

Makeup Activism on TikTok: Beauty as Political and Visibility Work Under Platformization

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Abstract

Social media platforms increasingly shape how activism emerges and operates. Within these attention economies, visibility is a crucial but unevenly distributed resource, structured both by platform infrastructures and gendered power relations. This article examines how feminist actors negotiate these conditions on TikTok by mobilizing beauty practices—specifically makeup—as platform-specific resources for political expression. Focusing on two distinct cases, the Iranian #WomanLifeFreedom movement and the Latin American #NiUnaMenos protests against feminicides, the study analyzes 200 TikTok videos through comparative multimodal discourse analysis. Despite major differences in political context and risk, activists across both cases converge in their use of shared visibility strategies: They adapt TikTok’s dominant beauty formats, including makeup tutorials, transformation videos, and facial inscription, to embed feminist critique within familiar, algorithmically favored genres. By repurposing practices traditionally associated with beautification and commodification, creators transform makeup into a visual repertoire of resistance. Conceptualized here as makeup activism, these practices allow feminist content to circulate through high-visibility platform vernaculars. The article argues that visibility on TikTok is not simply a matter of exposure, but a strategic and contested resource shaped by the interaction of platform infrastructures, aesthetic conventions, and gendered politics. In doing so, it contributes to feminist media studies by moving beyond a focus on representation and providing empirical evidence on how feminist actors strategically negotiate gendered regimes of visibility across platformed public spheres that span diverse national and transnational settings.

Keywords

activism; beauty culture; digital feminism; feminist media studies; platformed visibility; political communication; TikTok

1. Introduction

Beauty has long occupied an uneasy position within feminist politics. In particular, makeup has been theorized simultaneously as a disciplinary tool of control (Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 1991), meaning that society, and the beauty industry, dictate how women should look and behave, a site of commodification (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007), and a medium of resistance (Kennedy, 2016; White, 2018).

This ambivalence has become particularly pronounced in platform-mediated environments, where beauty circulates as one of the most visible and profitable forms of content (Abidin, 2016; Liu, 2023). On TikTok, beauty is not only culturally prominent but infrastructurally privileged. Beauty-related products dominate the platform's commercial ecosystem, accounting for over 80% of sales within TikTok Shop shortly after its launch (Nielsen IQ, 2023), while makeup- and beauty-related videos consistently outperform other categories in terms of engagement and circulation (Liu, 2023). These dynamics are reinforced by recommendation systems that amplify content capable of sustaining attention, producing feedback loops in which visibility generates further visibility. Formats such as makeup tutorials and "get ready with me" (GRWM) routines are therefore not only widespread but systematically advantaged within TikTok's attention economy.

At the same time, TikTok has become a key site of contentious expression (J. Lee & Abidin, 2023), where political discourse unfolds under conditions of algorithmic curation (Baumann et al., 2026; Bonini & Tréré, 2024). Within this platform environment, visibility is neither neutral nor equally distributed but is continuously shaped by recommendation systems, opaque moderation, and governance practices (Abidin, 2020). As a result, activism depends not only on what is communicated but also on how political claims are formatted, performed, and adapted to the platform's vernaculars and visibility regimes.

Despite growing scholarship on digital feminism (Clark-Parsons, 2022; Vachhani, 2024), beauty cultures (Foster & Baker, 2022; Liu, 2023), and TikTok activism (Cervi, 2026; J. Lee & Abidin, 2023), the strategic appropriation of platform-native beauty formats for feminist political communication remains underexplored. This article addresses this gap by conceptualizing "makeup activism" as the strategic appropriation of platform-native beauty formats to articulate feminist claims and negotiate visibility on TikTok.

To explore how these practices operate across different political contexts, we focus on TikTok videos related to two feminist movements: the Latin American Ni Una Menos movement (#NiUnaMenos) and the Iranian Woman, Life, Freedom protests (#WomanLifeFreedom, #MahsaAmini).

The Ni Una Menos movement emerged in Argentina in 2015 in response to rising feminicides and rapidly developed into a transnational feminist movement that spread throughout Ibero-America and inspired mobilizations worldwide. Initially organized through mass street protest, the movement subsequently expanded its digital repertoire, with TikTok becoming an important space for communication and mobilization following the platform's rapid growth after the Covid-19 pandemic (Bedrosian, 2022).

Woman, Life, Freedom emerged in Iran in September 2022 following the death of Jina Mahsa Amini and constitutes a movement resisting the country's authoritarian regime and its systematic oppression of women. Although both movements have achieved global visibility on TikTok, they operate under markedly different

political and communicative conditions. Whereas Ni Una Menos incorporated TikTok into an already established transnational movement, the visibility of Woman, Life, Freedom has been shaped from the outset by internet censorship, state surveillance, and restrictions on access to social media platforms in Iran (Alimardani & Alterman, 2022).

In this article, feminism is understood as a heterogeneous field of struggles against gendered oppression whose goals, repertoires, and political meanings are shaped by their specific socio-political contexts (Mohanty, 2003). This perspective allows us to examine how platform-native forms of feminist communication are locally articulated while also identifying communicative practices that emerge across different political contexts through a shared platform infrastructure.

Despite their different political and communicative conditions, both movements reveal a shared communicative logic: Creators adapt platform-native beauty formats to stage critique, represent violence, and negotiate visibility within TikTok's attention economy. We argue that these similarities are not coincidental but reflect the operation of a shared platform environment in which movements observe, appropriate, and rework communicative practices while adapting them to local political conditions.

The article makes three main contributions. First, it advances research on digital activism by shifting the analytical focus from participation to visibility, showing how activism on TikTok is shaped by the need to align political expression with platform-native forms. Second, it contributes to feminist media studies by demonstrating how makeup operates as a platform-mediated communicative resource for articulating feminist critique, complicating binary understandings of beauty as either empowerment or commodification. Third, it contributes to scholarship on platform governance by showing how structurally privileged beauty formats function as tactical infrastructures of visibility, enabling the circulation of contentious political expression across algorithmically curated environments and diverse geopolitical contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. *Negotiating Visibility: Affordances, Imitation Publics, and TikTok Activism*

TikTok has become a paradigmatic site for contemporary digital activism (J. Lee & Abidin, 2023). On the platform, the articulation and circulation of contentious expression are inseparable from platform-specific regimes of visibility: Rather than functioning as a neutral channel of dissemination, TikTok actively structures the conditions under which content can be seen, circulated, or suppressed (Gerbaudo, 2026; Sianturi, 2026) through its algorithmic recommendation system and its opaque, multi-layered regime of moderation (Baumann et al., 2026; Kaye et al., 2022; Zeng & Kaye, 2022). Visibility, in this sense, is not an outcome that follows expression but a prior condition that organizes its possibility.

This visibility regime is concretely enacted through the “for you” feed, where content is continuously selected, ranked, and circulated according to its capacity to capture and sustain attention (Kaye et al., 2022; Zeng & Kaye, 2022). Rather than reflecting pre-existing audiences or stable communities, the feed assembles dynamic clusters of visibility by grouping users around shared patterns of engagement, aesthetic styles, sounds, and affective intensities. What becomes visible is therefore less a function of authorship or claim-making than of alignment with metrics of retention, interaction, and repeatability (Cervi, 2023; Gerbaudo, 2026).

Attention operates here as a sorting mechanism that privileges forms of expression already compatible with platform logics, since within this attention-driven environment, participation is structured through imitation. As Zulli and Zulli (2022) argue, TikTok gives rise to imitation publics, in which content circulates through the iterative uptake and modulation of recognizable formats. Templates (lip-syncs, transitions, storytelling conventions, or vernacular genres such as Duets or POVs) provide a shared vernacular grammar through which expression becomes legible. Visibility is thus predicated on formal recognizability: Content must first align with established formats in order to be processed and circulated within the feed.

For activist communication, this infrastructural logic introduces a dual constraint: Political expression must, first, be articulated through platform-native templates in order to enter circuits of visibility. At the same time, such expression remains subject to an opaque platform policing (Baumann et al., 2026; Sianturi, 2026) that regulates the visibility of content, particularly of those materials which are considered sensitive or explicitly political (Aprilia, 2025).

Empirical research illustrates how activists respond to these conditions by embedding political meaning within recognizable formats: Studies of #freepalestine (Cervi & Divon, 2023; Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022) show how political narratives are rearticulated through stylized performances aligned with platform conventions; Subramanian (2020) discloses how Bahujan girls mobilize TikTok's aesthetic repertoires to articulate caste critique; J. J. Lee and Lee (2023) show how participants in #StopAsianHate embed personal narratives within platform-native formats; and Lünenborg and Backes (2025) highlight how shared performative registers facilitate the transnational circulation of feminist campaigns such as #mybodymychoice. At the same time, research on algorithmic filtering and platform governance shows that such practices often involve indirect language (Aprilia, 2025; Ungless et al., 2025), aesthetic camouflage (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022), and the appropriation and/or hijacking of high-visibility hashtags to navigate moderation systems (Treré & Kaun, 2021; Zeng & Kaye, 2022).

Activism on TikTok consequently emerges as a practice of adaptation under constraint, in which political meaning is embedded within formats that are both recognizable to the algorithm and less susceptible to moderation. Creators adjust not only what they say, but how they say it, translating contentious issues into aesthetic, narrative, and affective registers that negotiate both visibility and permissibility. These strategies are not merely reactive but anticipatory, oriented toward opaque systems of classification in which visibility depends on how content is rendered legible (or undetectable) by algorithms.

2.2. *Feminism and Makeup: A Contentious Relationship*

Feminist scholarship has long conceptualized makeup as an ambivalent practice. While beauty has been theorized as a technology of gendered regulation that reproduces normative ideals of femininity (Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 1991), it has also been understood as a practice of agency (Riley & Scharff, 2013) and resistance through which dominant norms can be strategically negotiated and contested (White, 2018). Rather than resolving this tension, contemporary scholarship increasingly approaches makeup as a contested cultural practice whose political meanings are contingent upon the social and media contexts in which it is performed (Stein, 2023).

This debate has acquired renewed significance within digital feminism. Social media platforms have fostered forms of “visual net feminism” (Kohout, 2019), in which political expression increasingly unfolds through images, short-form video, and embodied aesthetic performances. Within these environments, hyper-feminine and “girly” aesthetics function as recognizable platform vernaculars that can simultaneously align with platform logics and challenge conventional expectations of feminist politics (Kohout, 2019). At the same time, these practices remain embedded within platform economies, influencer cultures, and the commercialization of visibility, where empowerment is frequently articulated through self-branding and market participation (Abidin, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007).

Yet reducing digital beauty practices to neoliberal visibility alone overlooks their broader communicative and political capacities. On TikTok, makeup increasingly functions as a platform-native communicative practice through which creators articulate political claims, contest dominant representations, and render marginalized identities visible. Feroza Aziz’s viral TikTok, which embedded criticism of the persecution of Uyghur Muslims within a makeup tutorial, illustrates how familiar beauty formats can be repurposed for political expression (Cervi, 2026). Likewise, studies of queer creators and racialized communities demonstrate how aesthetic performance and self-representation mobilize makeup to challenge normative constructions of gender, race, and sexuality on social media (Foster & Baker, 2022; Stein, 2023; White, 2018).

2.3. Analytical Framework

Building on the preceding discussion, we conceptualize TikTok makeup activism as a platform-native practice constituted through the ongoing negotiation of affordances within imitation publics under conditions of contested visibility. To examine this practice, we propose a three-layered analytical framework comprising three interrelated aspects of activist communication on TikTok: the adaptation of political communication to platform-native vernaculars, the articulation of feminist claims through beauty practices as communicative resources, and the strategic negotiation of visibility within algorithmically governed environments. These layers are analytically distinct yet mutually constitutive.

The first layer, “platform adaptation,” examines how creators appropriate recognizable TikTok formats as communicative resources. Rather than functioning as neutral containers, platform-native formats such as #makeupwithme, transformation videos, or “GRWM” routines structure participation by establishing recognizable conventions of visual performance, narration, temporality, and audience engagement. They therefore shape not only how content is presented, but also how it becomes intelligible within TikTok’s vernacular culture.

The second layer, “political articulation,” examines how feminist claims are expressed through these adapted formats. Rather than treating political meaning as external to aesthetic performance, this dimension focuses on how spoken narration, visual symbolism, textual inscription, embodied performance, and affective expression work together to articulate contentious issues within communicative forms that are not conventionally understood as political.

The third layer, “visibility work,” examines how creators position their videos for circulation within TikTok’s recommendation and moderation systems. This includes strategies such as combining activist and beauty hashtags and/or modulating the explicitness of political expression in order to maximize visibility

while reducing the risk of suppression. Visibility work therefore captures the strategic calibration between recognizability, ambiguity, and amplification through which creators negotiate algorithmically governed environments.

Taken together, the three layers conceptualize TikTok activism as a relational process in which creators continuously negotiate how political meaning is formatted, articulated, and circulated within a platform whose visibility is structured by both algorithmic recommendation and platform governance. Rather than representing sequential stages, the framework captures complementary dimensions of the same communicative practice, explaining how makeup becomes a platform-native resource for feminist activism.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study employs multimodal critical discourse analysis (Machin, 2013) to examine how political meaning is constructed and circulated within TikTok videos that combine makeup practices with commentary on social and political issues. Multimodal critical discourse analysis is particularly suited to analyzing how meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes rather than through isolated communicative elements. Accordingly, each video was examined as a multimodal communicative event, considering the interplay between visual performance (e.g., makeup application, gestures, facial expression, and transitions), spoken discourse (voice-over or direct address), written text (captions, on-screen overlays, and facial inscriptions), audio (music, reused sounds, and lip-syncing), and platform-specific elements. Rather than analyzing these modalities separately, the study focuses on how they work together to construct feminist meanings and negotiate visibility within TikTok's recommendation and moderation systems.

3.2. Dataset Construction

The dataset consists of 200 TikTok videos selected from two previously developed corpora on feminist activism: one focusing on #NiUnaMenos and the other on #WomanLifeFreedom. Both corpora were originally constructed through the systematic collection of publicly available TikTok videos (for a detailed description, see Appendix A in the Supplementary File).

For the purposes of this study, we applied a second-stage filtering procedure, retaining only videos in which beauty practices constituted a central communicative format. Videos were included when they (a) employed beauty-related hashtags (e.g., #makeupwithme, #beauty, #GRWM) and/or (b) incorporated recognizable beauty formats such as makeup tutorials, transformation videos, or "GRWM" routines.

This filtering procedure resulted in a subsample of politically oriented videos that explicitly integrate beauty practices, allowing us to isolate a specific communicative configuration: political discourse embedded within high-visibility, platform-native beauty genres. The final sample size ($N = 200$) was determined through qualitative saturation, as no substantially new patterns emerged during the iterative analysis (for a detailed description, see Appendix A).

3.3. Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is the individual TikTok video, treated as a multimodal communicative artifact. Each video is analyzed as a composite of interacting elements, including visual performance (such as makeup application, gestures, and facial expression), spoken narration or voice-over, on-screen text (captions and overlays), hashtags and metadata, and audio elements such as music or reused sounds. This approach enables a holistic analysis of how meaning is distributed across modalities rather than located in any single component.

3.4. Analytical Procedure

The analysis combined deductive and inductive interpretation. Deductively, the three analytical layers developed from the theoretical framework—platform adaptation, political articulation, and visibility work—structured the analysis. Rather than functioning as mutually exclusive categories, these layers provided complementary analytical perspectives through which every video was examined. Inductively, descriptive subcodes were developed within each layer to capture recurring multimodal patterns across the corpus. A detailed description of the analytical framework, coding dimensions, and inductively developed subcodes is provided in Appendix B.

The analysis was interpretative and informed by feminist visual methodologies, which emphasize the situated nature of knowledge production and the construction of meaning across visual and discursive modalities (Özkula et al., 2024). Following an iterative comparative procedure, both authors repeatedly reviewed all videos, examining how visual performance, narration, on-screen text, sound, and platform-specific features interacted to produce political meaning. Coding categories were continuously refined through systematic comparison and discussion until interpretative consistency was achieved.

Rather than emphasizing the frequency of individual features, the analysis focused on recurring multimodal configurations across videos. Particular attention was paid to how platform-native formats, feminist claims, and visibility strategies co-occurred and interacted, thereby shaping the articulation and circulation of contentious expression on TikTok.

3.5. Limitations and Reflexivity

The dataset reflects content made visible through TikTok's interface and is therefore shaped by platform recommendation systems and hashtag-based retrieval. As such, it captures patterns of circulated rather than total content and may reflect underlying algorithmic biases in what becomes observable and analyzable.

In line with the ethical guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al., 2020), the study adopts a precautionary approach to identifiability. Although all data were publicly accessible at the time of collection, no screenshots, usernames, or facial images are reproduced, as their inclusion would increase the traceability of individuals—particularly in the context of politically sensitive content.

4. Results

In this section, we present the three main formats that we identified in the comparative analysis of our datasets: (a) makeup tutorials as Trojan horses for political meaning, (b) makeup transitions to dramatize (and make sense of) violence, and (c) the face as canvas for political messages. As our analysis shows, these practices do not function in isolation but often intersect in complex ways.

4.1. *Makeup Tutorials as Trojan Horses for Political Meaning*

The videos in this dataset closely adhere to the #makeupwithme format, which constitutes a recognizable platform-native genre in which creators document their daily makeup routines while addressing the audience in an informal, conversational manner. Typically structured around close-up shots of the face, these videos combine aesthetic practice with direct address, often accompanied by music or voiceover.

Across the dataset, this format is adapted in two similar but distinct ways. In the Ni Una Menos case, the format is anchored in a standardized discursive template. Creators perform their makeup routine using two main audio tracks—“si un día de estos me matan” (if one day they kill me) or “si mañana no regreso” (if I don’t return tomorrow)—poetic monologues anticipating the conditions under which femicide would be socially justified, referencing institutional limitations and enumerating familiar victim-blaming narratives. The soundtracks structure the communicative act, producing consistency across videos while allowing variation in visual performance.

By contrast, in the videos relating to the Woman, Life, Freedom protests, the same format is more frequently adapted through individual narration. While maintaining the visual conventions of makeup tutorials—foundation application, concealer, eyelash curling—creators introduce voice-over or direct speech to articulate critique. For instance, one creator denounces how the Iranian regime controls “how women dress, speak, think and protest,” while another frames makeup itself as resistance, stating: “Did you know makeup is a form of political resistance in Iran?” and recounting how women in Tehran use it to assert autonomy in a context where it is regulated and policed. This contrast highlights two complementary modes of adaptation: a collective, standardized mode, structured through a shared soundtrack; and an individualized, narrative mode, based on personal explanation and contextualization.

Within both configurations, the makeup tutorial format performs political work by embedding critique within an aesthetic routine. Rather than presenting contentious expression through explicitly political genres, creators integrate it into everyday practices associated with beauty and self-presentation. In the Ni Una Menos videos, this embedding operates through the juxtaposition of repetitive, visually familiar gestures with the severity of the soundtrack’s content, producing a layered communicative structure in which aesthetic normalcy coexists with discursive disruption. In the Woman, Life, Freedom videos, political work is performed through personal narration and explanation, transforming the routine into a space for contextualizing repression and reframing everyday practices—such as wearing makeup—as acts of resistance. In both cases, the format is not a neutral container but an active structuring device that shapes how contentious expression is articulated and received, enabling activism to operate through vernacularized, platform-native forms.

From a visibility work perspective, these videos constitute paradigmatic examples of algorithmic resistance (Treré & Bonini, 2024). By embedding critique within highly recognizable and platform-familiar formats, creators engage in algorithmic evasion, presenting contentious expression in forms unlikely to be immediately classified as political (Zeng & Kaye, 2022). At the same time, creators perform algorithmic hijacking (Treré & Bonini, 2024), appropriating unrelated high-visibility hashtags—such as #makeuptutorial, #makeupartist, #women, or #beauty—and their associated metadata to redirect attention toward gender violence and state repression. Positioning the content within lifestyle and beauty categories rather than activist discourse allows activists to reach a greater public, namely all users interested in beauty, while reducing the likelihood of moderation, downranking, or exclusion from recommendation flows. Through this combined strategy, contentious expression becomes both circulable and less detectable within TikTok’s contested visibility regime.

Makeup tutorials such as these illustrate how networked feminist actors strategically appropriate and repurpose the visual repertoires of popular culture to articulate critique. Functioning much like a Trojan horse, contentious expression is embedded within familiar beauty content and thus introduced into the viewer’s attention under the guise of entertainment. The unexpected shift from tutorial to critique not only amplifies the disruptive effect but also enhances circulation by sustaining viewer engagement. As Alice Ophelia observes, the appeal of such content lies in its capacity to convey a “secret coded message,” making viewers feel that “they are in on the activism itself” (as quoted in Newman, 2021).

4.2. Makeup Transitions to Dramatize (and Make Sense of) Violence

In contrast to the #makeupwithme videos discussed above, a significant portion of the dataset mobilizes makeup practices as a form of visual storytelling through staged, embodied violence. Here, the memetic structure shifts from conversational routine to transformation-based formats, in which creators rely on TikTok’s highly recognizable technique of visual transitions. As a platform-native convention, transitions function as an iterable template that structures participation through before–after sequences, rapid edits, and gesture-based cuts, and are widely understood as markers of technical proficiency within TikTok’s audiovisual grammar (Abidin, 2020; Zeng & Kaye, 2022). In beauty-related content, such transitions typically dramatize aesthetic transformation—from a natural appearance to a stylized or “full-glam” look—serving as a central visual spectacle (Otto, 2023). Across the dataset, however, creators adapt this familiar format by reconfiguring transformation as a narrative device for staging violence.

Despite their different geopolitical contexts, both the Woman, Life, Freedom and Ni Una Menos subsets follow a similar formal logic in which makeup transitions are used to depict and transform embodied experiences of violence. In the Iran-related videos circulating after the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, creators initially reproduce conventional beauty routines: Close-up shots frame the application of foundation, concealer, blush, mascara, and red lipstick. These sequences are abruptly disrupted by transition effects that transform polished appearances into simulated injuries—bloody noses, black eyes, or split lips. Through cuts or hand gestures that alternately conceal and reveal different layers of makeup, creators juxtapose aesthetic perfection with visual markers of violence. Combined with hashtags such as #MahsaAmini and #WomanLifeFreedom, these transformations explicitly reference Amini’s death while pointing to broader patterns of gender-based violence and state repression in Iran. Facial expressions—often staging grief, pain, or shock—further intensify the performative dimension, as violence is not only represented but enacted on the creators’ own bodies.

A similar aesthetic logic can be observed in videos associated with the Ni Una Menos makeup challenge. These clips likewise stage bodily reenactments of violence through made-up injuries and theatrical performances of suffering. However, compared to many Iranian examples, the Ni Una Menos videos often employ a more elaborate choreography of transitions, linking multiple shots of differently made-up faces through rapid, platform-specific edits. Faces marked by bruises, taped mouths, or bloody handprints are interwoven with gestures and props—blindfolds, plastic bags, ropes suggesting strangulation—that evoke different forms of gender-based violence. In some cases, additional visual effects such as flames intensify the dramatic staging. At the same time, these representations are juxtaposed with images of composure and defiance, as creators confront the camera with steady gazes and carefully applied makeup. Within this visual vocabulary, elements such as purple eyeshadow and red lipstick emerge as recognizable symbols of feminist protest.

Within this configuration, the format performs political work by transforming makeup itself into an aesthetic medium of contentious expression. In doing so, it connects with a longer history of feminist performance art, in which the body becomes both medium and site of protest through the staging of vulnerability and violence, while also aligning with more recent “artist” repertoires such as those of the feminist activist group FEMEN, who mobilize body paint, fake blood, and simulated injury to turn the naked female body into a political weapon. Comparable strategies can be observed in contemporary makeup art, where practitioners such as Alex Box, Isamaya Ffrench, or Eszter Magyar use distortion and prosthetics to deliberately collapse the boundary between beautification and violence. In this sense, the TikTok videos extend an existing visual repertoire across art and activism in which makeup is used as a weaponized aesthetic of resistance.

Unlike #makeupwithme formats that embed critique within narrative or audio layers, transition videos thus convey political meaning directly through the visual transformation. The abrupt shift from normative beauty aesthetics to explicit signs of violence produces a moment of rupture that destabilizes the coherence typically associated with beauty content. Through this visual logic, makeup ceases to function as decoration and instead becomes a tool for representing, reenacting, and contesting violence.

Makeup transition videos use the performed vulnerability of the female body as a protest tool which is turned against the causes of the violence itself. Recent scholarship has emphasized the constitutive role of vulnerability in political action, particularly in digital contexts (Vachhani, 2024). Butler (2011, p. 198) suggests that “receptivity and vulnerability are actually the presuppositions of agency and resistance, and not their opposite.” She argues that it is precisely our susceptibility to being affected by injustice that moves us to resist it. Therefore, vulnerability functions as an “effective mobilizing force” in political struggles (Butler, 2016, p. 14). In this sense, the injured female body we see in the transition videos is not a sign of its “weakness,” but, on the contrary, becomes a potent symbol for feminist resistance and the starting point for networked action.

From a visibility work perspective, these videos similarly rely on the strategic adaptation of platform-native conventions. Transformation videos are known to capture attention and sustain viewer engagement, contributing to their algorithmic amplification (Zeng & Kaye, 2022). By operating within this high-visibility format, creators increase the likelihood of circulation while embedding contentious expression within content that remains recognizable as beauty-related. The use of relevant hashtags—such as #makeup, #makeuptutorial, or #beauty, alongside activist tags—further situates these videos within overlapping

content categories, enhancing discoverability while reducing the risk of immediate suppression. At the same time, the dramatic and visually striking nature of the transformations increases shareability, reinforcing circulation within TikTok's attention economy.

This visibility is further amplified through the use of highly recognized, context-specific protest songs. Some Woman, Life, Freedom transition videos draw on a live version of "Another Love" by Tom Odell. By lip-syncing the lyrics ("And if somebody hurts you, I wanna fight/But my hands been broken one too many times"), the audio evokes themes of struggle and solidarity, reinforcing the affective intensity of the visual performances. Other videos use "Baraye" ("For" in Persian) by Shervin Hajipour, a song that became a central anthem of the 2022 Iranian protests, articulating everyday grievances of the Iranian people and their collective demands for freedom. Both songs circulated widely on social media and were adopted across various protest formats, including videos of women cutting their hair as a gesture of solidarity (Schankweiler & Straub, 2023). As such, the sounds function as a connective infrastructure linking different memetic templates, enhancing the overall visibility of the Woman, Life, Freedom protests on the platform.

In the Ni Una Menos case, the most recurrent song is "Canción sin miedo" ("Song without fear" in Spanish), a protest song by Mexican composer and singer Vivir Quintana, which stages a letter to the Mexican president, asking him to address the endemic problem of gender violence, which has become an anthem for feminist protests (Cervi & García-Blesa, 2026).

Across both the Woman, Life, Freedom and Ni Una Menos cases, activism thus emerges as a form of platform-native adaptation, in which the aesthetic affordances of makeup content are repurposed to stage, visualize, and circulate experiences of violence under conditions of contested visibility. Notwithstanding, the consequences of making such expressions visible are unevenly distributed, contingent on the geopolitical conditions in which creators operate. For Iranian creators, in particular, participating in such forms of visibility entails very real risks to their lives. A striking example is Iranian actress and influencer Parisa Pourmashki, who disappeared shortly after posting a makeup transition format video in October 2022 (Witness Report, 2024). Her video followed the elaborate transition choreographies typical of our dataset, shifting between multiple staged looks: a blindfolded, blood-smeared face, a mouth sealed with safety pins, or mascara running like blood from her eyes. After the video was removed from her accounts, it was reposted by users outside Iran. Many explicitly linked its publication to Pourmashki's sudden disappearance and called for amplifying Iranian voices, urging others to "be their voice." This case underscores the ambivalent conditions under which makeup activism operates: While visibility can function as a powerful resource for feminist expression and transnational solidarity, it is embedded in asymmetrical structures where visibility carries radically different real-world political consequences depending on geopolitical context.

4.3. The Face as Canvas for Political Messages

A third memetic format identified in the dataset consists of videos in which makeup is used to transform the face into a surface for explicit inscription, where contentious expression is rendered directly through written or symbolic elements. As a platform-native adaptation, this format builds on the visual conventions of beauty content while extending them toward more overt forms of signification. It often appears in hybrid configurations, combined with the transformation-based videos discussed above, but shifts the emphasis from visual transitions to symbolic and textual marking of the body.

Across the dataset, this format is adapted in both the Woman, Life, Freedom and Ni Una Menos contexts, albeit with different emphases. In videos expressing solidarity with the Iranian protests, creators paint national flags or maps onto their faces, visually aligning themselves with the Iranian people's struggle. In these cases, the individual body is reconfigured as a collective or national body, displacing the focus from violence against individual women to violence against a broader political community. This articulation is sometimes embedded within familiar TikTok formats such as GRWM, reframed as "get ready with me for protest," thereby merging everyday routines with explicit acts of political positioning. In some cases, this is expressed through direct inscription—one video shows an act of unveiling that coincides with the revelation of text written across the woman's eyelid: "hijab is a choice." Here, makeup is effectively replaced by an explicit political message.

In the Ni Una Menos subset, this aesthetic is further intensified, as the format more consistently foregrounds written messages and symbolic repertoires of feminist resistance. Phrases such as "Ni una más, nos queremos vivas" ("not one more, we want you alive") are inscribed directly onto the skin, often complemented by hashtags that reinforce the message at the level of metadata. Another recurring practice involves writing the names of femicide victims onto the body, producing an embodied form of remembrance that situates individual cases within a broader collective struggle. At the same time, the videos mobilize widely recognizable feminist symbols, including the Venus sign and the use of purple makeup, alongside more elaborate imagery such as female figures with raised fists or surrounded by flames, echoing established revolutionary iconography.

Within this configuration, the format performs political work by transforming makeup into a medium of direct inscription, where contentious expression is no longer embedded or implied but visibly articulated on the body itself. The face becomes a site of enunciation, collapsing the distinction between aesthetic practice and political messaging. In contrast to other formats where critique is conveyed through narration or juxtaposition, here the political meaning is materially present, rendered legible through text and symbols that anchor interpretation. This also resonates with conceptual trends in contemporary makeup art, where practitioners use written inscriptions to interrogate beauty norms and their socio-political implications—for instance, Eszter Magyar's text-based interventions on eyelids, lips and tongues such as "this is not art" or "inner beauty." Across these practices, the feminized body becomes a semiotic surface on which critique is made immediately visible and legible.

From a visibility work perspective, these videos operate differently from the previous formats, as they rely less on indirectness and more on the controlled amplification of explicit content. Rather than minimizing political legibility, creators deliberately foreground contentious expression through visual inscription, while still embedding it within recognizable beauty formats. By doing so, they ensure that the message remains immediately readable to audiences without fully departing from platform-native conventions that support circulation.

This strategy reflects a distinct mode of adaptation: Instead of disguising content, creators modulate its intensity and framing to remain compatible with platform logics. The use of familiar formats such as #makeup or #GRWM anchors the videos within high-visibility content categories, while the integration of activist hashtags—such as #NiUnaMenos, #MahsaAmini, or #WomanLifeFreedom—positions them within broader discursive networks. Rather than functioning primarily as a means of evasion, this dual positioning

allows creators to expand reach across overlapping audiences, connecting lifestyle-oriented viewers with activist content.

At the same time, these practices unfold within a context of algorithmic control and uneven censorship, where explicitly political content may still be subject to restriction. By distributing contentious expression across visual, textual, and symbolic layers—rather than relying on a single modality—creators reduce dependence on any one element that might trigger suppression. Visibility is thus achieved through compositional strategies, in which meaning is layered and distributed across the video's elements, allowing for both clarity and resilience within TikTok's contested visibility regime.

Across both the Woman, Life, Freedom and Ni Una Menos cases, this format demonstrates how activists adapt platform-native aesthetics not only to navigate censorship, but also to sustain the circulation of explicit political messaging, reinforcing the centrality of adaptation in conditions of algorithmic visibility and control.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article comparatively examined how creators associated with the Latin American Ni Una Menos movement and the Iranian Woman, Life, Freedom protests mobilize beauty practices to communicate feminist claims on TikTok. Despite their markedly different socio-political contexts, both movements repeatedly appropriated similar platform-native beauty formats to articulate distinct political struggles.

Building on these recurring similarities, we introduce the concept of “makeup activism” to describe the strategic mobilization of beauty practices to articulate feminist claims through platform-native vernaculars. The three analytical dimensions developed in this article—platform adaptation, political articulation, and visibility work—offer a framework for understanding how this communicative practice takes shape, acquires political meaning, and negotiates visibility within TikTok's algorithmically governed environment.

The first analytical dimension, platform adaptation, reveals how activists across both movements align their communication with formats that are already popular and privileged within TikTok's attention economy. This adaptation, on the one hand, reflects TikTok's transnational communicative ecology, in which creators continuously observe, imitate, and repurpose one another's practices—consistent with the platform's culture of imitation (Zulli & Zulli, 2022)—while reworking them through locally situated protest cultures, symbolic repertoires, and culturally specific references. On the other hand, activists strategically embed feminist claims within familiar beauty formats that are more likely to be amplified by TikTok's recommendation system, extending their reach beyond already sympathetic or politically engaged publics. Tutorials, transformation videos, and facial inscription, therefore, operate not simply as aesthetic conventions but as recognizable platform vernaculars that simultaneously facilitate transnational imitation and broaden the circulation of feminist claims across diverse publics.

These findings extend Kohout's (2019) concept of visual net feminism. While Kohout foregrounds the growing centrality of visual aesthetics to feminist expression, our analysis shows that on TikTok these aesthetics operate not simply as expressive resources but as platform vernaculars through which feminist politics become recognizable, imitable, and widely circulable. In this sense, visual net feminism is shaped not only by the increasing importance of visual aesthetics, but also by the platform logics that render aesthetic forms communicatively effective across diverse political contexts.

The second analytical dimension, political articulation, foregrounds how TikTok creators transform makeup from a practice of beautification into a communicative medium through which collective feminist critique is articulated. Across both datasets, beauty practices become vehicles for denouncing gender-based violence, staging embodied experiences of oppression, and cultivating affective solidarity.

These findings not only complicate longstanding feminist debates that conceptualize makeup simultaneously as a technology of discipline (Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 1991) and a medium of resistance (White, 2018) by showing how beauty practices can be strategically reconfigured as collective performances of political expression, but also challenge influential accounts of popular feminism and platformized beauty cultures (Abidin, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007). Existing scholarship has frequently interpreted beauty practices on social media through the lens of neoliberal self-branding, individualized choice, and commodified empowerment. While makeup activism undoubtedly unfolds within commercialized platform environments, our findings suggest that commodification and political resistance should not be understood as mutually exclusive dynamics. Political expression, aesthetic practice, self-presentation, and entrepreneurial branding frequently coexist within the same creator profiles, rendering any straightforward distinction between activism and the commercial infrastructures that sustain visibility increasingly untenable. Rather than displacing feminist politics, these commercial infrastructures increasingly constitute the conditions through which feminist critique is articulated, circulated, and made publicly visible.

More fundamentally, however, our comparative analysis challenges dominant understandings of popular feminism derived primarily from Western liberal contexts (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Popular feminism has frequently been theorized through individualized empowerment, entrepreneurial self-branding, and the politics of personal choice. Although these dynamics remain relevant within TikTok's commercial ecosystem, neither of the movements examined here can be adequately explained through this framework alone. In both cases, makeup is mobilized primarily to articulate collective political struggles rather than individualized projects of self-realization. At the same time, the comparison reveals that these collective struggles are themselves differently constituted. Whereas Ni Una Menos mobilizes beauty practices to denounce femicide, memorialize victims, and reinforce transnational feminist solidarity, Woman, Life, Freedom articulates feminist resistance within a broader struggle against authoritarian rule, compulsory veiling, and state repression. Similar platform vernaculars therefore accommodate distinct feminist projects whose political meanings remain inseparable from their socio-political contexts.

The third analytical dimension, visibility work, extends Abidin's (2016) account of platformed visibility by demonstrating how commercially privileged beauty vernaculars become tactical infrastructures for feminist activism. Makeup activism emerges not because beauty is inherently political, but because beauty constitutes one of TikTok's most structurally privileged communicative genres. As discussed above, beauty formats are already optimized for attention, circulation, and imitation, making them particularly effective vehicles for embedding political critique within familiar platform conventions. Their apparent ordinariness also generates a degree of strategic ambiguity, allowing contentious expression to circulate through genres more commonly associated with entertainment and lifestyle while reducing the likelihood of immediate moderation or algorithmic suppression. Rather than operating outside platform logics, activists strategically appropriate these logics as conditions for political visibility, illustrating forms of algorithmic resistance (Treré & Bonini, 2024) that work through, rather than against, the platform's recommendation and governance systems.

At the same time, our comparison highlights that similar visibility strategies acquire different political meanings and consequences across socio-political contexts. Although creators across both movements negotiate the same platform infrastructures, they do so under profoundly unequal socio-political conditions. Whereas Ni Una Menos primarily mobilizes makeup to sustain public denunciation, collective memory, and transnational feminist solidarity within comparatively open digital publics, Woman, Life, Freedom deploys these same visibility strategies in a context where aesthetic self-presentation already constitutes an act of resistance against authoritarian rule and online participation can translate into offline retaliation (Alimardani & Alterman, 2022). Visibility on TikTok should therefore be understood as a situated political resource whose possibilities and risks are shaped by the intersection of platform governance and local regimes of power.

This study has several limitations. Because the platform's recommendation and moderation systems remain largely opaque, our analysis necessarily infers platform dynamics from observable patterns of content production and circulation rather than from direct access to algorithmic processes. Likewise, focusing on two movements cannot capture the full diversity of feminist activism on TikTok, nor the many forms of political expression that remain invisible because they fail to align with platform-native vernaculars or are actively suppressed by platform governance. Future research could therefore examine more directly how creators themselves understand and strategically appropriate these communicative practices, as well as how changes in platform governance reshape the relationship between visibility and activism over time.

Ultimately, this article argues that “makeup activism” should not be understood as a universal feminist repertoire disseminated through social media, but as a shared platform vernacular through which distinct feminist projects are articulated, negotiated, and rendered visible under historically and politically specific conditions. Under conditions of platformization, beauty functions not simply as an object of consumption or self-expression, but as a communicative infrastructure through which feminist politics become recognizable, circulable, and collectively actionable. In doing so, the concept of “makeup activism” foregrounds how contemporary feminist struggles are shaped not only by their political objectives or cultural meanings, but also by the algorithmic, aesthetic, and commercial infrastructures that increasingly govern the conditions under which dissent becomes visible, circulates across publics, and acquires political durability.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

LLMs Disclosure

A large language model (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used solely for translation purposes (single words or phrases) and minor linguistic refinement. All outputs were reviewed and verified to ensure accuracy and fidelity to the intended meaning.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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