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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Weaponized Virality: The Harris Campaign's TikTok Dramaturgy

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Abstract

Kamala Harris is the first American Presidential Candidate to understand TikTok. Both her personal feed and campaign feed demonstrate this understanding. This essay will unpack what it means to create TikTok native content, and how Harris is doing so on TikTok.

Keywords: communications; dramaturgy; digital humanities; politics; TikTok

It was the end of July 2024 when my past came crashing into my present as I was scrolling my FYP on TikTok. The FYP or "For You Page" is an endless content scroll that greets users when they open the TikTok app, carefully curated by the app's proprietary algorithm. Every time a user interacts with the app, they give the algorithm more information about what they might like or dislike; a series of behaviors that Crystal Abidin calls "algorithmic practices."[1] It's not shocking, then, that I (a chronically online American Millennial with outspokenly leftist points of view) would be greeted by the ruggedly handsome face of a heartthrob from my past: former 90s boy band stud Lance Bass. Bass is in a nondescript room with the phone in selfie mode as he speaks to the camera in direct address, "Hey, Kamala!" At this point, current Vice President and newly minted presidential candidate Kamala Harris literally enters the picture to stand behind Bass. The two look directly into the camera as Bass asks Harris, "What are we going to say to Donald Trump in November?" Harris smiles and says, somewhat shyly, "Bye bye bye!" after which the hook from NSYNC's 2000 hit plays, echoing those very words, as Bass makes the "bye bye bye" hand movements and Harris smiles and laughs.[2]

The sheer weight of these 15 seconds crashed upon me all at once as I realized: Kamala Harris was making history in more than one way. While the historic first most might associate with Harris is that she is the first woman to serve as Vice President of the United States, I was marking the moment as the first time a presidential candidate understood TikTok.

Let me be clear: I know that Harris is surrounded by a media team who strategizes and runs her social media. When I say "Kamala Harris," a portion of what I mean is the Harris team.

[1] Abidin 2021, 77–103.
[2] https://www.tiktok.com/@kamalaharris/video/7396069339742457119

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Accordingly, I will use the term "Kamala Harris" to indicate the Royal Harris, if you will. Both the person, and the campaign. Harris isn't the first American presidential candidate to have a TikTok, but she is the first to be using TikTok with any sense of how TikTok works. Let's unpack that statement a bit.

TikTok was first made available to a global market in 2017, and first appeared in the United States in 2019. The app made major waves; cresting 2 billion downloads in April 2020 to have the "best quarter for any app ever."[3] Obviously, this limits the historical availability to U.S. presidential candidates since (to date) the app has only been accessible to candidates in the 2020 and 2024 election cycles, namely: Joe Biden and Donald Trump. The 2024 election saw a major plot twist when, on July 21, 2024, Joe Biden announced that he was withdrawing from the race and officially backed Vice President Kamala Harris to take his place.

But just because these candidates had access to TikTok doesn't mean they necessarily used it (and certainly doesn't mean they used it effectively). Both Trump and Biden have a tumultuous relationship with the app: Trump, famously, attempted to ban TikTok in the United States with an August 2020 executive order (EO 13942) citing threats to national security.[4] On March 13, 2024, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill that would, effectively, ban TikTok in the United States (HR 7521).[5] This bill was then tied to a foreign aid package (House Resolution 815), and was signed into law by President Biden on April 24, 2024.[6] In spite of this, Trump does have a personal TikTok where, as of October 10 2024, he has posted all of thirty three videos since he first started the account in June 2024.[7] Trump's re-election campaign does not have a TikTok. In the almost complete polar opposite, President Joe Biden does not have a personal TikTok, but his re-election campaign did (@BidenHQ). After Biden stepped back from the race, the feed was immediately re-titled "KamalaHQ" and content posted there adjusted accordingly.[8]

As indicated before, the presence of a feed does not indicate use success. Social media platforms each have their own esthetics and norms, and TikTok is no different. The best users will adopt these norms with their videos and create content that is "native" to the app (i.e., conforms with the aesthetics seamlessly). And here's where we return to Lance Bass; this is what Harris gets that no one else has yet gotten: her content is TikTok native. The Bass video (and subsequent posts to Harris' various TikTok feeds) demonstrates several hallmarks of TikTok aesthetics that neither of the other candidates have yet to harness.

Let's start with the video's quirky do-it-yourself feel. Rather than any kind of specialized equipment, Bass himself is simply taking a video in selfie mode – you can't tell me those two couldn't afford a cameraman or a gimbal. It was a conscious choice to have the stars manually operate the camera and lent to a home-grown down-to-earth vibe that is hallmark of TikTok. Then, of course, there's the presence of two viral celebrities themselves. Bass embodies memeability. As part of NSYNC, Bass originated some of the most iconic choreography pop culture has birthed including two song/dance combos that are all over TikTok:

[3] Chapple 2020.
[4] "Addressing the Threat Posed by TikTok" 2020.
[5] Gallagher 2024.
[6] McMorris Rodgers 2024.
[7] If you really need to see it, you can find it here: https://www.tiktok.com/@realdonaldtrump.
[8] https://www.tiktok.com/@kamalahq.

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"It's Gonna Be Me" and "Bye Bye Bye."[9] Dance trends (or: the repetition of popular choreography and music by various content creators in different videos that use these core elements but harness their individual brand) are TikTok's bread and butter. By using one of the more prevalent memes to come out of NSYNC's heyday as the punch line to this video, Harris demonstrates that she understands both that the meme exists and that the culture of the TikTok platform lends itself to meme embodiment. Harris, the other part of this video's duo, also embodies a TikTok meme. Before Harris joined the platform, she became part of it vis-à-vis a recirculated portion of a 2023 speech she gave at an event for advancing opportunities for Hispanic Americans. During that speech, Harris related an anecdote about her family: "Everything is in context. My mother would give us a hard time sometimes, and she would say to us, 'I don't know what's wrong with you young people. You think you just fell out of a coconut tree?' You exist in the context of all in which you live and what came before you."[10] This footage, quite ironically, was taken entirely out of its context in order to meme Harris onto TikTok. Shortly after Biden announced his resignation from the presidential race, TikTok content creators got a hold of the soundbite. Several of them re-mixed it with a club beat to create a now-viral sound (one of which has surpassed 7 million views as of August 8, 2024).[11] Of course, on TikTok, where there's music people will dance; creators took the sounds and then began choreographing dances to it.[12]

Harris understands that she's already part of the TikTok vernacular. The VP's first video (July 24, 2024) acknowledges, "I've heard that recently I've been on the For You Page, so I thought I'd get on here myself." Of note: this TikTok was posted 2 days after the @zeo_-choons viral remix; it's difficult to believe that it's not a direct response to at least some of the coconut tree memes. This self-determination, Harris taking her TikTok image into her own hands, is (Trevor Boffone argues) one of TikTok's hallmarks. Boffone asserts that TikTok allows content creators to shape their own internet destiny; they are allowed to control what they put on the app and (accordingly) how they present themselves.[13] Here again Harris understands the unique power that TikTok holds. While other social media apps might present content that seems to come directly from a celebrity or public figure (Twitter, I will not be calling it "X," is one such example), TikTok gives us a horse's mouth approach. Because TikTok content is in video form, there is (at least seemingly) no veil between the audience and the creator. The creator looks the camera in the eye, delivers their message from their own mouth in their own voice, and it very intimately makes its way to the consumers of this message. Another salient TikTok trait that Boffone outlines is its omnipresence; the user accesses TikTok from their phone which can (and often does) go with them in their most intimate moments.[14] Accordingly, Harris is harnessing that intimate relationship. While not all of her content consists of confessional-style videos or the home-brew feel that the Bass video demonstrates (some of the Harris videos have a bit more

[9] "It's Gonna Be Me" made famous by lead singer Justin Timberlake's pronunciation of "me" as "May" and the accompanying dance can be seen in NSYNC's official TikTok account: https://www.tiktok.com/@nsync/video/7363738756051995946. "Bye Bye Bye" has recently gained new virality due to its use in the 2024 film Deadpool & Wolverine; another cultural moment NSYNC has memorialized on their TikTok: https://www.tiktok.com/@nsync/video/7400555418457525546.

[10] Schapitl 2024.

[11] *Her Laugh Her Laugh* 2024.

[12] See, for instance: @megthegreer's cute robot-inspired take: https://www.tiktok.com/@megthegreer/video/7397225969871949102; @habituallyhenry's more sassy vogue-inspired take: https://www.tiktok.com/@habituallyhenry/video/7398228771809037598; or even @mateomuscleofficial's shall we say cheekier take: https://www.tiktok.com/@mateomuscleofficial/video/7398645253168696618.

[13] Boffone 2022a, 41–8.

[14] Boffone 2022a, 41–8.

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production value), the interspersal of such organic TikTok content demonstrates the team's understanding of what TikTok does well and how it works.

Notably, Lance Bass is not the only celebrity on Harris' feed; Megan Thee Stallion and America Ferrera also join the lineup with selfie-style conversational videos. The choice of these celebrities is similarly telling: Megan Thee Stallion is an omnipresent force in TikTok dance challenges and noted for her feminist reclaiming of female sexuality via her explicit rap music, and America Ferrera's recent appearance in the 2023 smash hit "Barbie" (a film that had its own dance TikTok dance challenge) makes her an avatar of popular feminism.[15] Combine these elements with recently resurfaced now-viral footage of a 2021 interview with Republican Vice Presidential Candidate JD Vance in which Vance claimed that the country is run by "a bunch of childless cat ladies" and the image becomes clear: the Harris campaign understands virality, and they understand what TikTok loves.[16]

As I write this in August 2024, it remains to be seen how Harris' understanding of TikTok's strengths will play out in terms of electoral power. But what one can say with certainty is this: her ability to communicate with the American people using popular (and populist) methods is a historic first, and one that anyone with an interest in communications should be paying close attention to.

Danielle Rosvally is an Assistant Professor of Theatre at the University at Buffalo. Her monograph (*Theatres of Value: Buying and Selling Shakespeare in Nineteenth-Century New York City*, State University of New York Press, 2024) considers the commodification and economization of Shakespeare's work in America's nineteenth century. Rosvally's interest in the digital has fuelled past work on database methodologies in humanist text, social media, and the personification of Shakespeare by performers/users. Her next project, *Yassified Shakespeare* (co-authored with Trevor Boffone), is a multimedia exploration of how iterations of Shakespearean performance and Shakespeare's cultural capital critically intersect with drag and drag esthetics. Her work has been seen in *Theatre Topics*, the *Early Modern Studies Journal, Studies in Musical Theater, Shakespeare Bulletin*, and *Fight Master Magazine.* She is the co-editor of *Early Modern Liveness* (Bloomsbury 2023) and the forthcoming special issue of *Shakespeare* titled "Inessential Shakespeares: Contingency, Necessity, and Marginalization in Early Modern Drama."

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[15] For more about Megan Thee Stallion's rise to fame via TikTok, see Boffone 2022b, 1–14.

[16] Treisman 2024. This was further reinforced when, after Harris announced Minnesota Governor Tim Walz as her running mate, the feed posted a montage of screenshots of tweets in which Walz shared images of his orange tabby cat, Afton, overscored by Walz denigrating the Republican nominee's choice to "go after cat people." What Can I Say, TikTok Loves Orange Cats. 2024.

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