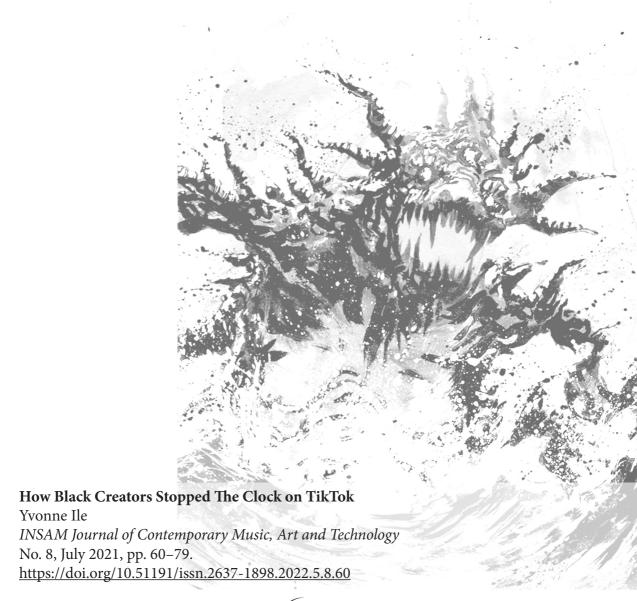# INSAM

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, ART AND TECHNOLOGY

INSAM

Yvonne Ile*

Institute of Contemporary Music Performance /
University of West London,
London, United Kingdom

HOW BLACK CREATORS STOPPED THE CLOCK ON TIKTOK

Abstract: Between June and July 2021, a number of Black creators banded together on TikTok and withheld from creating content – they went on strike. This sudden protest came after outcries from Black creators, who claimed that they created many of the viral dances on the platform, whilst their white counterparts received the accolades. I propose that this strike is a result of underlying bias, antagonisms and an unresolved history of musical and artistic plagiarism from Black creators. Inspired by how race is presented in the media and focusing on novel media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, I assert that creative works by Black creators and subsequently their ownership, use and replication, need to be studied within popular culture.

Keywords: cultural appropriation, Internet, artistic plagiarism, social media, expression, TikTok, Black music, Black creators, Black TikTok, Black TikTok Strike.

Debate around the plagiarism of Black music existed long before the formation of social media in the late 1990s. For decades, Black musicians and creators have complained about their works being stolen and replicated by white and other non-Black creators. Put simply, the issue is that non-Black creators have a history of plagiarising the creative works of Black creators, without crediting them.

*   Author's contact information: missyvonneile@gmail.com.

This plagiarism has historically taken the form of lyrics and music, literature and fashion (to name a few), but more recently has manifested itself in the form of TikTok dances and dance challenges. It can be argued that the theft of works online is inevitable, as the variety and number of platforms create more avenues for the global creation and dispensation of works. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for individuals to mistake the appreciation of culture for cultural appropriation; it is possible that ignorance is a leading cause of this phenomenon. Artistic plagiarism has been widely debated for decades and seems to be increasing as the years go by.

In the 20th century, the music plagiarism and cultural appropriation arguments gained momentum following the controversy surrounding artists like Elvis Presley and the Beatles, and gained a European dimension, as British entertainment inclined to minstrel shows and Reggae music, while the French fetishised Black entertainers. In recent years, the plagiarism/cultural appropriation debate has acquired a new relevance, specifically in a social media context. Approaching the history of artistic plagiarism of Black works from a wide variety of perspectives, scholars such as Lauren Michele Jackson, Susie Trenka, Eric Lott, and David Metzer, among others, explored the impact that the instrumental use of cultural theft has had on popular culture, to erase Black creators and their contributions. This research focuses on the ways in which Black styles, images and sounds have been commercialised by white performers and entertainers, whilst the Black communities and creators themselves are marginalised or unacknowledged. Many scholars agree that plagiarism, digital minstrelsy and exploitation of Black works negatively impact Black communities online and offline and this research aims to contribute to the ongoing study of these occurrences.

In an important recent collection, Trevor Boffone (2020) notes that critics may show scepticism towards the need for a collection that specifically addresses TikTok's influence on popular culture, as it is a relatively new app. However, given the way it has managed to shift social media use and culture, it warrants scholarly inquiry. His research looks at how digital spaces (present and future) will shape cultural literacies. Leslie Kay Jones (2019) emphasises the position of digital spaces within social discourse. Counterpublics on social media networks, such as Twitter or TikTok, are used as spaces to discuss community issues and to mobilise movements but they are also used to express shared, cultural experiences (like music and dance). Jones' essay raises questions on how much influence digital spaces can have on those communities on and offline. She notes that while there is an increase in research that addresses Black cultural and intellectual spaces, their focus is on these spaces as "transgressive social imaginaries". She also points out that there is a need to separate open social media dialogue from movement actions because of their implication in mediation for the public

and she does this by specifically using the word "disarticulation". Though it is suggested that there is an increase in the study of [Black] cultural spaces, counterpublics and digital spaces, little research has been done on the direct impact of these spaces on the communities they represent. Furthermore, a majority of the existing research looks at these counterpublics as a negative vehicle for the mobilisation of movements and not a discursive space for the marginalised.

This study will look specifically at how Black TikTok creators stood in solidarity with each other in June 2021, to bring awareness to the expropriation of their work by non-Black (specifically white) TikTokers. The aims of this study are to identify how the historically-evidenced exploitation of Black works affects the creation and dissemination of works in digital spaces and to seek to understand what the Black creator TikTok strike tells us about current content creation culture on TikTok practices for social media.

The New Social Media

With its ability to connect different people from different places and unite them over single causes, social media has proven itself to be one of the most expansive and versatile tools at our disposal. While maintenance of the systems themselves is looked after by the plethora of developers employed by the platforms, the same cannot be said for content moderation on the platforms. Who decides what can and cannot be posted online? How do we verify whether content is original or replicated? Do we care whether the content is original or not? The unrestrictive nature of social media has made it easy for individuals to express themselves and gain global audiences that they may not have otherwise been able to reach. Contrary to how works were created before Web 2.0,[2] creators can now create something that they know will be seen by someone and this opportunity has added meaning to their existence; our expression is visible to the world and creators can now receive responses to their expression, which drives them to create more (Burstein 2013). The appeal of being a creator or influencer increases with the possibility that you can reach a wide audience at the push of a button.

The freedom of expression that social media allows can also create the ideal environment for plagiarism. Due to the availability of information and content, it is common for content[3] to appear on the Internet several times, in different formats, different interpretations and by different people (Kurniawan and

---

2   Web 2.0 refers to websites that prioritise user-generated content and encourage participatory culture.
3   The word 'content' here refers to music, fashion, literary quotes and other works.

Surendro 2018). Whether intentional or not, this makes it difficult to pinpoint the origin of certain works and, typically, creators tend not to cite their work or pay homage online because they don't feel the need to; it doesn't suit the social media aesthetic. Wunsch-Vincent and Vickery (2007) highlight that the concept of citation "may be blurry" in a multimedia space, where there is a combination of text, video and other graphics. It is clear that the nature of social media facilitates the proliferation of plagiarism by the lack of clearly defined protocols for how to create derivatives of existing works, especially with platforms like Instagram and TikTok encouraging the use of user-generated content (UGC) with in-app software like the 'Remix' feature.[4] The replication of creative works on social media is one of the driving factors behind its success because it makes it easy to populate the platforms but this ease and readily accessible content mean that users don't need to create from nothing – they can reimagine an existing work. People believe that if something is on the Internet, it is free and they can do what they want with it. Appropriation art is creative work that borrows images within popular culture, mass media and other places and combines them to create a new piece of art. Technical ability is often less important, as emphasis is placed on how well the art has been envisioned and put together, thereby re-contextualising its meaning (Landes 2000). Social media platforms can be home to this school of thought; all art is rooted in other art, therefore nothing is truly "original" and creators should have freedom of expression without fear of copyright action against them (Emery 2002).

It is currently unclear as to whether social media has exacerbated this form of content creation or whether it has simply highlighted a longstanding issue that went seemingly unnoticed until frequent social media use brought visibility to it. According to Mandiberg (2012), platforms couple identity and content. Focus is placed on the content but the author/creator is directly attributed with it so the publicising of a piece of content is the creator's statement that "This is who I am. This is what I did". Studies show that there is a direct correlation between how the gratification of content creation, offline community (civic engagement) and UGC influence psychological empowerment; specifically, the three components which are self-efficacy, perceived competence and desire for control (Leung 2009). Not only can the online creation of content drive people financially, it drives people psychologically. Leung (2009) reiterates that the creator's behaviour in civic engagement and the degree to which they generate content online can enhance the user's psychological empowerment. The social aspect and necessary interactivity of these platforms appeals to content creators because they are encouraged to do and create more by the comments and reac-

---

4   The Remix feature allows users to record responses to and collaborate on any reel/video on the platform. Responses can be done on the spot or be in the form of a camera roll upload.

tions they receive. This drives the production cycle and can increase the creators' audience but also motivates creators to create by any means necessary.

The anonymity of the Internet perpetuates the notion that anything can be done without the user having to face direct repercussions. Subsequently, societal norms are shifted to accommodate this, users normalise this behaviour and the thin line between 'authorship' and 'ownership' is blurred further. This separate identity is another reason why UGC takes the form it does – it is difficult to trace it back to the creators unless they want it to, in which case it is made extremely accessible and the content is claimed as theirs (Desjarlais 2020).

Our consistent use of web-based platforms to enhance our everyday lives means that our lives are growingly intertwined between digital and analogue. Therefore, digital spaces like TikTok force us to reimagine our identity online and, in turn, offline and inform the shaping of our individual and group identity (Boffone 2022). Its ability to penetrate culture with ease is largely due to the fact that it functions as a reflection of society, created and used by members of mainstream society. Constant access to information and content have made it necessary to absorb more content, which naturally also fuels the creation of content. "Virality is a social information flow process where many people simultaneously forward a specific information item, over a short period of time within their social networks, and where the message spreads beyond their own [social] networks to different, often distant networks, resulting in a sharp acceleration in the number of people who are exposed to the message" (Nahon and Hemsley 2014). To 'go viral' is essentially to become famous overnight. Photo and video-sharing social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok and Twitter (among others) have increased the possibility that an everyday user can go viral and achieve fame, acquire financial success and build a brand with a new audience. Acerbi (2020) notes that "there is no recipe for how to go viral" but, as explored by King et. al (2011), it is possible to achieve success by copying somebody else who is successful. In a climate where regular people are achieving pseudo-celebrity status, creators can replicate already viral content in an attempt to also go viral. Examples of this would be people recreating graphics and captions and posting them or participating in an online challenge. This reasoning behind UGC is superficial as whilst any form of content can go viral, it can just as easily become irrelevant. This is often the case when content is driven by trends and online communities.

Black Presence on Social Media

Social media is often used as an outlet for individuals to express themselves and, at times, to escape from their everyday life. It has been documented that engagement with online activities and frequent social media use as a form of

escapism or coping strategy can be associated with problematic use and have a negative psychological impact on users (Kircaburun and Griffiths 2018). Notwithstanding, social media allows two groups of people to come together and coexist; those who share opinions, cultures and experiences and those who never would have taken the time to speak to each other and are linked by their use of the platform. It is somewhere within this space that separate groups of Black people have been able to find their voice.

In recent years, Black people have been able to contribute their specifically Black perspectives and narratives into societal discourse, both nationally and globally. As a counterpublic, Black Twitter[5] has managed to effect change and bring light to the issues of Black people in the diaspora and in Africa (among other things). However, it is yet to be contextualised or researched thoroughly and it can be argued that this lack of empirical research is the reason why significant events have gone seemingly unnoticed because the affected group is yet to be recognised (Graham and Smith 2016). Counterpublics were an inevitable evolution of the "bourgeois public sphere" (Fraser 1990, 56) as the original definition of public sphere failed to include marginalised groups of people and the voices of certain races, religions and sexualities were intentionally drowned out. Civic dialogue and Black media remain an essential element of Black counterpublics (Banjo 2018). Black people have successfully turned Black Twitter from an "emergent social phenomenon" to a widely referenced alternative, non-mainstream public sphere. If not for the #BlackTwitter hashtag, it would have been considered a niche space (Hughey and Gonzalez-Lesser 2020). Black Twitter is formed of users who both identify as Black and make use of in-built platform features to engage with Black discourses and share Black cultural experiences. Participation within this online gathering requires "a deep knowledge of Black culture, commonplaces, and digital practices" though it is not uncommon for Non-Black users to participate in the wider conversation (Brock 2020). Florini (2019) observes that the inherent nature of Black Twitter is transformational; on the one hand, it functions as an enclave, which facilitates the unconstrained and unpoliced conversation that it is known for – on the other hand, it serves as a counterpublic, which engages with external discourses. It is the cultural practices and the way users position themselves within the space that allows for the oscillation between the two states.

Despite the specific nature of this space, it is common for Black-centred narratives and experiences to be appropriated by urban marketing campaigns. The use of hashtags and trending topics on the platform make Black Twitter visible to non-Black users and allows these users to access cultural information, in addition to offering them "topical and cultural coherence" (Brock 2020, 81). The

---

5   Black Twitter is commonly stylised as #BlackTwitter.

hashtag brings the counterpublic into mainstream visibility. Feldman and De Kosnik (2019) highlight that Black cultural works do not materialise from thin air but when they appear in the mainstream, their Black progenitors are effaced and erased, leaving the product itself "unauthored and authorless", thus allowing the work to appear available to be claimed by anybody. Online Black spaces have proven to be great spaces for creators to create and share music, fashion looks, beauty trends, to entertain and to educate one another. Furthermore, social media can also cultivate a collaborative culture, which offers the potential for greater works. Within the communities themselves, these contributions to culture are often recognised or at least acknowledged but beyond the digital space, origins cannot always be definitely traced to a single individual or group. This is intensified by the remixing and replication of content. Social moves quickly so once an idea becomes mainstream, it is hard to trace its roots. This erasure is common with Black creators.

TikTok as an Entertainment Platform

Since its launch in 2017 as the international version of Douyin (before launching globally in 2018), TikTok has risen to become the most popular website and most popular social media platform of 2021 (Rosenblatt 2022). Operating with over one billion users, it is rare that you will find somebody who has not heard of or used the platform at least once. The platform has solidified its place as a medium that pushes short-form media content,[6] with clear audience positioning. The appeal of the platform is that users can choose their own music, effects and, in the simplest way, create videos on any topic of their choice. Therefore, there is a low threshold for creation. The simplicity of the video production has made it easier for creators to exert their creativity. As a platform TikTok excels because in addition to UGC, it accurately pushes content curated for the specific user (Yang et. al 2019).

Where service users were able to sustain long-term fame on earlier social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube, fame and virality on TikTok is dependent upon performance and posts. According to Abidin (2020), TikTokers focus on the success of individual posts, in the form of views, comments and shares, more commonly referred to as 'engagements'. This focus on the creation of posts is largely driven by the desire to feature on TikTok's For You Page (FYP) – "one of the most addictive scrolling experiences on the internet" (Zeng, Abidin and Schäfer 2021). As a result, a coherent persona or style is not conscientiously

---

6   The platform 'Vine' originally hosted short-form media content before it was discontinued in 2017.

maintained by TikTok celebrity aspirants but instead, they adapt to the "latest trends and viral practices" on the platform in an attempt to appear on the FYP. The use of hashtags, keywords and audio memes – the last of which is particularly popular on the app – can allow users to gain a large following 'overnight'. The drive to become TikTok Famous warrants users to seek out and engage with 'virality', so as to remain visible, popular and in some cases, paid. This differs from the earlier social networks, which accommodate niche subcultures. Going viral on the platform, as well as its in-built features (e.g. filters) play a central role in the success of the content creator and have made it a hub for creative expression and social commentary in bitesize form (Zeng, Abidin and Schäfer 2021).

TikTok has ushered in a new age of influence. Its rich content format and accessibility make it a beneficial platform to be an influencer on and this influence can be leveraged to build a following on/offline for both the creator and the company (Van Houtte 2021). The term 'influencer' has different criteria on different platforms, with some breaking the term down into subcategories based on size.[7] However, the benefits remain largely the same; brand collaborations, fame, exclusive invitations and platform-specific preference. While anything over 5,000 followers is considered a form of influence in general, the bottom of TikTok's top 10 influencers can boast of a following of 57.3 million followers.[8] It is worth noting that of the top 10 influencers, only two are Black; Will Smith and Khabane Lame, the latter of which only rose to TikTok fame during the lockdown of the COVID pandemic and is now the second most followed account on TikTok. How is it possible that an underrepresented demographic is able to influence popular culture the way it does? When Lame began posting his videos online, his content was visible on every platform, not just Twitter. There is immense potential for typically marginalised people to be represented within the digital space but they are rarely able to view their culture within the mainstream culture, unless they specifically search via hashtag.

Kennedy (2020) recognises that not only are many of the most-followed accounts on TikTok young, they are also female, white and wealthy. Resultantly, our default idea of girlhood and femininity on TikTok are stars like Charli D'Amelio and Easterling. The videos that are propagated on the platform are often of young women who fit the D'Amelio aesthetic – slim, white and normatively attractive, which evidences the racial power dynamic that has been integrated into the app itself. As videos appear on the FYP by the most viewed rather than chronologically, and considering that the top users and TikTok megastars are white, it is highly unlikely that a regular user searching via hashtag, sound-

---

7   Large influencer, medium influencer, small influencer and micro influencer.
8   For the full list of the top 50 TikTok influencers, see "Top 50 Most Followed Tiktok Accounts In 2021 | Tiktokblade". 2022. *Social Blade*.

bite or other will encounter the Black creator and more likely that they will be led to believe that these [white] creators have initiated whichever trend or challenge they seem to be a part of, which consequently results in the continuation of power dynamics (Boffone 2020). As a central aspect of fame on social media is visibility (Abidin 2018), it is important to highlight that the FYP's algorithm leads to the reduced-visibility of Black content creators on the platform (see Boffone 2021). Boffone (2020) argues that TikTok is a white space, which is fuelled by an oppressive algorithm that privileges white, heteronormative content. Algorithms have the potential to be racist as they are embedded with the biases of their creators (Noble 2018) and TikTok's FYP reinforces the perpetuation of White supremacy.

Plagiarism and Theft from Black Creators

From music to fashion and language to literature, the appropriation of Black people and their works is a topic that has gained recognition in recent years. In the past, this phenomenon went mostly unacknowledged outside of the Black community and creators have struggled to call attention to the severity of this plagiarism, due to a lack of interest. In her book, Laura Michele Jackson (2019) states that appropriation is used as a tool for power. She argues that instead of being chastised for flaunting Black culture – a culture which they cannot identify with – white people are praised and rewarded "financially, artistically, socially and intellectually". Whether created for profit or for fun, the physical products and intellectual property created by Black people are often exploited. This has only increased with the facelessness of social media; [non-Black] creators can now access as much [Black] content as they like and can replicate works without citing the original creator because ultimately it is difficult to trace the content back to them. Moreover, white people do not profit from the acknowledgement or compensation of Black people in a climate where individuals are working for the furtherment of themselves. It is possible that one can take an existing product from one place and transport it to a new audience that has never seen it and believe that their first encounter with that product is at the product's inception. Easy access to the variety of online counterpublics available creates opportunities for non-identifying individuals to access cultural information from specific spaces and recontextualise and recreate them in other spaces.

Digital Blackface is a term used to describe the minstrel performance that takes place in cyberspace. This is presented in the form of memeification of Black individuals as users essentially pretend to be them and take on the emotion/ex-

pression as demonstrated within the video, image, gif or phrase.[9] Coleman et. al (2019) note that the language and expression of Black people are used to entertain the masses while the plight of Black people (police brutality, misogynoir and educational inequity etc.) goes largely ignored. They emphasise that, "Black content – and, more specifically, Black Culture and Black bodies – dominate digital public spaces". Brock (2012) adds that it is Black content, "images, words, phrases and ideas" from Black spaces and communities like Black Twitter that "go viral" and receive acclamation from white Internet users and white media. This indicates that Black individuals themselves remain marginalised on and off the screen, while Black culture is desired, fetishised, popularised and commodified within the digital space. It is culturally acceptable to take from Black communities because whiteness is viewed as 'normal', 'neutral' and therefore, the 'standard'; online, this assumed normal identity is "white, male, middle class and hetero" (Brock 2012). The normalisation of digital blackface is supported by online fixity,[10] the narrative that the cultural backgrounds of Internet users cannot be determined because visitors to these spaces are too diverse. If cultural origins cannot be ascertained, it's impossible to know where a word, phrase, behaviour or cultural practice originated and, therefore, gratuitous use cannot be theft. Uninhibited intellectual property theft from Black digital spaces will remain a regular occurrence until these spaces are contextualised and recognised within the mainstream and their contributions are validated as those from an established public sphere.

One possible way to protect the intellectual property of creators is to copyright it. JaQuel Knight[11] is credited as the first choreographer to copyright his dance steps and his reasoning behind this is to transfer power back to the artist. Taking ownership of one's artistic output is one way to protect the art and potential financial gain. However, copyright of the choreography can be counterproductive because content creators on TikTok need other users to recreate their work. Value does not come from the dance itself, but rather the exposure and possibilities that result from being a recognisable, online personality (Morris 2022). Hence, we should emphasise recognition and acknowledgement, which can build careers and lead to bigger opportunities for creators.

---

9   Digital Blackface is explored further by Erinn Wong (2019); Haugan (2020); Davis (2020).
10   The term 'fixity' is an Internet and social media practice, coined by Brock (2012, 538).
11   Choreographer whose credits include Beyoncé and Megan Thee Stallion.

The TikTok Black Creators' Strike

At the end of June 2021, Megan Thee Stallion released 'Thot Sh*t', her first single of the year, following her debut album. Prior to this release, her singles 'Savage', 'WAP' and 'Body' had become certified hits after dance challenges on TikTok made the singles go viral; these challenges were choreographed by Keara Wilson, Brian Esperon, JaQuel Knight and Megan herself – primarily Black people. Dance challenges on TikTok are a proven vehicle for virality as dances catch on quickly and are spread simply with hashtags but the potential for growth and to develop a following are heightened by app features like curated content on the For You Pages (FYPs). Users searched these pages tirelessly following the single's release, only to be disappointed that, unlike its predecessors, no dance challenge had materialised. There was no challenge for a Charli D'Amelio to popularise (Boffone 2022).

The hashtag '#BlackTikTokStrike' began trending across social media sites in June 2021. Black TikTok creators formed a united front as they took to the platform to express their disdain for the appropriation of Black creative works by white creators; the platform was inundated with videos of creators explaining why they would not create content on the platform until TikTok worked out a way to prevent their work from being replicated by others. Many of the strike videos used audio from a specific user's account,[12] which highlights the importance of Black women gaining popularity like other demographics on TikTok – by doing nothing. One popular video showed a Black creator pretendedly about to dance to the single before flipping off the camera, with the caption "Sike. This app would be nothing without Blk people [sic]".[13] The creator reported in a later post that even this video was copied by white creators, further emphasising the lack of creativity and sheer disregard for the Black TikTok creator community (see Erick 2021). Hashtags play a very important role in the sustained life of the counterpublic; hashtags aid the expansion of social discussions and movements beyond the communities that navigate the online sphere. Johnson (2020) points out that Black social dance comes from Black social gatherings and that by using hashtags, the "circle" is opened up to those who though not physically present, can relate through the screen. Through hashtags like '#BodyChallenge', '#SavageChallenge' and '#BlackTikTokStrike', users could engage with the dance challenges but were also able to challenge those challenges. Despite there being no organised plan to strike, it took place seamlessly and this could be due to the "universality of the cultural appropriation" that many Black TikTok creators

---

12   The audio is from TikTok user @thevictorystory's video, dated 23rd of November 2020.
13   The video by TikTok user @theericklouis has been viewed over 440,000 times.

have experienced. The central role that dances and dance challenges play as one of the most popular forms of short-form content on TikTok meant that the impact of the strike was felt across the entire platform.

The dissatisfaction with Black TikTokers and the app itself had been developing for a while with users taking to the platform to express their unhappiness with the preferential treatment received by white creators for a while. Black TikTok decided to leverage their cultural power and by July 2021, had banded together to go on a dance strike – some creators even refused to post at all or left the app entirely. The experiment was done to "highlight just how significant the contributions from Black creators are to viral trends on the app", to emphasise how Black culture drives traffic to the platform and to show what would happen if they refused to allow their works to be exploited (Chan 2021). Despite Megan giving instructions for how to dance to the song: "hands on my knees, shaking a*s, on my thot sh*t" (Pete, Mason and Parker 2021), what surfaced were videos of flailing arms and hand holding. Though the soundbite went viral on the app, no notable dance went viral. This is a testament to the often overlooked capital held by Black creators on TikTok. The strike was propelled by the hashtag #BlackTikTokStrike, which accompanied videos in support of the strike and received millions of views. This movement drew attention to the exploitation that is embedded in the TikTok platform and encouraged creators to collectively work against appropriation and marginalisation on social media. Prior to the strike, several Black creators had complained that the platform censored their content if it related to #BlackLivesMatter or #GeorgeFloyd. One creator even noted that the platform did not allow him to include the phrases "Pro Black" or "Black Success" in his biography, as they triggered the app's content monitoring system and were flagged as potential hate speech, while other terms like "white supremacy" and "neo-Nazi" went unflagged (Chan 2021). Race clearly plays a role in the way that creators are supported and the platform that their content is given. The disparity between the Black and non-Black creator communities on TikTok was made visible to everyone on the platform as the TikTok strike upset the balance of creation on the platform. Black creators stopped visibly creating so the white creators had nothing to copy and, resultantly, there was a lull in the number of videos created by both communities. An important point to note is that many Black creators did not 'strike' completely; several Black creators continued to create and join dance challenges on TikTok – including 'Thot Sh*t' but did so using their own sounds. White creators were unable to find the dances because they didn't follow the creators themselves but followed and relied upon hashtags for the dance. This reiterates that Black products themselves are often the object of desire, while Black creators are viewed as undesirable and not worth time and investment.

In the autumn of 2019, TikToker Charli D'Amelio garnered fame for her #RenegadeChallenge dance challenge – a challenge that she did not create but did not credit the original choreographer for and that saw her following rise to tens of millions of followers.[14] Another TikTok creator, Addison Rae Easterling was invited to perform viral TikTok dances, made by Black creators, in a dance section on The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon in March 2021 and also failed to credit the originators of the dance. It was only after outcry by the public that Fallon invited the original choreographers to make an appearance on the show – virtually. This was clearly not the first time that an incident like this had taken place. This controversy over dance credit and the many similar experiences faced by other Black creators created the perfect climate for protest. White creators on TikTok have a history of pilfering choreography from Black creators. Jackson (2019) makes the point that white people are rewarded for appropriating Black culture. This has only been proven repeatedly by the content creators on TikTok; as a result of this fame and popularity from the replication of Black content, white creators are able to leverage their already large followings into major brand deals, media appearances, record deals (music careers) and acting roles, while the original Black content creators are often unable to receive even a mention in a caption (Onibada 2021). Megan's music has been a consistent source for dance challenges on TikTok in recent years but Black creators are rarely credited for creating them and it is no coincidence that these viral dances are [mostly] created by Black women. With tensions still high from the Tonight Show appearance, it would have been easy for Black TikTokers to follow suit and join the strike bandwagon once they saw the hashtag trending because they could identify with the movement. Megan's music being a great source for creators to create content on TikTok, it would have been appropriate for it to be used to make a point in this way; it could have been any Megan Thee Stallion single but it just so happened that as the first release post-Fallon, 'Thot Sh*t' became the focal point of the campaign. This choreography theft is another example of misogynoir, whereby the contributions of Black women are erased, their work goes uncited and their words plagiarised (Bailey and Trudy 2018). Johnson (2020) highlights that though Black performance contains both history and racism, it does not solely represent those things. She notes that, "Black social dance is an instrument of the people: It transmits, convenes, and envisions". Therefore, in addition to entertainment and expression, it can – and should also be used as a vehicle for narration. The idea that Black movement and choreography can be separated from the lived experiences that the creators themselves have and simply taken on as a dance that can be replicated by individuals with no acknowledgment of the context, is one that further emphasises the undervaluing of Black art and more importantly, the Black experience.

---

14   Charli D'Amelio is now the most followed account on TikTok.

Additionally, Davis (2020) notes that this strike "demonstrates a tonal shift from petty grievances of kids online to a verifiable labour issue where money, attention, and opportunities are expropriated from Black creators" so the misappropriation and exploitation of Black works rests at the core of this strike. If, as Abidin (2020) suggests, there truly is a formula to become an Internet – more specifically, TikTok – celebrity, it is likely that this issue will persist. She suggests that post-based virality takes precedence over persona-based fame on TikTok. This 'post privilege' means that audio memes are often the driving template for content creation on the app since TikTok gives privilege to sounds over images. As these audio memes are often of Black people or Black creators, this parodic performance lends itself to digital blackface. While the 'blacking up' of white skin for entertainment purposes faces widespread disapproval at present, blackface minstrelsy has adapted to social relations of the times. Audio memes on platforms like TikTok can evoke humour by performing heightened emotions and appropriating Black vernacular like African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Black British English for the platform's non-Black users to gain cultural capital[15] associated with Black joy and expressivity. Thus the user's ability to mime to audio memes has allowed offline racial exaggeration and bias to evolve into a digital minstrelsy, which has increased its impact through the misappropriation and misrepresentation of Black cultural expression (Davis 2020).

The Black TikTok strike magnifies the way TikTok and other similar platforms have infiltrated mainstream culture. This strike opened conversations on anti-Blackness, cultural appropriation and blaxploitation on TikTok up to the public as the controversy was not confined to the platform (Boffone 2022). It became a mainstream, cultural matter when it was covered and discussed by multiple publications[16] and media outlets, across various social media feeds to mainstream news[17] and daytime talk shows. The strike shifted the dynamics on the platform, to expose how TikTok is a microcosm of society that utilises racial politics. Racial bias on TikTok is a reflection of race relations in the physical world and therefore, racial inequality offline. That made its occurrence even more significant; the Black creators' protest and comments for TikTok were protest and comment for society, for the United States – for the world.

---

15   Based on a scale to evaluate the exploitative nature of digital dance cultures. See Davis 2020.
16   See Foreman 2021; Njera 2021.
17   See Paul 2021; McClay 2021.

Conclusion

With post-based fame taking centre stage on platforms like TikTok, it appears that Bill Gates' statement "content is king" (Gates 1996) rings true now more than ever. Abidin's work on TikTok culture suggests that the attention economy on TikTok breeds users who strive to become celebrities on the app (Abidin 2018; Abidin 2020). This motivation to become famous – whether in-person or on the app via the FYP – drives the personaless nature of content creation and encourages users to jump on trends in order to appear relevant and attain fame. It is highly likely, therefore, that the expropriation of Black culture and mimicry of Black expression is merely a by-product of the process and racial power dynamics on social media. Furthermore, these trends demonstrate that this mimicry remains a "rite of passage for white youth" (Davis 2020) as Black joy and expressivity are used as bargaining power for white teens.

While research has been conducted into established Web 2.0 platforms, TikTok is considered an emerging platform that continues to define itself and mainstream culture[18] globally. Though still a relatively new platform, research by scholars such as Trevor Boffone, Sarah Florini, André Brock, Safiya Umoja Noble, Aria Halliday and Ruha Benjamin specifically focus on the platform's effects on Black communities. In this increasingly more researched area, it is unclear as to how previous studies will affect the way Black creatorship is considered when programming algorithms and organising platforms, though suggestions have been made. What is clear, though, is that previous debates which have dominated discussion on popular culture and within cultural studies have little relevance when we begin to deconstruct the white, heteronormative identity and introduce perspectives using the oppositional gaze. Reluctance to ground Black counterpublics in an empirical framework suggests that more scholarly output is desired to trade its assumed presence for that of a recognised entity. My intent is to fill in the gap in cultural and communication studies by focusing on Black counterpublics.

I argued at the beginning of this article that when non-Black creators are credited for Black work, Black creators are forced to rethink the way they create and disseminate their work. An example of this being during the strike, a number of TikTokers continued to choreograph routines to Megan's songs but without the official soundbite, opting to use their own audio. If the video clips posted on TikTok are "complex, cultural artefacts" as suggested by Schellewald (2022), then not only should they be stored and studied – they should be protected. We need to question the relationship between social media and the way we view intellectual property. The findings that I have presented suggest that TikTok fa-

---

18   TikTok's mainstream culture is also known as "Straight TikTok".

vours white content creators over Black content creators and that this racial bias is integrated into the platform itself in the form of censorship, an algorithm that favours white creators, etc. The participatory [social] nature of social media platforms makes them an ideal place for individual and collaborative works but there is a divisive dynamic embedded within the platform that restricts Black creators from benefiting from this way of creating, like their non-Black (specifically white counterparts). Creators have been calling out this disparity but the Black TikTok strike brought this issue to mainstream attention. This is important for Black creators specifically, but also creators in general because it calls into question the ethics of fast content creation and the protection that is (or is not) offered to those creators, on those platforms. Furthermore, it forces users to question how they perceive and discuss race. Historically, Black voices have been stifled and silenced but their presence in the public sphere has given them a space to amplify their voice and position their experiences within the discourse. While this study does not offer a conclusive answer to the question of how Black TikTok can be better understood as a counterpublic, it does take a look at one instance where Black creators were able to gain enough momentum to break free of the boundaries of social media and affect the mechanism that restricted them. This is important as I believe that studying this strike in detail could offer insight into how Black creators can leverage their work and formally unify in the future.

List of references

Abidin, Crystal. 2018. *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online*. United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing.

Abidin, Crystal. 2020. "Mapping Internet Celebrity On Tiktok: Exploring Attention Economies And Visibility Labours". *Cultural Science Journal* 12 (1): 77–103. https://doi.org/10.5334/csci.140.

Acerbi, Alberto. 2020. *Cultural Evolution In The Digital Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bailey, Moya, and Trudy. 2018. "On Misogynoir: Citation, Erasure, And Plagiarism". *Feminist Media Studies* 18 (4): 762–768. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447395.

Banjo, Omotayo O. 2018. *Media Across The African Diaspora*. United States: Routledge.

Boffone, Trevor. 2021. *Renegades: Digital Dance Cultures From Dubsmash To Tiktok*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

Boffone, Trevor. 2022. *Tiktok Cultures In The United States*. 1st ed. United States: Taylor & Francis.

Brock, André. 2012. "From The Blackhand Side: Twitter As A Cultural Conversation". *Journal Of Broadcasting &Amp; Electronic Media* 56 (4): 529–549. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.732147.

Brock, André. 2020. *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. United States: NYU Press.

Burstein, David D. 2013. *Fast Future*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Chan, Clara J. 2021. "Black Tiktok Creators Grapple With How Far To Take Strike – The Hollywood Reporter". *Hollywoodreporter.Com*. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/digital/tiktok-strike-1234988427/.

Coleman, Loren Saxton, Robert D Byrd, Christopher Campbell, Alison Yeh Cheung, Loren Saxton Coleman, Marcus J Coleman, Ashley Cordes, Jayne Cubbage, and Celeste Gonzalez de Bustamante. 2019. *Media, Myth, And Millennials*. United States: Lexington Books.

Davis, Cienna. 2020. "Digital Blackface And Troubling Intimacies". In *Tiktok Cultures In The United States*, 1st ed., 28–39. United States: Taylor & Francis.

Desjarlais, Malinda. 2020. *The Psychology And Dynamics Behind Social Media Interactions*. Hershey: IGI Global, Information Science Reference.

Emery, Lee. 2002. *Teaching Art In A Postmodern World*. Melbourne: Common Ground Pub.

Erick, Louis (@theericklouis). 2021. "If y'all do the dance pls tag me :eye role: it's my first dance on Tik tok and I don't need nobody stealing/not crediting." TikTok, June 19, 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/@theericklouis/video/6975379403282943237.

Feldman, Keith, and Abigail De Kosnik. 2019. *#Identity: Hashtagging Race, Gender,*

Sexuality, And Nation. United States: University of Michigan Press.

Florini, Sarah. 2019. *Beyond Hashtags: Racial Politics And Black Digital Networks*. New York: NYU Press.

Foreman, Beatrice. 2021. "How Digital Blackface Led To Tiktok'S First Strike". *Vox*. https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2021/6/29/22554596/digital-blackface-megan-thee-stallion-song-tiktok-first-strike.

Fraser, Nancy. 1990. "Rethinking The Public Sphere: A Contribution To The Critique Of Actually Existing Democracy". *Social Text*, no. 25/26: 56–80. https://doi.org/10.2307/466240.

Graham, Roderick, and Shawn Smith. 2016. "The Content Of Our #Characters". *Sociology Of Race And Ethnicity* 2 (4): 433–449. https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649216639067.

Haugan, Tor. 2020. "Blackface Has Resurged In The Internet Age. And You Might Be Part Of The Problem". *UC Berkeley Library News*. https://news.lib.berkeley.edu/digital-blackface.

Hughey, Matthew W., and Emma Gonzalez-Lesser. 2020. *Racialized Media*. United States: NYU Press.

Jackson, Lauren Michele. 2019. *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were In Vogue … And Other Thoughts On Cultural Appropriation*. United States: Beacon Press.

Jones, Leslie Kay. 2019. "#Blacklivesmatter: An Analysis Of The Movement As Social Drama". *Humanity &Amp; Society* 44 (1): 92–110. https://doi.org/10.1177/0160597619832049.

King, Andrew J., Lawrence Cheng, Sandra D. Starke, and Julia P. Myatt. 2011. "Is The True 'Wisdom Of The Crowd' To Copy Successful Individuals?" *Biology Letters* 8 (2): 197–200. https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2011.0795.

Kırcaburun, Kagan, and Mark D. Griffiths. 2018. "Problematic Instagram Use: The Role Of Perceived Feeling Of Presence And Escapism". *International Journal Of Mental Health And Addiction* 17 (4): 909–921. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-018-9895-7.

Kurniawan, M A, and K Surendro. 2018. "Similarity Measurement Algorithms Of Writing And Image For Plagiarism On Facebook'S Social Media". *IOP Conference Series: Materials Science And Engineering* 403: 012074. doi:10.1088/1757-899x/403/1/012074.

Landes, William M. "Copyright, Borrowed Images, and Appropriation Art: An Economic Approach". *Geo. Mason L. Rev.* 9 (2000): 1.

Leung, Louis. 2009. "User-Generated Content On The Internet: An Examination Of Gratifications, Civic Engagement And Psychological Empowerment". *New Media & Society* 11 (8): 1327–1347. doi:10.1177/1461444809341264.

Mandiberg, Michael. 2012. *The Social Media Reader*. United Kingdom: NYU Press.

McClay, Cache. 2021. "Why Black Tiktok Creators Have Gone On Strike". *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-57841055.

Morris, Brittany. 2022. "Tiktok, Social Justice And Information". SSRN. https://ssrn.com/abstract=4012976.

Nahon, Karine, and Jeff Hemsley. 2014. *Going Viral*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Noble, Safiya Umoja. 2018. *Algorithms Of Oppression: Data Discrimination In The Age Of Google*. NYU Press: New York Press.

Onibada, Ade. 2021. "The Latest Protest By Black Creators On Tiktok Just Might Be The Most Important One Yet". *Buzzfeed News*. https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/adeonibada/the-latest-protest-by-black-creators-on-tiktok.

Paul, Kari. 2021. "'They Can't Do It Without Us': Black Tiktokers Strike To Protest Dance Appropriation". *The Guardian*, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/jun/24/tiktok-strike-black-creators-megan-thee-stallion-dance.

Perkins, Njera. 2021. "The Black Tiktok Strike Isn't About Crediting Viral Dances, It's About Protecting Black Creativity In Digital Spaces". Blog. *Afrotech*. https://afrotech.com/black-tiktok-strike-protecting-black-creativity-digital-spaces.

Pete, Megan, Julian Mason, and Joshua Parker. 2021. *Thot Sh*T*. United States: 1501 Certified / 300 Entertainment.

Rosenblatt, Kalhan. 2021. "Tiktok Surpasses Google As Most Popular Website Of The Year, New Data Suggests". *NBC News*. https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/tiktok-surpasses-google-popular-website-year-new-data-suggests-rcna9648.

Schellewald, Andreas. 2022. "Theorizing 'Stories About Algorithms' As A Mechanism In The Formation And Maintenance Of Algorithmic Imaginaries". *Social Media + Society* 8 (1): 205630512210770. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221077025.

"Top 50 Most Followed Tiktok Accounts In 2021 | Tiktokblade". 2022. *Social Blade*. https://socialblade.com/tiktok/top/50/most-followers.

Van Houtte, Chantal. 2021. *Tiktok As A Marketing Channel For Influencer Marketing*. Austria: Lit Verlag.

Wong, Erinn. 2019. "Digital Blackface: How 21[St] Century Internet Language Reinforces Racism". UC Berkeley: Library. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/91d9k96z.

Wortham, Jenna, and Kimberly Drew. 2020. *Black Futures*. Ebook. United States: Random House Publishing Group.

Wunsch-Vincent, Sacha, and Graham Vickery. 2007. *Participative Web And User-Created Content*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Yang, Shuai, Yuzhen Zhao, and Yifang Ma. "Analysis of the reasons and development of short video application—Taking Tik Tok as an example." In *Proceedings of the 2019 9th International Conference on Information and Social Science (ICISS 2019), Manila, Philippines*, pp. 12–14. 2019.

Zeng, Jing, Crystal Abidin, and Mike S. Schäfer. 2021. "Research Perspectives On Tiktok And Its Legacy Apps: Introduction". *International Journal Of Communication* 15.

HOW BLACK CREATORS STOPPED THE CLOCK ON TIKTOK
(summary)

This study explores how racial bias and cultural appropriation underpin the creator culture on social media platforms, using the Black TikTok strike as a case study. While I cite various scholars, who have researched themes that are present within this study; cultural appropriation, TikTok culture and online public spheres, I note that most of these studies offer a broader perspective on Black communities. Contrastingly, I focus specifically on Black TikTok as a present counterpublic and the way the creator community itself is able to amplify its message by uniting behind an intention – a hashtag. As individuals, their voice is quieted but as a collective and community, the Internet allows them to amplify their voice within the digital space so I explore the repercussions of this mode of expression. I highlight the importance of earlier research into appropriation, racial inequity and how this research needs to be supported by deeper study of social media and the online presentation of self. I propose that the effect of social media on online Black communities needs to be studied further in order to create policies and legislation around intellectual property. I explore the implications of the ready availability of social media and how this access governs the practice of those that rely upon social media for creative expression and regular income. Following this, I examine TikTok as an entertainment platform that relies on the creation of content. This need for content drives the continuous production of short-form video, which when not governed ethically can result in controversial practices and theft. This allows us to contextualise the issues highlighted by Trevor Boffone in his book 'Tiktok Cultures In The United States'. I examine the significance of the #BlackTikTokStrike movement and how its ability to spread quickly shows that there are underlying issues that extend beyond an isolated incident. There is a history of theft and appropriation of works from Black creators. As a novel form of media, TikTok is still relatively under-researched and as such, phenomena like this go largely unnoticed. This research offers insight into how Black creators navigate self-expression in digital spaces and shape the culture of social media.