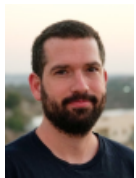


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The 2024 Elections: Emotional appeals through diversity and victimhood helped the reactionary right use TikTok to reshape its image



*The social media platform TikTok has become an important channel for news and information for many Americans and played an important role in the 2024 presidential election. **Gil Sharon** looks at how those on the reactionary right in the US were able to use TikTok to reshape their image away from the alt-right to a more diverse community based around a shared Christian identity and sense of victimhood.*

- *This article is part of 'The 2024 Elections' series curated by Peter Finn (Kingston University). The series has explored the 2024 US elections at the state and national level. If you are interested in contributing to the series, contact Peter Finn (p.finn@kingston.ac.uk).*

The 2024 US presidential election was the first where TikTok was a significant platform in the media landscape. About **two-thirds** of US young adults use TikTok, and its use for news consumption rose **drastically** between 2020 and 2024.

TikTok has enabled the reactionary right to undergo a form of rebranding and to distance itself from the increasingly sinister image of the **alt-right**. While the alt-right initially presented itself as a youthful and energetic movement, it was mainly characterized by dark humor on online fringe forums which eventually evolved into major campaigns of harassment like 2014's **Gamergate** and even violence as in the 2017 white supremacist rally in **Charlottesville**, Virginia. In contrast, reactionary right users on TikTok boldly present their faces and identities, showcasing a demographically diverse community and often appealing to a sense of victimhood.

People become content on the TikTok platform

TikTok is a short-form video platform. The general aesthetic is the selfie-style talking head testimony. The content is intertwined with **Gen Z** culture of being perceived as vulnerable, emotional, and real. Political content is no exception, as it's also wrapped in a personal, authentic, and amateur vibe. Indeed, TikTok users don't only share their opinions; they become the content as they **perform** their opinions. Even professional pundits or politicians usually use this amateur style so as to be perceived as more "real", giving them an accessible reach.

The reactionary right community I focus on are those users who dedicate their accounts exclusively to political content. They exemplify all these traits of TikTok's style, turning their messages into a form of entertainment: being short, simple, concise, and very binary.

It is important to note that TikTok strictly bans or suppresses videos, search terms, and accounts that don't follow its hateful speech **guidelines**. This saves the far right from itself, as extreme views are out, and those who are still there learn how to **code** their language and navigate the platform's norms and technicalities. Consequently, the language and symbols of the American far-right on TikTok are usually aligned with MAGA/Trump supporters' imagery.

Diversity and victimhood

Maybe the most fascinating aspect of the reactionary right community on TikTok is its diversity. Once immersed in the content, it seems many successful influencers are Black, women, Hispanic or gay. When we think in general populist terms of "the people", it's not only the usual suspects of far-right imagery: heterosexual, white men, but a range of demographics. Accordingly, who is included in this new "people", and who is excluded? The common ground is Christian/religious values and traditional gender roles. In that sense, gay people can be included, but trans people are excluded.

But it is more than just who is in and who is out. This large amount of content and users fosters a sense of community. This sense of belonging and identity is an element that draws youth to offline far-right communities. TikTok acts as a form of comradeship between like-minded people with reactionary views. Influencers form a bond between each other and with their followers.

Theoretically, consuming an immense amount of reactionary content creates a certain trust that could translate to persuasion. This is especially the case where the content taps into an emotional sense of victimhood. Studies have shown that the far-right appeals to the sense of white identity and **status** loss. But here, we can see a different target to the sense of victimhood. Supporting Trump is an identity in and of itself.



Photo by Solen Feyissa on Unsplash

There are many videos on TikTok talking about how Trump supporters feel threatened. For instance, some videos talk about how if someone puts a Trump sign in their yard, their house will be **trashed**. Another example is the controversy of FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) workers being instructed not to help houses with Trump signs after **Hurricane Helene**. Other influencers say they have been verbally attacked for supporting **Trump** out loud or that TikTok suppresses their **visibility**. You can only imagine how these users "**celebrated**" when former President Joe Biden called Trump supporters "**garbage**".

Christianity and masculinity

The themes overwhelmingly dominating the content created by the reactionary right on TikTok around the 2024 election are Christianity/religion and masculinity/traditional gender roles. The most significant theme may well be Christian or religious values, which include issues like abortion but mainly stays at the surface level of Christianity as an identity (and a source for victimhood as well). Likewise, these Christian themes play a crucial role in blaming the left or Democrats for being morally corrupt or evil. The most prominent reactionary influencers on TikTok, such as **Charlie Kirk** and **Candace Owens**, promote these messages.

The most significant controversy in this community in October 2024 was the then Vice President Harris' verbal "insult" against Christian protesters. At a rally in **Wisconsin**, Harris replied to two pro-life protesters, "You're in the wrong rally." That saying spread across the reactionary right influencers on TikTok. Notably, an edited **video** based on Donald Trump's response to Harris' remark by the account "MAGA" has generated about nine million likes (not views!)

The second most prominent theme is masculinity or traditional gender roles. Mainly the issues dealing with "woke" culture, transgender rights (especially in sports or education), and women's and

men's role in the family/relationships. There are also "manosphere" type accounts dedicated to masculinity advice or mocking women, but even users not from that sphere use similar rhetoric.

In October, just ahead of the election, masculinity was used as a rhetorical tool to ridicule Democratic men as not being masculine enough. Similarly, it was also used to personally attack the then Vice-Presidential Democratic nominee, Tim Walz, with offensive nicknames. Donald Trump Jr. posted a [video](#) humorously ridiculing Tim Walz about his masculinity. Don Jr.'s TikTok exemplifies the power of the platform to personalize the public's attitude towards a sophisticated professional political campaign just because he seems authentic.

The role of TikTok in the 2024 presidential election highlights how the reactionary right strategically used the platform to reshape its image as authentic, relatable, and diverse. This rebranding could significantly enhance their appeal to a broader audience and align with the demographic shifts seen in voter turnout.

- *This article is based on the paper, "The far-right appealing strategies on TikTok around the 2024 US election", which won the Richard E. Neustadt Paper Prize at the 2025 conference of the American Politics Group of the UK Political Studies Association.*
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Gil Sharon is a Media and Communication PhD student from the University of Leeds. His research focuses on analysing and mapping the US reactionary right on TikTok. His paper won the Richard E. Neustadt Paper Prize at the 2025 APG conference.

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