of the boycott and used the video to shame viewers who were not participating in the effort. Videos in this category also emphasized belonging to an exclusive in-group of boycotters through language featuring inclusive terms, such as "we." An example of one of these TikToks was the video – titular to this work – that sparked a viral sound inspiring many similar posts: a woman drinking an iced coffee with the dialogue, "You know what that tastes like? Like a company that doesn't support genocide" (ericasbookshelf, 2023).

The *Informational* section was the second most prominent of the four, classified by creators who explained the Starbucks boycott, its reasoning, and/or its consequences for the company with the smallest amount of emotion. However, of essential note is some bias or agenda was detected in all of these TikToks; a finding that will be discussed in more depth later. A video from this category, which could be argued as the most objective of the group, was posted by a woman explaining the reasoning behind the Starbucks boycott, specifically regarding their stance on the Israel-Hamas conflict (feliciaforthewin, 2023).

The *Stand for Justice* category was the most contested of the four, having the least intercoder agreement. These videos were characterized by discomfort at the loss of Starbucks and/or a tone of exasperation or annoyance at the brand. They were recognized to be an obvious statement about the creator and their actions, but unlike the *Holier than Thou* category, these

creators did not focus on shaming others who were not boycotting. One video placed in this category by both coders features a girl filming her boycotting experience at the airport as she looks for a coffee shop other than Starbucks. She expresses distress at the fact that she wants to buy Starbucks, but still refuses to go, even stating that she plans to never purchase from the company again due to their actions (lovelylivingtravel, 2024).

Only nine of the videos fit into the *In the Trenches* category, which depicted scenes of people posting signs describing Starbucks as a supporter of murder and genocide, individual content creators going to Starbucks stores yelling at people spending money there, and large protest rallies outside of various Starbucks locations with bullhorns and chants to deter people from patronizing the location. This pro-boycott behavior could also fit in the *Holier than Thou* category. Still, we felt this was a step further into the emotional and active severity of the content creator's actions in public settings rather than their purchasing behavior. These videos were also unique because they featured direct actions taken in the real world to advance or support the boycott. One post in this section showed a college student who had set up a coffee bar in his dorm room to try and persuade other students not to go to Starbucks (calvintanny, 2023).

While classifying the TikToks, both coders agreed upon a subcategory often appearing as an undertone, regardless of the post's assorted category. These videos made it a point to express their belonging to the collective identity of the boycotting effort and/or the support of the Palestinian people. This theme came to be referred to as Solidarity. Though the word "we" is constantly used in these videos, the majority of them were filmed by a single person. The aforementioned "solidarity," as well as the audience being addressed, are imagined, fostered, and perpetuated by the unifying social environment of TikTok's platform. There is no other physical person present; there is only hope that those identifying with the group will be on the other side of the screen. It is never made fully clear what behaviors constitute full participation, and this solidarity is expressed in different ways. One example of this occurrence, classified by both coders to be part of the *Holier than Thou* category, features a man discussing the role of class solidarity in making change and urging people to become part of the collective by boycotting Starbucks (trapwitch, 2023). Though there could be a moral superiority component to the videos in the *Holier than Thou* category, examples like this emphasize the multiple needs these posts fulfill, such as emotional and social solidarity for the cause.

Overall, the results of this thematic analysis highlight the reactions of TikTok creators involved in the Starbucks boycott through a categorization of each post into one of four categories: *Holier than Thou*, Informative, *Stand for Justice*, and *In the Trenches*. Findings concluded that most videos fell into the *Holier than Thou* section, and few were classified as *In the Trenches*. Almost every video was emotionally charged in some capacity, even those in the *Informational* group with a perceived exclusively factual and educational motivation. This theme, coupled with other patterns in the videos, exhibits the communicative abilities of the medium and the democratized messages of the boycott discourse.

Discussion

Outside of the research questions for this study, another pattern emerged in the analysis of the TikToks: replication. The repeating pattern included instances of the embedded sound "You know what that tastes like? Like a company that doesn't support genocide" (ericasbookshelf, 2023), and the content creator's presentation style was almost always in the same format of being in the frame as a digital bust talking to the viewer. Zulli and Zulli (2022) stated the mimetic properties of TikTok as a platform are built into the user interface, and the use of popularized sounds underpin the videos created. If a content creator wants to be included in the list of videos of a popular sound category, they have to use that audio in some way in their post. The more the sound is used, the more the related videos will appear in the algorithmically-led feed for TikTok users. Every video on the platform has the sound used listed at the bottom with the encouragement to "use this sound" to make another original post, contributing to the popularity of the sound-linked videos. It is important to note that TikTok was originally called Musical.ly and built on the practice of lip-synching to specific sounds, again reinforcing the memetic qualities of the platform.

Expanding on the memetic qualities, we saw greater support for the idea of "imitation publics," as coined by Zulli and Zulli (2022). They state that these imitation publics are "a collection of people whose digital connectivity is constituted through the shared ritual of content imitation and replication" (p. 1882), making the users feel like they are a part of the in-group. The "we" spoken about so much in the video sample of this study may be referring to this "imitation public" created through the boycott videos.

With most videos falling into the *Holier than Thou* and *Informational* categories, *Stand for Justice*

and *In the Trenches* had fewer than one-sixth of the videos. We suppose these differences stem from the TikTok platform versus a text-based platform like Twitter. With Twitter, a user just needs to think about what they want to say, type, and then post, whereas, with TikTok, a user needs to think about what they need to say, prepare themselves or the content to be posted, film sometimes multiple times, trim and edit in some cases, then post. The extra effort needed by the TikTok post versus the Twitter post necessitates greater motivation, possibly by emotions like outrage. This additional personal connection to the created content may be why there is an emotional undercurrent to nearly all the videos examined. *Stand for Justice* may have been fewer because it was defined as showing some conflict of the decision in a polarizing issue, which could open them up to criticism on either side or the user would have little motivation to share their internal conflict because it wasn't that difficult of a decision for them or there wasn't enough emotional impetus. Another finding from Dalakas et al. (2022) that our research supported was that consumers were often driven to engage in activism by psychological needs rather than concrete outcome-focused goals (p. 3).

It is important to note the practical implications this research presents for corporations. By understanding how people respond to perceived injustices committed by companies, brands can help ensure that, in the case that they find themselves "in the eye of the storm" (Dalakas et al., 2022, p. 1), they can steer themselves out of the line of fire. This research supports the idea that TikTok presents a unique opportunity to spread a message in viral capacity through the tool of replicable "sounds." Furthermore, the fact that most of the analyzed TikToks fell into the *Holier than Thou* category suggests that emotion plays an especially prominent role in modern social movements and boycott behaviors, especially the spiral known as outrage culture.

The capability of platforms such as TikTok to sustain messages like boycott calls presents a possible threat to corporations, as shown by the Starbucks boycott. Based on our findings, we recommend that brands craft responses tailored to the enraged or otherwise emotional audience. Knowing emotional responses usually cannot be combated with defense or logic, but with validation and alternative paths to expressing that emotion, a targeted company might find a way to redirect the reaction toward another source. In the case of the Starbucks boycott, the brand might consider providing information on where interested parties can donate to the victims or otherwise offer real-life solutions to appease and refocus boycotters. This tactic also can help society on a larger scale.

Conclusion

At the outset, we sought to explore the use of TikTok to produce boycotting messages in a campaign to call out Starbucks for ostensibly supporting a genocide. Through the viral nature of social media, users and influencers reproduced a call to avoid supporting Starbucks, one that was heard far and wide. Based on an analysis of these short video messages, we found the majority of producers took a negatively valenced "holier than thou" approach to encouraging viewers to boycott Starbucks. This finding makes sense, given the tendency for TikTok to encourage mirroring and replication of user-generated content. These findings represent an initial exploration of this social media movement and, therefore, must be taken with consideration of inherent shortcomings.

Some limitations in collection and analysis mitigated this study's results. One limitation includes using a single platform to examine the phenomenon of video posting on social media. Though a wider variety of social media posts may have garnered more variety in posting behaviors and content, the memetic quality of TikTok as a platform (Zulli & Zulli, 2022) contributes to a specific form of content creation. The TikToks were also collected three months after the initial incitement of the boycott call. This allowed more time for people to elaborate on the original posting of other TikTok users and build a variation of more personalized content and reasoning that might not have existed at the beginning of the boycott (though this also provided us with a broader array of content to analyze). This research only looked at one boycott movement, which, while allowing for a deeper examination of the topic, does limit its generalizability to similar situations. In addition, this study could not look at direct behavior change in the Starbucks customers at large who viewed these TikToks. It is only through the assumed correlation of the timelines of the beginning of the boycott efforts in late 2023, and the 11 billion dollars in reported market loss in less than a month (Smiligus, 2023), that we assume the boycott message was successful. Nonetheless, intervening factors, such as unionization struggles and a volatile stock market, also likely influenced that figure. Finally, the presence of more than two coders might have improved the dependability of the study's intercoder reliability rate.

This study has supported a better understanding of boycott behavior, the potential of TikTok to form and perpetuate social movements, and the communicative patterns of people engaging in a collective identity. Future research could explore other social movements on TikTok to see how the findings match the discoveries highlighted in

this paper. It would also be worthwhile to see if similar movements have expanded to additional social media platforms with video-sharing capabilities, such as Snapchat and Instagram.

Finally, future research should compare the types of boycott messages generated on different social media platforms to determine how the platform influences the spread and temperature of a given message. Returning to the present study, the findings offer a glimpse into the real power of boycott messages to influence behavior across large numbers of people and, more importantly, the actual consequences that befall companies deemed to have committed a social faux pas.

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