STITCHING POLITICS AND IDENTITY ON TIKTOK

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Introductory Statement

Though a relative newcomer among social media platforms, social video-sharing platform TikTok is one of the largest social media platforms in the world, boasting over one billion monthly active users, which it garnered in just five years (Dellatto, 2021). While much of the early attention to the platform focused on more frivolous elements, such as its dances and challenges, the political weight of TikTok has become ever clearer. In the 2020 US election, Donald Trump's plan to fill the 19,000-seat BOK Center in Tulsa was stymied by young activists who reserved tickets with no intention of attending, organized largely on TikTok (Bandy & Diakopoulos, 2020). In the years since, political discourse on TikTok has continued to emerge from everyday users and political campaigns alike (see Newman, 2022), even as TikTok itself has become an object of political contention: calls for banning the app in the United States–citing security concerns influenced by xenophobia, given the app's Chinese ownership–began in the Trump presidency (Allyn, 2020) and have recently culminated in state- and federal-level bans on the app for government-owned devices in the U.S. (Berman, 2023). While some studies have navigated limited data access and the platform's relative infancy to offer an examination of political TikTok (see Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019; Medina Serrano et al., 2020; Vijay & Gekker, 2021; Guinaudeau et al., 2022), there remains a significant need for more analysis and theorization of how TikTok can become both a site for political discourse and a feature caught up within political mobilization.

This panel seeks to bring together emerging work that deals with political participation on TikTok, in order to share current wisdom and forge future research directions. The presented works specifically focus on the relationship between political participation on TikTok and political identity for three primary reasons. First, as a video-based and thus embodied platform (Raun, 2012), creator identity is more prominent and easily perceptible in the visual and auditory elements of TikTok videos than in the primarily text-based posts on platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Second, TikTok relies more heavily on its recommendation algorithm for content distribution than its competitors traditionally have (Kaye et al., 2022; Cotter et al., 2022; Zeng & Kaye, 2022; Zhang & Liu, 2021), leading to the creation of "refracted publics" (Abidin, 2021) or *Gemeinschaft-style* communities (Kaye et al., 2022) around users' common interests, which may include and/or be heavily informed by identity. Third, TikTok has long prioritized and found success with Generation Z and younger users more broadly (Zeng et al., 2021; Vogels et al., 2022; Stahl & Literat, 2022), which has made generational identity extremely salient on the app, while also implicating political identity, as young people tend to hold political beliefs more cognizant and accepting of diverse identities than older generations (Parker et al., 2019).

The papers in this panel consider a wide range of identity characteristics of TikTok users and how these identities shape and are shaped by political discourse on TikTok. Paper 1 builds on TikTok's targeting of Gen Z, considering the identities of age and generation through a content analysis of political remix on TikTok to uncover how younger users use TikTok for political activism as compared to their older counterparts, and finding evidence that TikTok is a powerful site of collective action. Also building from TikTok's appeal to GenZ, Paper 2 presents a digital ethnographic analysis of the Trad-Wife phenomena on TikTok, offering that TikTok quietly (and thus insidiously)

offers space for the cultivation of Christian Nationalist, 'gentle fascisms' within GenZ women, often without mention of 'politics' at all. Paper 3 offers a computational content analysis of political posts on TikTok with a focus on the interactions between identity and partisanship, and particularly the ways in which creators of marginalized identities on the right act as identity entrepreneurs, offering conservative critiques of their identity groups in ways which find popularity among conservative audiences of hegemonic identities. Finally, Paper 4 looks at differences in how TikTok users respond to male and female politicians' TikTok videos using a combination of computational and qualitative methods, with exploratory analysis suggesting that male politicians receive more neutral and positive comments than female politicians. By focusing on identity and political discourse on TikTok, we recognize the wide range of political activity occurring on a platform often denigrated as frivolous, and foreground the importance of identity characteristics to the technological and social shaping of these dialogues.

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STOP SCROLLING!: YOUTH ACTIVISM AND POLITICAL REMIX ON TIKTOK

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Introduction

As the social video platform TikTok has exploded in popularity (Guinaudeau et al., 2022), its political aptitude has been subject to debate. While some see it as a site of frivolous dance videos (Harris, 2021), others see it as a site of serious political action (Herrman, 2020). TikTok stands out from other platforms like Twitter, whose political implications have been widely studied, for being video-based, remix-based, and centered around algorithmically-curated content over personal networks. It also stands out for being dominated by youth (Vogels et al., 2022), who are turning to the site in particular for political engagement (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019; Choi, 2022). Fittingly then, the debate around TikTok's political capacity mirrors the debate around youth political participation. Youth tend toward proactive forms of political participation that leverage new media technologies and peer interaction over formal institutions (Bennett et al., 2011; Cohen & Kahne, 2012; Pickard, 2019); although this style is increasingly validated by researchers, it continues to be read by many as improper and/or a sign of political apathy (Flanagan & Levine, 2010).

We would be well-advised to take seriously the potential of youth civic styles and TikTok for political change, as enough evidence has mounted that neither can be easily written off. Here, we take up this task by investigating youth political participation on TikTok in order to further our understanding of both.

We first consider what kind of political content circulates on TikTok among youth and in general. It has been found that people primarily use Twitter to spread information, rather than mobilize action (Boulianne et al., 2020). However, there is reason to believe that TikTok is more action-oriented than its extensively-researched counterpart: there is a strong perception that it is good for activism (Abidin, 2019; Compte & Klug, 2021), it has been linked to successful activist mobilization (Bandy & Diakapoulos, 2020), and its younger user base is inclined toward action (Earl et al., 2017). Next, we consider how political content circulates on TikTok among youth and in general. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), digital action networks follow two main logics: 1) collective action, wherein individuals rally around a shared 'we' by way of organizational brokerage, and 2) connective action, wherein individuals take part in a larger movement by sharing their own personal narratives and experiences. As a highly embodied (Raun, 2012) and affective (Hautea et al., 2021; Haslem, 2022) app built for personalization (Herrman, 2020), TikTok appears poised to support connective action, and in some cases, it already has (Becker, 2021; Sadler, 2022). Further, as connective action relies on emergent digital technologies and their sharing capabilities, it is seen as newer and younger, and thus well-aligned with TikTok's main user base.

Taken together, these considerations – i.e., the what and the how of political circulation on TikTok – allow us to better understand TikTok's political use, while adding important depth to our conception of youth civic styles.

Data and Methods

We hone in on the youth-led digital activist organization Gen-Z for Change, for which TikTok is the 'primary stomping ground' (Ward, 2022). We first collected all TikTok videos that have an original "sound" and that tag "#genzforchange" in the caption (N = 66). We manually categorized these as either a) informational or b) a call to action. We then collected all videos that use one of those original sounds, which gave us a sample of remixes. Content primarily circulates on TikTok through remix, since there is not an option to directly repost someone else's video; further, remixes are supported by the way sounds work on the app: while a sound always accompanies a video, it is listed as its own discrete entity that can be shared between users. Our remix sample mostly consists of "duets" (85%), in which the poster adds a video alongside the original content in split-screen fashion. We will refer to all remixes as "duets" from here on. A team of two researchers watched every duet (N = 798) and coded them ($\alpha_{krippendorf} \in$ [.79,1]) for an array of attributes tied to collective and connective remix strategies, along with whether they were posted by a member of Generation Z or an older user.

Results

In terms of the kind of activist content circulated on TikTok, we find that in contrast to other platforms, call-to-action videos generated far more engagement than informational videos. The 24 original call-to-action videos yielded 343 duets (a ratio of 14:1), whereas the 36 original informational videos yielded 338 duets (a ratio of 9:1). Call-to-action videos were especially likely to be remixed by younger users. Moreover, the set of call-to-action duets prompted more likes, comments, and shares than the informational duets. This effect is strongest for shares: call-to-action duets make up only 50% of all duets, but they account for a whopping 95% of all shares. At the same time, these duets received fewer views overall than the informational duets, and were posted by less popular users.

As for how content is circulated, we find younger users adhere to the logic of collective action over connective action, especially compared with older users. Young users' duets typically involve a completely blank screen – or mostly blank with some relevant text inserted – alongside the original content. Meanwhile, older users tend to appear in their duets, reacting and gesturing alongside the original content. Additionally, young users repeat ideas and resources from the original content more frequently than they contribute new ones, while the opposite is true for older users. In these and other ways, young users demonstrate a form of remix that centers the core, collective message over their own self-expression.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that TikTok is a promising tool for social change, as it is not a site of political discussion alone, but also one of mobilization. When activists on TikTok urge other users to stop scrolling and act, their call is heeded – especially by members of Generation Z. Beyond reinforcing TikTok's social justice bent, this result affirms young

people's growing reputation as empowered and influential doers who leverage social media for social change.

However, young users' remix strategies challenged our expectations. As opposed to the playful, personalized, and connective approaches increasingly used to characterize youth political participation online, we observed young people engaging in deeply serious and collective ways. Instead of inserting their own ideas and reactions, they chose to repeat elements of the original message in their remixes; instead of appearing in the frame and visually articulating their stance, they maintained a minimalist aesthetic, directing the viewer's eye to the original content. In other words, they consistently chose to center the original video over themselves. For members of Generation Z then, political remix on TikTok does not always seem to hinge on creative self-expression, but can prompt and reward humorless collective organizing and advocacy. This departure from prior work on youth civic styles is all the more surprising given that older users made the opposite choices. That is, by injecting their personal opinions and physical reactions, older users took up strategies commonly attributed to younger users, verifying the existence of those strategies while complicating their associations.

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#MAKEHOUSEWIVESGREATAGAIN: THE DIGITAL-POLITICAL LIFE-WORLDS OF TRADITIONALIST GEN-Z WOMEN ON TIKTOK

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When we think of what constitutes far-right or hateful content online, we may imagine Pepe-laden 4chan memes and Reddit posts, or hyper-masculine YouTubers or Vloggers who provide explicitly political commentary and discuss the degeneracy of contemporary society. This notion of who and what the far-right *is* was especially solidified with the emergence of the Alt-Right, which popularized the image of a meme-savvy, young 'identarian' man who occupied fringe, subcultural digital spaces (Hawley 2019; Beran 2019). However, as the Alt-Right we remember from the deadly "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, VA has slinked out of the spotlight, it has been replaced by a far-right merged with expressions of the Christian right, forming what is now described as post-Trump Christian Nationalism. As images of the January 6th remind us that political crusades are also often spiritual ones (Dalsheim & Starrett 2021), the question of how mainstream Protestant, Catholic, and even Orthodox Christianities enable the evolution and spread of white and/or male supremacist traditionalist politics is gaining attention from scholars of media, religion, sociology, and anthropology alike (Berry 2021; Butler 2021; Gorski & Perry 2022; Riccardi-Swartz 2022).

Like the Alt-Right, we might imagine Christian nationalists as an identifiable group with similar cultural expressions, ideological rhetoric, political practices, and demographic features. However, the manifestations of Christian Nationalism that evolve within social media spaces like TikTok that host younger demographics and different forms of participation prove that not all users who endorse traditionalist and/or Christian Nationalist beliefs match the expectations we typically have for contemporary far-right

adherents. While much work has been done to investigate toxic masculinities of the alt-right as they emerge on Reddit's manosphere or within 4chan's recesses (e.g. Cousineau 2021; Helm et al. 2022; Stern 2019), little work has been done on the complex, ambiguous, and mundane political mobilization work achieved by young women practicing and promoting 'traditional family values' (Bjork-James 2020; Culicchia 2022) on digital spaces not typically associated with the contemporary far-right or Christian Nationalism, like TikTok and Instagram (Abi-Hassan 2017; Bracewell 2021).

In response, this paper draws from over a year of digital ethnographic research into the "trad-wife" (traditional wife) trend as it has been enacted on TikTok (Schellewald 2021). Differing in style from "Red-Pill Women" (Stern 2019), Trad-wives are young, white, Gen-Z or millennial women who use TikTok and/or Instagram to document their lives as traditional homemakers and housewives. These women have decided not to pursue higher education or a career, and instead commit to serving their husbands, tending to the home, and raising children. Most typically, these young women are in their early twenties, married, and already pregnant and/or mothers of young children. Trad-wives view themselves as strongly anti-feminist, and typically identify as Evangelical, Christian Reformed, or Catholic through hashtags like #christianwife or #christiangirlaesthetic. Most consistently, trad-wives present their lifestyles as a form of rebellion against the exhausting and toxic demands of #bossbabe capitalism and what they view as the dehumanizing hyper-sexuality of liberal or left-wing feminism, often playfully expressing these beliefs by lip-syncing lyrics in TikToks that cheekily present their point. In this sense, trad-wife politics enact what I refer to as a "gentle-fascism" that rebels against global neoliberal capitalism and that "rejects modernity" in pursuit of traditional, "natural" hierarchies of gendered (and implicitly racialized) order, but that does so in a playful, quotidian, and spiritual way that makes for supportive and upbeat comment sections.

Ironically, these women often rely on the liberal rhetoric of "individual choice" to mark their gendered enactment of these politics as innocent, normative, and in fact restorative of a better time and place, hence #Makehousewivesgreatagain. Alongside their rejection of egalitarian social systems in preference of patriarchy and "Western values" (a common far-right dog whistle for white-supremacy), Trad-wives' desire for a future that resembles the past firmly locates them as an expression of far-right politics (Stern 2019). Yet, the fact that trad-wife content can easily be described by followers as a healthy expression of liberal democracy via "freedom of choice", and the fact that such nuclear family life slides easily into normative Christian, Western cultural structures suggests why trad-wife content has been overlooked by researchers of the far-right in favor of more explicit extremist content that is easier to spot. Indeed, these accounts do not need to be explicitly political to present key features of far-right gender ideology as an admirable, whimsical, and "wholesome" lifestyle alongside their occasional denouncement of feminism, progressive activism, or "Marxism". While trad-wife styles vary, most content mimics other trending TikTok video formats that trace the rhythms of everyday life, such as the POV (point of view), "get ready with me", or "day in the life" templates often reproduced by beauty influencers. Trad-wives however infuse this quotidian day-in-the-life content with messages of modesty, humbling the self, coming to terms with the biological 'realities of womanhood', and serving God through acts of service to one's husband. More insidiously, some trad-wife content will briefly admit that

the best work they can do as a Christian woman is to bear more (implicitly white) children and raise them to follow their worldview. Others will use a TikTok dance to express that women shouldn't vote or be involved in public life, a sentiment that often deflects resistance by coding itself as "not totally serious".

At its core, this paper argues that it is a mistake to view trad-wife TikTok content as less urgent than more explicit forms of Christian Nationalism or far-right politics more broadly. Trad-wife content is dangerous precisely because of its subtlety and its emphasis on the daily, material practice of one's spiritual politics. Building from previous research which shows that mobilization of political practice tends to proceed ideological recruitment online (Devries 2021), I argue that TikTok trad-wives are a key ingredient within the spread of Christian Nationalist political belief within GenZ women, in part through their practice of prefigurative politics (Yates 2021). In other words, this research sees the political potency of trad-wives in their ability to engender the participation of other young women to enact hierarchy, supremacy and submission often without their knowledge that such practices are political at all. This conclusion is supported through qualitative analysis of the comment sections attached to the videos of popular trad-wife accounts. Additionally, this paper demonstrates the complexity of TikTok trad-wives by focusing on three key themes that distinguish trad-wives from other manifestations of the far-right: *women-for-women content*, *gentle fascism*, and their ability to function through what we on the outside might qualify as *contradiction*. Based on these findings, I suggest how we might design our resistance to these new and unsettlingly benign forms of digital Christian Nationalism. In sum, this research provides an important move within internet studies to assess a) how mainstream and youth-oriented platforms host seemingly benign expressions of white and male supremacy, and b) how spiritual-political-technological processes operate within and through the specific affordances of TikTok to reproduce a theocratic, authoritarian, and bio-essentialist politics of Christian Nationalism within even those populations that stand to lose greatly from such politics.

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FOR YOU POLITICS (FYP): PARTISANSHIP AND IDENTITY DISCOURSE ON POLITICAL TIKTOK

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Introduction

From activist organizing as in the effort to stymie Donald Trump's 2020 Tulsa campaign rally (Bandy & Diakopoulos, 2020) to use in electoral campaigns like that of the internet-savvy John Fetterman (Newman, 2022), TikTok has proven itself a political forum to be reckoned with, especially among younger users (Zeng et al., 2021; Vogels et al., 2022). This makes TikTok an ideal platform for studying the politics of younger publics, who survey data suggest are more likely than older generations to recognize inequality along the lines of race, gender, and sexual orientation, and advocate for related inclusive policies (Parker et al., 2019).

One of the best-known conservative influencers on TikTok is Christian Walker, who had over 400,000 followers before he was banned from the platform in early 2021 (Colyar, 2021). A young, gay, Black man, Walker made a name for himself with harsh critiques of his own identity groups, including his assertions that Black Lives Matter protestors are "terrorists" (as cited in Colyar, 2021) or that Pride Month is pointless (Robinson, 2022). Might figures like Walker be the future of the American right?

Existing literature suggests that they may. Leong (2016, 2021) employs the term "identity entrepreneurs" to refer to figures who leverage their minoritized identities to benefit themselves, particularly among hegemonic audiences. To this end, Leslie et al. (2019) found that white conservatives preferred Black conservative candidates who directly addressed issues of race from a conservative perspective over those who addressed other topics. Robinson (2005), Cimino (2006), and Hatfield (2018) likewise examined how queer conservatives have come to support the Republican party despite the American right's longstanding anti-LGBTQ+ platform. Such figures stand in stark contrast to wider trends: nonwhite Americans make up 40% of Democratic voters and only 19% of Republican voters (Gramlich, 2020), with Black Americans having a long history of voting Democratic in even greater proportions (Dawson, 1994, 2001; Harris-Lacewell, 2004), and LGBT voters identifying with the Democratic party over the Republican party in a 10:3 ratio (Mallory, 2019). Still, it is clear that the twenty-first century Republican party aims to benefit from the incorporation of (certain elements of) marginalized identities. This project aims to investigate this trend by focusing on TikTok, prompted by the app's young audience and the prominence of identity in the visual and auditory features of its video format, and posing the following research questions:

RQ 1: Do minoritized TikTok users address identity more frequently than non-minoritized users?
    RQ 1a: How does this vary with partisanship?

RQ 2: Does minoritized users' choice to address their minority identity affect the number of likes they receive?
    RQ 2a: How does this vary with partisanship?

RQ 3: How does minoritized users' choice to address their minority identity affect the nature of comments they receive?

      RQ 3a: How does this vary with partisanship?

Data & Account Coding

Making use of the Pyktok module (Freelon et al., n.d.), we scraped videos and metadata for the top 300 posts on each of nine TikTok hashtag pages, which appear to rank posts based on a combination of engagement and recency. The hashtags selected were *#liberal*, *#democrat*, *#biden*, *#conservative*, *#republican*, *#trump*, *#politics*, *#election*, and *#vote*. This resulted in 1,778 unique videos from 1,343 unique users. Next, up to 30 recent posts for each user were collected to expand the sample, for a total of 34,642 unique videos. The video descriptions associated with these videos featured 32,814 unique hashtags, which were coded by the researchers as either addressing politics, identity, neither, or both. Finally, this sample was reduced to 12,252 video posts which contain at least one hashtag addressing identity and/or politics. Comments were captured for each of these videos, totaling 3,741,461 comments.

With the aid of a graduate student researcher, all user accounts were for partisanship and identity characteristics including gender, up to two identifiable races/ethnicities, sexual orientation (if expressed), trans/cis gender status (if expressed), and religion. The unit of analysis for this coding is each account, including the associated screenname, handle, user bio, and avatar, as in Freelon et al. (2020), in addition to the videos from these accounts originally scraped from TikTok's hashtag pages.

Findings

To answer RQs 1 and 1a, we employed a series Welch's two-sample t-tests. First, we compared the frequency of posts containing race-related hashtags among nonwhite users to the frequency of such posts from other users, performing separate analyses for users on the political right and the political left. Race-related hashtag use was significantly higher among posts by nonwhite users than other users, for users on the right and on the left, and with a similar effect size across partisanship, as measured by Cohen's d ($d = 0.62$ and $d = 0.63$, respectively). Queer users on the left were also significantly more likely to post LGBTQ+-related hashtags than were users who did not self-identify as queer, but there was no comparable significant association on the right, likely due to the limited number of outwardly queer users on the right ($n = 3$).

To answer RQs 2 and 2a, we examined three-way interactions between video plays, user minoritized identity (queer or nonwhite), and the related minoritized-identity hashtag use on video likes, again separating models by partisanship. On the political right, we found that videos with a race-related hashtag and a nonwhite creator featured a significantly stronger relationship between plays and likes than other combinations of identity and hashtag, but no observable interactions regarding queer users. On the left, we found that only the presence of a race hashtag, regardless of user race, strengthened the relationship between video plays and likes. Regarding queerness on

the left, the strongest relationship between video plays and likes was observed on videos with an LGBTQ+-related hashtag and a queer creator, or with neither.

To answer RQs 3 and 3a, we examined the frequency of twelve words indicating agreement (e.g. "correct", "exactly") in video comments. Such agreeing comments are only slightly more common on videos posted by users on the right (roughly 10% of comments vs. roughly 7% on the left), but appear about twice as frequently than on the left when the posting user is nonwhite and the video features a race-related hashtag, or when the user is queer and the video features an LGBTQ+-related hashtag.

Discussion

Nonwhite and/or queer users across the political spectrum seem to post about their minoritized identity more often than their peers of non-minoritized identity, but this effect was not stronger on the right than the left, implying a lack of intentional identity entrepreneurship among minoritized conservatives, as intent is a crucial aspect of that theory. Nonetheless, conservative posts from nonwhite users which address race gain more likes than other conservative posts as views increase, whereas on the left this relationship is only strengthened by race-related hashtag use, not creator identity. Moreover, nonwhite and/or queer creators on the right receive a deluge of comments agreeing with them when they address race, more so than on the left. Identity entrepreneurship requires intent to leverage one's minoritized identity for gain; without that intent and without policies aimed at supporting such identity groups, the disproportionate positive responses to minoritized voices making conservative arguments about identity looks less like identity entrepreneurship, and more like tokenization.

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REACTING TO U.S. POLITICAL TIKTOK VIDEOS: AN ANALYSIS OF GENDER USING SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

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Introduction

TikTok is one of the most used social media platforms (SMPs) in the world. Facilitating short video content, TikTok boasts over 1 billion users worldwide and over 138 million users in the United States (Iqbal, 2023; TikTok Statistics, 2023). With so many users and the platform's meme-like content, it is no surprise that TikTok has already demonstrated an impactful presence in American political life (e.g., Lorenz et al., 2020). However, TikTok has increasingly come under scrutiny for concerns related to data security (Treisman, 2022).

Although the political future of TikTok in the U.S. is unclear, before the bans on all U.S. government devices, TikTok was considered the "new frontier of political communication," following the rapid adoption of other SMPs (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), into politicians' campaign repertoire (Kambhampaty, 2022; Kim, 2023). Despite the bans, politicians can still use TikTok on their personal devices to reach voters, and some have held onto their personal accounts (Paz, 2023). Likewise, average individuals will continue to post, duet, or stitch political TikTok's. Therefore, questions related to the nature and effectiveness of political TikTok use remain.

To begin answering these questions, this study focuses on one aspect of continued relevance to political communication: politician gender. Research has long shown that female politicians are disadvantaged due to masculine norms in politics (Kenney, 1996; Meeks, 2012). However, many SMPs, including TikTok, are dominated by female users (Iqbal, 2023), which could impact the reception to female politicians on these platforms. Therefore, this research asks two questions: (1) How are TikTok users responding to

male and female U.S. politician TikTok videos? (2) What are the differences between male and female U.S. politician TikTok video content?

Social Media and Gender

Stereotypes are shared beliefs about individuals based on their membership in social identity groups (Bauer, 2013). Gender stereotypes relegate women to nurturing traits of compassion and warmth, positioning them as inferior to men and causing them to be viewed differently in terms of their traits, ideology, capability, and preferences (Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010; Glick & Fiske, 1997; Winter, 2010). Female politicians have historically been deemed "less electable" due to gender stereotypes, creating a performative bind for women (Bauer, 2013). Women must embrace their femininity while not being too feminine and demonstrate masculine traits without deviating from gender norms (Teele & Thelen, 2017).

Gender stereotypes could also impact how male and female politicians embrace TikTok and the type of content they post on the platform. However, the nature and demographics of TikTok may allow female politicians to find unique success. SMPs like Instagram and TikTok privilege visual content over discursive content. Importantly, different SMPs have varying expectations and norms for the *types* of visual content posted. For example, the "norm" on Instagram is to post "lifestyle," "behind the scenes" visual content (Borges-Rey, 2015; Reade, 2021), which may cause politicians to post more "personal" content. The use of TikTok, focusing on trend-based and meme-like content, may result in politicians posting more humorous and derivative content (Zeng & Abidin, 2021).

The emphasis on, but changing norms of, visual representations on social media becomes important when we consider the research linking gender and physical representations to perceptions of political viability and likeability. The viability of female candidates may be negatively impacted by voters make voting decisions based on who they think looks like a leader (Benstead, 2015) and their attractiveness (Sigelman, 1987). However, political images that contain feminine content are perceived favorably (Peng, 2018), especially by female voters (Barrett & Barrington, 2005). On TikTok, there are more female users (Iqbal, 2023), which may also help female politicians.

We thus use the lens of social identity theory (SIT) to examine how TikTok users respond to the TikTok videos of male and female politicians in the U.S. SIT suggests that individuals are often classified as group members based on differing factors, such gender, class, or political affiliation, which are internally and externally formed (Tajfel, 1982; Trepte & Loy, 2017). Internal group identification consists of cognitive awareness of group membership, evaluation of the group and associated identities, and emotional investment in group membership (Fujita et al., 2018; Tajfel, 1982). External group identification consists of those outside the group recognizing its existence (Tajfel, 1982).

Method

We combine computational and qualitative methods to answer our research questions. We collect data from a sample of all verified TikTok accounts of the 117th Congress,

governors, and a snowball sample of other verified political figures for a total of 54 accounts. We used web scraping through PykTok and traktok to collect the 30 most recent videos from each account in our sample (N=1,360) and their meta-data (e.g., time, number of comments, likes, shares). We also collected the visible comments on each video (N=19,748). We used this data to conduct a sentiment analysis on the text of comments (positive, negative, neutral) to identify general reactions to male and female politicians' TikTok videos. We also thematically analyzed the content of 20% of the videos, randomly selected, to identify any content differences by candidate gender.

Results

The sentiment analysis found that most of the comments on politicians' TikTok videos were neutral, without significant disparities across male and female politicians. Following neutrality, comments tended to be more positive than negative. This is likely because the TikTok algorithm shows users videos that they are inclined to find enjoyable to keep them on the platform, eliminating the need to post negative comments to push back against differing ideologies or gendered representations. Still, the thematic analysis revealed differences in TikTok content across male and female politicians. The male politicians incorporated TikTok's norms and trends significantly more than the female politicians. Male politicians incorporated trends and sounds, posted videos that were significantly shorter and less political, and made more attempts at humor and showcasing personality. Comparatively, the female politicians' TikTok videos featured predominately political content. Some video content was clearly made for TikTok, even though this content was less trend-based. However, it was more common for female politicians to post clipped videos of other political appearances and moments, such as their television news appearances, advertisements, and congressional speeches. Female politicians also rarely made explicit reference to their womanhood.

Discussion and Future Directions

Although the political use of TikTok is still new, politicians have adopted the platform to further their communication goals. Accordingly, TikTok represents a worthy object of study to continue interrogating gender and politics. We have begun to do so here, providing a preliminary assessment of the tone of comments in response to male and female politician TikTok videos, and the content within some of those videos. While users largely reacted with a tone of neutrality, there did appear to be differences in how, or what, male and female politicians posted on TikTok. While male politicians better incorporated TikTok norms and trends into their videos, women overwhelming focused more on discussing political topics and issues in a traditional way. These findings contradict our expectations about the identity of TikTok users and their reactions to political content online. They do, perhaps, suggest that gender stereotypes are still alive and well in U.S. politics; female politicians likely feel the need to work harder to be perceived as credible and serious candidates, and therefore, have less room to be "unserious" on TikTok.

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