

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Soft Power Viral: TikTok, Memes, and Transnational Dissent in the Age of Digital Influence

<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/09/29/soft-power-viral-tiktok-memes-and-transnational-dissent-in-the-age-of-digital-influence/>

MAURICIO PERCARA, SEP 29 2025

This article was shortlisted as part of the 2025 E-International Relations Article Award, sponsored by Edinburgh University Press, Polity, Sage, Bloomsbury, Manchester University Press, Palgrave Macmillan and Bristol University Press.

In the last decade, we have witnessed the emergence of a new form of digital soft power, driven by social media and meme culture. Platforms such as TikTok have evolved from mere entertainment hubs into powerful tools of political influence and transnational activism. From viral videos documenting wars in real time to global youth-led solidarity campaigns, the international stage is increasingly shaped by content produced and disseminated in a decentralized, digital environment. Across the Global South and among younger generations worldwide, TikTok and memes have become cultural weapons used to challenge official narratives, mobilize global support, and amplify transnational dissent. This article explores how TikTok and meme-driven culture function as instruments of soft power—that is, the ability to influence through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion—in today’s social and political contexts. It presents an updated conceptual framework of soft power in the digital era, drawing on recent academic sources (2023–2025) that address both its transformation and its emerging dilemmas. Through three key case studies—the war in Ukraine, global pro-Palestine mobilization, and the pan-Asian digital alliance known as the Milk Tea Alliance—we examine how viral videos and memetic content are shaping international conflict narratives and social movements. Finally, we engage in a critical discussion of the opportunities, risks, and ethical challenges posed by this decentralized form of soft power. In a world where ordinary users can shape global perceptions as much as—if not more than—traditional state actors, the dynamics of influence, legitimacy, and information flow are being fundamentally redefined.

Conceptual Framework: Soft Power in the Digital Age

The concept of soft power was first introduced by Joseph Nye in the late 1980s, defined as “the ability to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment” (Nye, 2004). Traditionally, a state’s soft power stemmed from its culture, political values, and foreign policy, and was exercised through public diplomacy, educational exchange, international aid, and global media. For decades, states sought to “win hearts and minds” abroad by showcasing the most attractive aspects of their identity—Hollywood films, French cuisine, Japanese anime—all became instruments of cultural influence with geopolitical implications.

What has changed in the digital era? First, the rise of the internet and social platforms has exponentially expanded both the reach and immediacy of soft power. Today, any country—or individual—with a compelling narrative can access global audiences in real time, bypassing traditional diplomatic channels. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X), and especially TikTok allow direct engagement with broad and often unintended audiences without state mediation.

Second, the nature of the influential actor has diversified. Soft power is no longer an exclusive domain of states. Non-state actors—NGOs, internet celebrities, social movements, and even ordinary citizens—can shape global narratives. Online communities form around shared causes, creating transnational micro-publics. In this new

Soft Power Viral: TikTok, Memes, and Transnational Dissent in the Age of Digital Influence

Written by Mauricio Percara

environment, civil society plays a central role in producing soft power, often independent of or in opposition to official state agendas. As Abidin (2020) shows, TikTok's attention economies and visibility labours shape emergent forms of internet celebrity.

Scholars and policy analysts now argue that the internet, once hailed as an open highway for ideas, is increasingly fragmented and contested. Countries are building digital walls, restricting access to platforms, and tailoring content flows to local sensibilities. This has led to a balkanization of the internet, where digital soft power is shaped not just by cultural appeal but also by algorithmic infrastructures and geopolitical filtering (Gillespie, 2018; Repnikova, 2023). According to Freedom House (2023), AI-driven moderation and algorithmic governance have become central mechanisms of digital repression worldwide. As audiences become more fragmented and polarized, public diplomacy must be more agile, personalized, and people-centered.

Another core transformation is the horizontal, participatory nature of influence. Soft power is no longer a top-down message from capitals to passive global consumers. Instead, it is a multi-directional, co-produced process, where users remix, reinterpret, and emotionally engage with content. TikTok, in particular, thrives on this participatory remix culture. According to Papacharissi (2015), digital platforms facilitate the rise of "affective publics"—communities that mobilize around shared emotions and narratives, often outside institutional structures.

Of course, this new digital landscape comes with serious challenges. The same platforms that amplify authentic voices can also spread disinformation and foster manipulated narratives. This has led to the emergence of the concept of "sharp power", used by authoritarian regimes to distort, divide, and undermine rival societies through media and cultural channels (Walker, 2018). Instead of attracting others through legitimate appeal, sharp power uses soft tools—like news, entertainment, and social media—for coercive or deceptive purposes. In practice, this blurs the line between influence and interference.

In sum, soft power in the digital age is more accessible, participatory, and volatile. It offers extraordinary opportunities for marginalized voices to reach the world, but it also exposes societies to new vulnerabilities. As we will see in the following case studies, platforms like TikTok and the viral logic of memes are reshaping not only how influence works, but also who gets to influence.

TikTok, Memes, and the War in Ukraine

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a turning point in the role of social media in armed conflict. Analysts quickly dubbed it "the first TikTok war," not because previous conflicts had lacked online coverage, but because TikTok became a primary battlefield for global narratives—one shaped not only by journalists or state media, but by ordinary citizens in real time.

In the early days of the invasion, TikTok was flooded with user-generated content: Ukrainian civilians documenting air raids, soldiers dancing or singing to maintain morale, and young women narrating their lives from underground shelters—all paired with viral audio, humor, and a sense of raw intimacy. These videos did more than record suffering: they helped audiences make emotional sense of the war, countered Russian disinformation, and drew sympathy and solidarity from millions abroad.

One of the most emblematic figures was Valeria Shashenok, a young Ukrainian who gained millions of followers by posting candid, ironic clips about her life during the siege of Chernihiv. Her humorous yet harrowing videos—set to pop music—showed the human cost of the war in ways traditional diplomacy could not. TikTok, in this case, became a bottom-up tool of emotional soft power, enabling ordinary Ukrainians to reach global audiences with stories that resonated across borders and languages.

At the same time, Ukraine's government used TikTok and other platforms for strategic digital diplomacy. Official channels promoted unity, resilience, and international appeals. But the most impactful content often came from decentralized, crowd-driven initiatives. A striking example is the "Saint Javelin" meme—a viral image depicting a Madonna-like figure holding a Javelin missile launcher. Initially a joke, it was embraced as a symbol of resistance.

Soft Power Viral: TikTok, Memes, and Transnational Dissent in the Age of Digital Influence

Written by Mauricio Percara

The meme quickly morphed into merchandise, raising over \$1 million USD to support Ukraine's military and humanitarian needs. The image became so prominent that its creator, Canadian journalist Christian Borys, was blacklisted by the Russian government. The "Saint Javelin" icon emerged as a wartime symbol and fundraising vehicle (BBC News, 2022; Borys, 2024).

Another powerful example is the rise of the North Atlantic Fellas Organization (NAFO), a digital grassroots movement using Shiba Inu dog avatars to satirize Russian propaganda online. Originating on Twitter and spreading to TikTok, NAFO participants engaged in meme warfare, discrediting disinformation and raising funds for Ukraine's defense. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense officially thanked the group for its "meme offensive." Through humor and irreverence, NAFO showed that memes can be weapons of resistance, building community and morale while undermining enemy narratives.

Russia, in contrast, leveraged TikTok as part of its own information warfare strategy, albeit with mixed success. While restricting internal access to TikTok and other Western platforms to control domestic dissent, Russian state-affiliated media—such as RT en Español and Sputnik Mundo—used TikTok to target global Spanish-speaking audiences, particularly in Latin America and the U.S. A Brookings analysis (May 2024) shows Russian state media get far higher engagement per post on TikTok than elsewhere (Wirtschafter, 2024).

These competing uses of TikTok highlight its dual role: as a space for grassroots storytelling and global solidarity, and as a platform for state-sponsored manipulation and influence operations. In Ukraine's case, the power of the individual—armed with a smartphone and a personal narrative—proved to be one of the most effective tools in shaping international support. As the war continues, so does the battle for hearts and minds on the digital frontlines.

TikTok and the Struggle for Palestine

Another context in which TikTok and memes have played a central political role is the transnational activism in support of Palestine. During recent escalations of violence—particularly in 2021 and 2023—TikTok became a key channel for sharing testimony, mobilizing solidarity, and challenging dominant narratives in traditional media. Some commentators began referring to this trend as the "TikTok Intifada", highlighting the platform's influence in reframing how the conflict is perceived, especially by younger, global audiences.

In the aftermath of the October 7, 2023 attacks and Israel's military response in Gaza, TikTok was flooded with first-person accounts, images of devastation, and emotional appeals for justice and protection. The imbalance in narrative power that has historically favored official state voices began to shift. Contemporaneous reports showed #StandWithPalestine drawing around four times the views of #StandWithIsrael on TikTok (Axios, 2023; The New Arab, 2024).

Polling data in the U.S. confirmed the trend: for the first time, a majority of voters aged 18–34 reported identifying more with the Palestinians than with Israel (52% vs. 29%). This raised concerns among pro-Israel politicians and advocacy groups, some of whom accused TikTok of harboring a "pro-terror bias" or of being part of a "digital brainwashing" campaign orchestrated by foreign adversaries, including China (TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, is Chinese-owned). While these accusations were largely unsubstantiated, they reflect how seriously the platform's influence is now taken in the sphere of international politics.

At the heart of this shift were Palestinian digital creators, many of them broadcasting directly from Gaza. One of the most compelling voices was Bisan Owda, a young filmmaker who began each daily post with the chilling phrase: "This is Bisan from Gaza. I'm still alive." Her TikTok channel became a window into the siege: bombings, hospital shortages, food insecurity. With over 1.2 million followers, she offered not just images but emotional context—what it felt like to live under constant bombardment (Forbes Middle East, 2024). Another figure, Mahmoud Salama, shared tender videos of his daughter playing in a tent after their home was destroyed. These posts, often just seconds long, served as unfiltered testimonies, connecting viewers emotionally and humanizing a population often reduced to statistics.

Soft Power Viral: TikTok, Memes, and Transnational Dissent in the Age of Digital Influence

Written by Mauricio Percara

These creators filled the void left by the absence of international journalists, many of whom were barred from entering Gaza. By late 2024, the Gaza war had become the deadliest for journalists on record, per CPJ data (CPJ, 2025). In this vacuum, platforms like TikTok became lifelines for truth, despite risks of censorship or reprisal.

The impact of this user-generated content extended far beyond online metrics. It galvanized protest movements, fundraising efforts, and petitions across Europe, the Americas, and Asia. One notable initiative was the “Pass the Hat” campaign, launched by American writer Erin Hattamer. Through this project, over 2,000 TikTok creators “adopted” Palestinian families, telling their stories and raising funds to support them directly. In a matter of weeks, hundreds of families received tangible support, thanks to a viral ecosystem that translated empathy into action. The “Pass the Hat” initiative mobilized creators to support Palestinian families via mutual-aid campaigns (Baker, 2024; El-Terk, 2024).

At the same time, TikTok’s algorithmic opacity raised concerns about who controls visibility. Was the platform promoting or suppressing certain content? Was it moderating against hate speech fairly? Researchers noted inconsistencies and cases of shadow banning, where content creators saw their reach mysteriously drop. Despite these concerns, the platform remained one of the few accessible spaces for Palestinian voices during the height of the conflict.

The case of Palestine reveals both the transformative potential and the fragility of digital soft power. It underscores the ability of platforms like TikTok to humanize political struggle and mobilize global awareness, especially among younger demographics. But it also illustrates how this new power is contested, politicized, and vulnerable to being silenced—either through state pressure, algorithmic bias, or disinformation.

The Milk Tea Alliance: Transnational Meme Solidarity

The third case takes us to Asia, where a simple meme about milk tea evolved into the symbol of a pan-Asian, pro-democracy digital alliance. The so-called Milk Tea Alliance was born in April 2020, after Chinese nationalist trolls targeted Thai celebrities online for expressing sympathy toward Hong Kong and Taiwan. In response, young netizens from Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan rallied together, using humor and solidarity to push back—sharing memes that featured different local versions of milk tea as a playful yet symbolic unifier.

What started as an online joke quickly grew into a broader transnational movement. The milk tea drink—a beloved staple in many parts of Asia—came to represent resistance against authoritarianism, censorship, and China’s growing regional influence. Twitter became the central hub of coordination, with the hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance trending across multiple countries. Memes of united cups of tea, comic strips, and digital artwork portraying activists as animated milk tea warriors circulated widely. By May 2020, the phenomenon had caught the attention of international media as an emergent grassroots cyber-alliance for democracy.

This meme-based identity gave activists a common language and an emotional anchor for mutual support. Protesters in Thailand adopted tactics from Hong Kong, while Taiwanese users expressed solidarity with Myanmar following its 2021 military coup. The hashtag surged again when Myanmar’s youth joined the Alliance, adding their own version of sweet milk tea to the visual lexicon. According to Twitter data, over 11 million tweets used #MilkTeaAlliance in its first year alone, with activity spiking during periods of repression and protest across the region.

Unlike traditional alliances, the Milk Tea Alliance had no centralized leadership, no organizational infrastructure, and no official manifesto. It was, in essence, a memetic movement—fluid, decentralized, and emotionally resonant. It drew strength from pop culture, internet aesthetics, and digital storytelling. When Twitter officially acknowledged the movement in April 2021 by introducing a custom milk tea emoji linked to the hashtag, it served as a recognition of its global reach.

The Alliance’s greatest strength lies in its cultural cohesion through humor and shared struggle. In authoritarian contexts where dissent is dangerous, meme culture offers a way to speak truth with plausible deniability. An illustration of a milk tea army defeating a cartoon dictator is more difficult to censor than an outright political slogan.

Soft Power Viral: TikTok, Memes, and Transnational Dissent in the Age of Digital Influence

Written by Mauricio Percara

Furthermore, the meme framework allowed participants to localize the message—tailoring protest imagery and language to national contexts while preserving a sense of transnational belonging.

Though born on Twitter, the Milk Tea Alliance also flourished on TikTok and Instagram, where young activists posted short videos explaining the alliance, mocking state censorship, and celebrating each other's victories. In Bangkok, Yangon, Taipei, and even in diaspora communities, Milk Tea signs and symbols appeared on banners, masks, and graffiti. The meme had crossed over into offline expression, further blurring the line between digital solidarity and physical activism. This mirrors scholarship framing the #MilkTeaAlliance as a new transnational, youth-led pro-democracy movement (Schaffar and Praphakorn, 2021).

From a soft power perspective, the Milk Tea Alliance represents a non-state-driven, bottom-up form of transnational influence. It is not about exporting culture in the traditional sense, but about creating a shared emotional and aesthetic space in which values like democracy, freedom of expression, and mutual respect can circulate organically. It challenges top-down narratives and creates horizontal channels of identification among youth across borders.

Crucially, it demonstrates how memes can be soft power tools—not merely trivial jokes, but vehicles of resistance, identity, and alliance-building in the digital age.

Risks, Opportunities, and Dilemmas of Digital Soft Power

The previous case studies demonstrate the immense potential of TikTok and meme culture as instruments of grassroots soft power. These tools have empowered marginalized voices, disrupted state-dominated narratives, and mobilized global attention in unprecedented ways. However, this decentralized and emotionally-driven form of influence also presents significant risks, contradictions, and ethical challenges.

Opportunities and Strengths

- Amplification of marginalized voices: Digital platforms have enabled everyday citizens to act as storytellers, witnesses, and advocates, reaching global audiences instantly.
- Transnational solidarity: Movements like the Milk Tea Alliance show that digital soft power can build emotional and political bridges across borders.
- Youth political engagement: TikTok and meme culture engage younger audiences often alienated from traditional discourse.
- Tactical creativity and mobilization: Humor and memes can undermine authoritarian messaging and foster resistance.
- Rapid fundraising and material impact: Initiatives like “Pass the Hat” or NAFO’s crowdfunding for Ukraine show emotional engagement translating into tangible aid.

Risks and Challenges

- Disinformation and manipulation: Platforms can be exploited by authoritarian states to spread propaganda.
- Superficiality and polarization: Virality often favors emotionally charged content, sidelining nuance.
- Lack of verification: User-generated content lacks editorial oversight, amplifying risks of misinformation.
- Corporate gatekeeping: Algorithmic bias and opaque moderation limit visibility and fairness.
- Government backlash: Many states respond with bans, censorship, or repression of digital activism.
- Ephemerality and fatigue: Viral trends fade quickly, risking empathy burnout.

Ethical Dilemmas

- Distinguishing disinformation from marginalized perspectives is fraught.
- Slacktivism risks substituting symbolic acts for structural change.
- Activists face surveillance and personal danger, raising urgent questions about platform responsibility.

Soft Power Viral: TikTok, Memes, and Transnational Dissent in the Age of Digital Influence

Written by Mauricio Percara

Conclusion

TikTok and memes have become powerful vectors of digital soft power, transcending borders and redefining who gets to influence global narratives. As shown in the cases of Ukraine, Palestine, and the Milk Tea Alliance, this form of influence does not originate in foreign ministries or think tanks—it often emerges from smartphones in bomb shelters, in street protests, or from artists and activists remixing symbols of resistance. This signals a transformation in how power operates in the international system. The ability to attract, persuade, and mobilize now lies not only with states but also with decentralized, networked publics who create emotional, visual, and participatory content. These users are not diplomats, but they are often more effective in shaping perceptions, building solidarity, and framing legitimacy in conflict and protest.

However, this democratization of influence comes with new vulnerabilities: manipulation, surveillance, misinformation, and the commodification of trauma. The same tools that empower resistance can be used to undermine truth and trust. Platforms like TikTok are battlegrounds—not only for attention but for values, empathy, and meaning. For scholars, practitioners, and policymakers, this raises key challenges. How do we rethink public diplomacy in an age where the most impactful content may be a 30-second meme? How do we protect civic expression while combating disinformation? And how do we ensure that digital influence enhances democratic values rather than eroding them? In this new environment, authenticity, narrative, and emotional resonance matter more than ever. Understanding and engaging with the dynamics of digital soft power is no longer optional—it is essential to navigating the complex, hybrid geopolitics of the 21st century.

References

- Abidin, C. (2020) 'Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labours', *Cultural Science Journal*, 12(1), pp. 77–103. <https://doi.org/10.5334/csci.140>.
- Axios (2023) 'On TikTok, views of pro-Palestine posts far surpass views of pro-Israel posts', 31 October. Available at: <https://www.axios.com/>.
- Baker, K. (2024) 'How comedian Erin Hattamer got TikTok's favorite influencers to raise funds for Palestinian families', *Good Good Good*, 10 May. Available at: <https://www.goodgoodgood.co/> (accessed [add date]).
- BBC News (2022) 'Saint Javelin: How a meme raised over \$1m for Ukraine'. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/>.
- Borys, C. (2024) 'The story of Saint Javelin', *NATO Review*, 22 February. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/>.
- Brookings Institution (Wirtschafter, V.) (2024) *Tracing the rise of Russian state media on TikTok*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2 May.
- Committee to Protect Journalists (2025) *Deadliest year for journalists on record*. CPJ Special Report, February. Available at: <https://cpj.org/> (accessed [add date]).
- El-Terk, N. (2024) '“Pass the Hat”: The viral TikTok campaign that has influencers talking about Palestine', *Middle East Eye*, 20 May. Available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/> (accessed [add date]).
- Forbes Middle East (2024) 'Palestinian filmmaker Bisan Owda becomes the voice of Gaza on TikTok'. Available at: <https://www.forbesmiddleeast.com/> (accessed [add date]).
- Freedom House (2023) *Freedom on the Net 2023: The Repressive Power of Artificial Intelligence*. Washington, DC: Freedom House.
- Gillespie, T. (2018) *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Soft Power Viral: TikTok, Memes, and Transnational Dissent in the Age of Digital Influence

Written by Mauricio Percara

Nye, J. S. (2004) *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: PublicAffairs.

Papacharissi, Z. (2015) *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Repnikova, M. (2023) *Chinese Soft Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schaffar, W. and Praphakorn, W. (2021) 'The #MilkTeaAlliance: A New Transnational Pro-Democracy Movement Against Chinese-Centered Globalization?', *ASEAS – Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 14(1), 5–35.

The New Arab (2024) 'TikTok ends hashtag feature that counts Gaza war video views'. Available at: <https://www.newarab.com/> (accessed [add date]).

Walker, C. (2018) *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*. Washington, DC: National Endowment for Democracy.

Yarchi, M. and Boxman-Shabtai, L. (2024) 'The Image War Moves to TikTok: Evidence from the May 2021 Round of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict', *Digital Journalism*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2023.2291650>.

About the author:

Mauricio Percara is an Argentine academic, journalist, and author specializing in international relations, cultural diplomacy, and intercultural communication. He is currently pursuing a PhD in International Relations at Central China Normal University in Wuhan, where his research focuses on the impact of Confucius Institutes in Argentina and Latin America. He previously worked as an editor and journalist for China Radio International, producing Spanish-language content for global audiences. Percara is also the author of several literary works, including *Escalera al infierno*, *Sombras de venganza*, *Historias errantes de almas perturbadas*, and *Dragones cantando*, a collection of Chinese legends.