

Christian Walker's Social Media Expertise: Impacts of Comedic Theory and the Online Attention Economy

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Introduction

In the year 2020, like many others I spent a significant amount of my pandemic-gained time on social media. For hours per day, I scrolled through videos of people sharing what a day in their life looks like, dancing, giving their input on the state of the world in lowered voices, and much more. However, it was rare that anything held my attention. One exception were the videos of Christian Walker, who became known for posts in which he went on loud, shocking political rants, largely in the Starbucks drive through. In these videos, he spouted common right-wing talking points regarding topics like the Black Lives Matter Movement, LGBTQ+ Pride, transgender identity, immigration, and more, before stopping abruptly once it was his turn to order a beverage. Walker's overall demeanor and the comments made in his videos may not have been as eye-catching if said by someone else. However, what made him especially interesting was that unlike many other outspoken online conservatives, Walker is Black and has been open about the fact that he is attracted to men.

In this paper, I aim to examine Christian Walker's media persona and look at his online success through the lenses of the theories of negative self and other presentation in comedy (Pérez, 2013) and the "attention economy" (Goldhaber, 1997). I will begin by explaining research and current scholarly conversations around my lenses and topic. I will then examine Walker's social media posts at three points in his online career: during his original rise to popularity, after his supposed "rebrand," and during his father's Senate campaign. In Walker's

original content, he made extreme points using over-the-top language and gestures, resulting in his content often being seen as satirical. However, his posts eventually evolved, and he began separating his political and comedic videos, resulting in many saying that he had “rebranded.” I will also be examining posts Walker made speaking out against his father, who ran for Senate in the 2022 elections. Throughout these points in Walker’s career, his content continuously evolved in style and as a result interacted differently with viewers. Through looking at these posts, I will demonstrate how comedic theories allow Walker to keep an audience while making offensive videos, and how his grasp of the attention economy gives him continuous success on social media. The implications of Walker’s social media use include the proliferation of the derogatory views that he presents and as a result, harm being caused to the marginalized communities that he attacks in his videos.

Theoretical Foundations

While researching Walker, I focused on analyzing his use of comedy and interactions with the social media platforms that he posts on. Information that I found especially interesting came from research by Raúl Pérez (2013) on how students of comedy are taught to make jokes about sensitive issues such as race. In an age where overt racism is usually not accepted by society, comedians can use certain “rhetorical performance strategies” in order to portray to their audience that they are not actually racist; they are just “playing with racism” (pp. 483-484). Pérez calls this the “veil” of “authentic inauthenticity,” as the strategies are used to create distance between “literal claims and comedic intent” (p. 483). In other words, these strategies are meant to indicate that the comic is not acting with racist intent, but only saying racist things for comedic purposes without truly believing them. Specifically, Pérez found students were taught to

use the concept of “negative self-presentation” and “negative other-presentation” (p. 490-491). Negative self-presentation would be making a negative joke about a group that the comedian is a part of, while negative other-presentation is making a negative joke about a group that the comedian is not a part of. Through balancing these concepts by making jokes first about groups that they are included in and then groups that they are not a part of, students were able to make jokes about marginalized communities without their audiences seeing the comedian as being racist or otherwise prejudiced against the groups that they were making jokes about. In other words, even though the students in this study were making jokes that were outwardly racist, as a result of the balance of negative self- and other-presentation, the veil of authentic inauthenticity was allowed to remain, and the students were not perceived as being racist. By employing these strategies in comedy, Pérez argues that the students studied were essentially learning how to make racism palatable and funny in an era in which most people would not have accepted their comments otherwise.

This research connects to the fact that Brown, Pini, and Pavlidis (2022) identify humor as one of the most important components in creating a successful video on TikTok. In their study of TikToks that spread information or otherwise communicated about the 2019/20 Australian bushfires, they found that successful videos on the TikTok app raising awareness on this issue often contained “memetic qualities” (p. 3). These scholars use Zulli and Zulli’s 2020 definition of TikToks as “memetic texts,” meaning that they are derivative of memes and share many qualities (p. 2). Memes, according to Shifman’s 2013 definition, are “units of pop culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual internet users, creating a shared cultural experience” (p. 2).

Brown, Pini, and Pavlidis (2022) also use 2020 research from Hakoköngäs et al. to explore how memetic texts “not only amuse audiences but are also utilized to ‘disseminate political arguments and ideologies’” (p. 2). Through their study, the scholars found that the TikToks that were most successful in raising awareness around the bushfires contained the memetic elements of whimsy, humor, and juxtaposition. Despite the fact that these videos were made about a serious issue, the researchers noted that none of them were made in a “serious or sombre way” (p. 8).

The success of memetic content on TikTok is a part of the app’s “attention economy” (Goldhaber, 1997). The concept of the attention economy was first applied to the internet by Michael Goldhaber, and in this context describes how attention functions as the most valuable resource driving the Web. Goldhaber details how economies are “governed by what is scarce,” and on the Internet, users are overwhelmed by information, so what is scarce is their attention (n.p.). He furthers that those who are able to gain attention in these economies have power, as they have control over what ideas enter the consciousness of their audiences as well as influence over their thinking. This theory connects to explain the significance of the fact that within TikTok’s attention economy, content with memetic qualities receives the most attention. Since these videos receive the most attention, their creators in turn have the most power within the attention economy of the app and the most influence over what ideas are presented to the users of the app.

Crystal Abidin (2021) also expands on ideas of how fame is achieved on TikTok by exploring the effect of relatability in videos. In comparison to other social media platforms, TikTok has seen an even stronger and sharper move towards content that includes “personalized disclosures and storytelling,” as well as more “personalized interactions” that allow viewers to

imagine creators as ordinary people who may have even come from “humble beginnings” (p. 83).

A study by the researchers Duffy and Meisner (2022) has found, however, that it is harder for content creators who are a part of marginalized groups to achieve visibility, or attention, online as a result of platform governance and algorithms suppressing their content. In their study, Duffy and Meisner performed “in depth” interviews with 30 social media creators of marginalized identities and found that many of them felt that they were being blocked from achieving visibility (p. 285). There was significant discussion of TikTok, and many of those interviewed described being “shadowbanned,” or having their levels of engagement on the platform drop quickly and out of nowhere (p. 291). The idea of the attention economy makes this especially significant, as in this economy, those who have attention have power and influence over viewers (Goldhaber, 1997). This study contributed to evidence that people who are part of marginalized communities are being blocked from gaining attention online; however, others who are not part of those groups are able to gain attention. This results in creators with marginalized identities having less stake in the online attention economy. Since Goldhaber describes attention as the driving force of the Web, this severely limits the ability of marginalized communities to gain power and influence online.

The Original Content

When Christian Walker first began to gain internet fame, his content was very extreme in its right-wing political leaning and consistently targeted historically marginalized groups. These videos attacked both groups that Walker is a part of and groups that he is not a part of. I will examine his old content using the examples of two videos posted to his social media pages in

order to demonstrate his use of both negative self-presentation and negative other-presentation. Walker has deleted all of the content on his TikTok page from before January of 2022; however, many videos can still be found through accounts that have reposted them or are still posted on his Instagram page.

On Juneteenth in 2021, a holiday that celebrates the emancipation of the enslaved people in the United States, Walker posted a video making wild claims and spreading misinformation about slavery (Christian Walker, 2021). In the video, he states that Africans were already being enslaved by other people of color before slavery existed in the United States and that slavery still exists in Africa today. He then claims that as a result, the United States should be celebrating that his ancestors were “brought over to America, where they eventually had the opportunity to be free” (0:13) He also continues on to question why the colors of the holiday are drawn from the Pan-African flag and not the American flag, the flag of the country that “freed” his ancestors (0:20).

The claims made in Walker’s Juneteenth video clearly show a gross denial of widely accepted history and spread dangerous misinformation about slavery. At its core, this video is blatantly and outrageously racist, and denies centuries of oppression faced by enslaved people and their descendants. However, because Walker targets a group that he is a part of, in this video he demonstrates negative self-presentation (Pérez, 2013). As a result of this negative self-presentation, and the fact that language and points that he makes are so extreme, this video crosses the threshold into potential satire. To an extent, this allows Walker to keep the veil of authentic inauthenticity, and viewers are able to doubt that he really believes what he is saying. This video also contains the memetic quality of juxtaposition (Brown, Pini, & Pavlidis, 2022), as Christian Walker is clearly Black but is spreading misinformation about slavery, a terrible form

of oppression that was experienced by his direct ancestors. The use of this memetic quality both added to the possibility that his video was satire and made it more likely that his video would succeed on TikTok, since, as shown by Brown, Pini, and Pavlidis, many successful political videos on TikTok contain memetic qualities.

The second example of Walker's original content that I will examine is a video in which he attacks the use of alternative pronouns before bringing up crime rates and the border wall (Sheppee, 2021). In the video, Walker is sitting in his car and yells at his camera, saying he will not take political advice "from people who can't decide what pronouns they're supposed to use" (0:01). He then continues to attack the idea of using gender pronouns different from the ones assigned to a person at birth and calls complaining about pronouns a "privilege" (0:12). Walker continues by looking directly into the camera and yelling, "Crime is up forty percent in some of our American cities, people are calling to defund the police, and you're worried about pronouns?" (0:17). Walker follows this by questioning, "Do you want to know what my pronouns are?," and then shouting into the camera, "Proud American, build the fricken wall" (0:59). Immediately following this, the viewer can hear a drive-through employee, likely at Starbucks, greeting Walker, and he responds by significantly raising the pitch of his voice and saying "Hi, thanks" (1:04).

In this post, Walker heavily relies on the memetic qualities of humor and juxtaposition (Brown, Pini, & Pavlidis, 2022). Throughout the video, Walker uses specific mannerisms, such as over-the-top gestures, fluctuations in volume, and variations in proximity to the camera, that make the video more humorous in nature (Sheppee, 2021). Additionally, a core feature of the video is juxtaposition. Walker makes intensely conservative comments, hitting the hot button issues of alternative pronouns, crime rates, and the border wall. However, during his interaction

at the Starbucks window, he amplifies his use of feminine qualities stereotypically expected to be held by gay men, who are generally liberal leaning.

This video would be an example of negative other-presentation, as Walker attacks transgender and non-binary identities. In this case, unlike in his video concerning Juneteenth, Walker attacked a group that he was not a part of. Because he has been known to attack groups that he is a part of, the video was not taken as seriously. Additionally, similarly to the Juneteenth video, the ways in which Walker made his comments allowed viewers to wonder whether or not his content was satire. Therefore, he had some protection under the veil of authentic inauthenticity.

The “Rebrand”

Throughout 2022, Christian Walker began to move away from his original content model of creating videos in which he appeared to possibly be leaning into satire while referencing highly sensitive political or cultural issues. Instead, recent videos on his TikTok generally only include one of these aspects. In other words, Walker has videos in which he discusses political or cultural issues with a more serious tone relative to his previous content, and he also has videos that are clearly intended to be comedic.

One political video Walker posted after his “rebrand” describes why he does not celebrate Pride month (Walker, 2022, June 1). While he still uses intensely homophobic rhetoric, unlike in his original videos, Walker’s tone in this video is serious and somber. In the video, Walker is sitting in his car as he is during many of his other videos, but he uses no large gestures, keeps a reasonable distance from the camera, and does not act overly feminine. He calmly dictates that he does not celebrate Pride because he “grew up wanting Prince Charming, not to

walk around with no clothes on at a Pride festival” (0:01). After this, he continues throughout the video to correlate all celebration of Pride and being proud of LGBTQ+ identity with being sexual. He finishes the video by stating that he “just wanted a man” and was “not prideful about it” (0:37).

This video does echo some points that are made by others in the LGBTQ+ community, such as feeling that people should not have to have a strong association with their sexuality or gender identity. However overall, the video is blatantly homophobic, as characterizing LGBTQ+ people who are proud of their sexuality as being inappropriately sexual is a common tactic used to silence discussion of non-heteronormative identities and oppress people who do not fall into the category of straight. In spite of this fact, the majority of the comments left on the video are positive, including many that come from individuals who disagree with Walker politically. One comment states, “no matter how much i disagree w your views i hope you know you're super valid in this” (Zarianagrande1, 2022). The top comment on the post is, “SLAYED” (gwnflwr, 2022), a slang term meaning that someone did something well. This term was coined by Black and Latinx drag queens, and although in recent years use of the word has spread, it is largely used within the LGBTQ+ community (“Slayed”).

In this video, instead of the use of negative self and other presentations to give Walker the ability to keep his platform, it was the major shift in his tone from prior political videos. This shift not only allowed him to keep an audience but actually prompted his audience to listen to the points that he was making. This connects back to attention gaining strategies on TikTok, as the juxtaposition of Walker’s earlier political content and his more recent content is jarring. This is relevant because according to Brown, Pini, and Pavlidis’ (2022) analysis of TikToks about the Australian bushfires, juxtaposition is a quality found in many successful political TikToks.

Additionally, this relates to Abidin's (2021) discussion of the importance of relatability and "personal disclosures" in many viral TikToks (p. 84). Other people in the LGBTQ+ community may have related to Walker's statement that he does not feel the need to exhibit pride for who he is. Walker used grossly homophobic rhetoric while making this point. However, the undertones of rational thought and the large style shift from his previous video-making style likely resulted in viewers' attention being specifically drawn to his reasonable points, as this aspect of Walker's content was new.

Walker's previous videos were popular because of their shocking and humorous qualities, which in turn resulted in Walker appearing inauthentic due to the veil of authentic inauthenticity. His new style of videos appears much more personal, as Walker is serious and collected. Especially when contrasted with the way that he presented in previous videos, he appears to be authentically sharing his thoughts on issues that are highly personal to him. This contrast allows Walker to gain attention that is even more dangerous, as his new serious tone and the idea that he has rebranded is resulting in more viewers taking his harmful content seriously, as evidenced by the comments cited above.

Herschel Walker's Senate Race

The effects of Christian Walker's "rebrand" were additionally expedited by his actions during his father Herschel Walker's campaign for Senate in Georgia. During the 2022 elections, one of the most contentious races was the Georgia Senate race between incumbent Democrat Rafael Warnock and Republican Herschel Walker. Prior to this election, Herschel Walker was best known for his time as a football player, where he had a very successful career and achieved national recognition (Bradner, 2022).

There were many scandals throughout Herschel Walker's campaign. However, the largest one involved a *Daily Beast* article that claimed he had paid for his girlfriend's abortion in 2009, which was incredibly important given that the core of Herschel Walker's campaign platform was family values and banning abortion in his state (Bradner, 2022). He fully denied this story; however, just weeks before election day, Christian Walker posted videos and messages on Twitter, defending the *Daily Beast* article and attacking his father (Walker, 2022, October 3 and 4). In these Tweets, Christian Walker stated that his father lived a life of "DESTROYING other people's lives" and said that he had been led to believe his father would take accountability for his past, but that never happened (Walker, 2022, October 3). He also brought up abuse of his mother, which Herschel Walker has already admitted to and claims was a result of dissociative identity disorder that he has since received treatment for (Bradner, 2022). Christian then went on to state that his father was absent in his life as well as the lives of his three other children, who all had different mothers.

The content posted to Walker's social media going against his father was different from most of his other content in that the videos he made not only appeared to be authentic and sincere but also talked about an issue that was deeply personal to him to the greatest extent seen on his social media. Up until this point, none of Walker's social media content had discussed his troubled family life; however, in these posts he referenced "atrocities committed" against his mother by Herschel Walker and his parents' messy divorce (0:01). He also talks in one video about how the reason he makes videos criticizing his father's absence is that it is an issue that affected him (Walker, 2022, October 4). Overall, these posts did the job of conveying that Christian Walker grew up with a messy family life, including abuse and divorce, and is still navigating complex issues in his relationship with his father today.

Through these posts, Walker gained the attention of more than just the social media audience who already knew of him and were drawn in by the new and intensely personal disclosures that he was making. Walker also gained the attention of everyone following the Georgia Senate race, as his speaking out may have been critical in swaying voters away from casting their ballots for his father. Following these posts, Walker not only received an exorbitant amount of attention but also, in spite of some criticism from conservatives, what the *New York Times* described as an “outpouring of support” (McGrady & Browning, 2022). As the Times reported, this support came even from “self-described liberals.”

As a result of Christian Walker speaking out against his father, he gained significant capital within the attention economy and was taken seriously with regard to the information he posted. With this development, a conservative influencer, who at one point was known for posting content so ridiculous that viewers thought it had to be satirical, was able to possibly influence the outcome of a major Senate election and become respected by many liberals.

Discussion: Impact of Walker’s Content

Christian Walker’s use of social media has allowed him to gain significant exposure within the internet’s attention economy. Some may question why this matters, as Walker is only one person, and his earlier, more outwardly offensive content was largely not taken seriously. However, as described by Michael Goldhaber (1997) in his overview of the internet’s attention economy, those who have the most attention in this economy have the most power, and throughout the entire history of Walker’s content making he has used his platform to spread harmful rhetoric about marginalized groups.

Walker's early content outwardly advanced stereotypes and misinformation, about both groups that Walker is a part of and groups that he is not a part of. Even though many interpreted these videos as satirical, the fact that his content prompted people to laugh about transgender and non-binary identities and even slavery advances harmful ideas. Additionally, the fact that he contrasts this with amplifying characteristics stereotypically ascribed to gay men also advances those stereotypes and allows people to laugh at them.

Even though it is not as openly derogatory, Walker's new content is possibly even more dangerous than his original content. This is because the new content still contains harmful rhetoric, but as a result of his major shift in tone, his statements are now being taken seriously by far more viewers, as evidenced by comments on his videos. The success of these newer videos following Walker's "rebrand" was built on the attention that Walker had already garnered from his previous content. This relates back to Goldhaber's (1997) statements that when users gain attention within the internet's attention economy, they are able to "build on" their "stock" (n.p.). In order to illustrate this concept, he even uses the example, "Even if you find what I say outrageous or stupid, it will be easier for you to tune into me the next time I come across your field of vision." (n.p) Even if the people who watched Walker's original videos found them ridiculous, having seen his content before made it more likely that he would capture their attention again in the future.

The idea that Walker is able to continuously build on previous attention he has received in order to gain more publicity in the future is especially important in regard to his speaking out against his father. First, the attention he had received in the past was able to serve as a significant starting platform to spread his message further. Additionally, through speaking out, Walker gained the attention of a huge portion of people who had not yet been exposed to his content and

who were introduced to him through a serious political issue. This follows the trajectory started by the “rebrand,” as Walker’s public perception has continuously been evolving to a point in which he is taken seriously in politics.

As Goldhaber states, “obtaining attention is obtaining a kind of enduring wealth, a form of wealth that puts you in a preferred position to get anything this new economy offers.” Walker is in this preferred position as a result of content that he has made, which adds to stereotypes and oppression of marginalized groups. In contrast, according to the study by Duffy and Meisner (2022) on influencers who are a part of marginalized communities, many influencers who are a part of these groups have been blocked from receiving that same attention. The result is that Walker has been able to spread harmful content and is in a position to achieve future success, while others in the groups that his content harmed have been made “invisible” and are not poised to achieve the same success.

Conclusion

Over the course of his time as an influencer, Christian Walker has used a sense of the attention economy in order to move from being a character who made content so ridiculous that most viewers could not take him seriously to someone who now has an expansive audience that gives weight and importance to his posts. Consequently, this audience was built on, and is still exposed to, content that furthers harmful ideas and negative stereotypes about marginalized communities. In order to create a society in which people of all identities are equal, viewers need to be more mindful when engaging with content and question what kind of stereotypes or misinformation is present in the posts that they engage with. In the age of social media, attention

online is a powerful currency, and it is paramount that people who use these sites are aware of how it is distributed.

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