

Socialism Sucks: Campus Conservatives, Digital Media, and the Rebranding of Christian Nationalism

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Manuscripts

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Socialism Sucks: Campus Conservatives, Digital Media, and the Rebranding of Christian Nationalism

In this blended ethnography, combining fieldwork with campus conservative organizations/figures and digital ethnography of their social media, we explore how capitalism, Christianity, and conservatism are brought together and branded for youth. We argue that campus conservative organizations like Turning Point USA are important sites for mainstreaming, branding, and circulating an assemblage of conservative, Christian, and racialized discourses aligned with Christian nationalism and against the left. We analyze how this ‘friend enemy distinction’ occurs through gendered social media practices, constructing female ‘cuteservatives,’ influencers who sell friendship and t-shirts, and masculine heroes who battle a socialist enemy. We explore how these discourses are produced, marketed, and circulated. And finally, through Turning Point’s

celebration of Kyle Rittenhouse, we show the dangerous potential consequences of this violent rhetoric.

Keywords: social media; Christian nationalism; youth politics; branding

(7901 words)

“Politics is a war,” stated podcaster Elijah Schaffer at America Fest 2021, a four-day series of concerts and conservative speeches held in Arizona. For Schaffer, borrowing from the National Socialist Carl Schmitt, politics involves building the “friend-enemy distinction,” a mutual, violent enmity, which creates an intense, existential group identity. This distinction shapes two deeply opposed camps: the enemy is Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters who as so-called “Black Lives Marxists” are the ground troops of a totalitarian Marxism moving “from the streets into your children’s classrooms.”^[i] The friends are conservative influencers and politicians, represented by the speakers at America Fest: far-right politicians, including Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene; Donald Trump’s cabinet and family; and Conservative evangelicals like Pastor Jack Hibbs. America Fest, which celebrates right-wing^[ii] politics, is sponsored by Turning Point USA (TPUSA), a campus conservative organization which brings together Christianity, nationalism, and fiscal conservative politics and brands them for a youth market.

In this paper we argue that through social media and highly mediatized events, campus conservative organizations like TPUSA are important sites for assembling, branding and circulating the racialized, gendered, Christianized, and conservative discourses aligned with Christian nationalism (Gorski & Perry, 2022; Kobes du Mez, 2020; McDaniel, et al., 2022). Campus organizations represent the youth wing of institutional conservative politics, and their media enregister discourses which shape the future of the conservative movement. Rebranding conservatism as heteronormative “cuteservatives” and “everyday heroes” in a youth-driven resistance, campus conservative organizations rely on an in-group/out-group framing or friend-enemy distinction as a central organizing strategy. The friend-enemy distinction links Christianity, capitalism, and conservatism (the friends) and invigorates the youth conservative movement by using martial language to oppose various enemies. Calls to save the nation from

the left create a desirable racialized and gendered, identity for young conservatives to attach to and imbue the movement with affective resonance.

The battle between friends and enemies has effects on religious lifeworlds, gendered social structures, and political ideologies. It also creates support for a youth (re)brand of Christian Nationalism. Christian Nationalism (CN) is the belief, purportedly held by nearly half of US adults as of 2022, that the United States was, and should be, a Christian nation (Whitehead & Perry, 2020). CN also conflates whiteness with Christianity and nationalism in such a way that to be a true American is to be white and Christian (Devos and Mohamed, 2014; Perry and Schleifer, 2021; Whitehead and Perry, 2020). This conflation crystallizes an identity which links religion, race, and nation, and shapes a rigid in-group and out-group boundary in the process (Davis, 2018; Gurrentz, 2014). This boundary has political consequences: CN advocates hetero-patriarchy and opposes LGBTQIA+^[iii] rights (Cravens, 2022), supports libertarian positions on gun control (Whitehead, Schnabel, and Perry, 2018), advocates authoritarian law and order politics (Perry & Whitehead, 2019) targeting people of color, and is positively associated with higher tolerance of overt and covert racism (Davis & Perry, 2021). This last characteristic can be seen in our analysis of Kyle Rittenhouse, who was accused of killing Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters and is held up as a model American citizen in opposition to BLM protests (Perry, Cobbs, Whitehead, & Grubbs, 2022), which were deemed as anti-American riots.

The Americans who most identify with CN are 65 years and older (Whitehead & Perry 2020) so studies of American CN focus on this population. A notable exception is Rotolo’s (2022) work on affective conditioning and CN ideology in the transition to adulthood. Our paper builds on this limited work using research in linguistic anthropology, media, and communication studies to explore how campus conservative media shapes how younger populations understand, adhere to and perpetuate CN. We analyze how conservative youth organizations’ mediatized discourses build intimacy to promote affective engagement, rebrand conservatism to sell it (often literally) to youth, and are ideologically productive sites which mutually enregister (Urciuoli 2008), (i.e. bring together in a single discourse) Christian, capitalist, and nationalist language. They rebrand and reshape CN and mainstream it as part of a mediatized campus conservative organization. Using blended ethnographic methods to investigate campus conservative media, and its uptake with young evangelical conservatives, we aim to advance a better understanding

of the relationship between information communication technologies (ICTs), religion, and US American youth politics.

We interrogate this relationship through semiotic and content analysis of youth organizations' outreach infrastructure: campus activists, a website, clothing, and social media. We focus on two youth conservative movements, TPUSA and YAF, which represent the largest and the first campus conservative organizations, respectively. Our findings draw primarily from Author 1's data from 3,059 Instagram posts, 50 hours of video, and 50 online articles, and secondarily, from interviews and observations of conservative activists taken from Author 2's fieldwork with US conservative white evangelicals (2020-2022). Ongoing dialogue between the authors shaped a blended ethnographic approach which enabled us to map the ensemble of campus conservatives' activities, examine how discourses circulate between these social media and political events, and interrogate how they are taken up by participants, all crucial elements to exploring the effects of media on youth political ideology and engagement.

In what follows, we first outline the historical and social context of TPUSA and YAF, and then introduce political influencers and metapolitical intimacy, the theoretical framework which underpins our analysis. Next, we trace key elements of how these organizations establish in-group/out-group boundaries: the construction of the socialist threat and the construction of the conservative friends who battle them. We show how Christian commodities construct gendered, mediatized (Agha, 2011) relationships which assemble, circulate, and rebrand anti-Black, Christian, and conservative discourses. We conclude by arguing that youth organizations are important sites for understanding the rightward shift of American conservatism and the interpenetration of Christianity and conservative politics in the US. Crucially, we show how social media is affecting American politics on ideological and material levels. Youth media reflect and shape political futures. As the YAF motto states: "The Conservative Movement Starts Here."

Background

TPUSA and YAF^[1], respectively, are the largest and the oldest US campus conservative organizations. These groups engage in highly mediatized activism, funded by wealthy and well-connected groups such as the Koch Brothers, American Legislative Exchange Council, and the

Council for National Policy. [iv] They have large and well-organized social media presences, campus outreach programs, and regularly host sizeable public events, including America Fest.

Known for its watchlist of leftist professors, Charlie Kirk’s TPUSA was founded in 2012 and is now the largest campus conservative organization with, according to tpusa.org, over 1,000 chapters on American college campuses. Though nominally promoting conservatism and the free market it also has strong connections to evangelical Christianity, evidenced by its Turning Point Faith program, TPUSA presence at Christian colleges like Liberty University and institutional links to evangelical churches such as Calvary Chapel. TPUSA’s Jack Posobiec as well as grassroots level members of TPUSA have been tied to white Christian nationalist organizations like the Proud Boys (Kitts, 2020). [v]

YAF’s membership connects nationalism to the heart of the conservative mainstream; in 1962 Ronald Reagan joined the advisory board. Young America Foundation united with the original Young Americans for Freedom in 2011 to run conservative chapters on high school and college campuses, as well as a National Journalism Center which trained Fox News host Greg Gutfeld (njcyaf.org). YAF shows that conservatives long sought to recruit young Americans—but the intensive branding and mediatization effort is new.

YAF and TPUSA’s membership and funding structures suggest that these organizations successfully link conservatism, Christianity, and capitalism, making them sites for the development of a youth-based Christian nationalism which unites all these ideologies. YAF and TPUSA’s media and branding practices package CN in a way which appeals to young adults. Moreover, our analysis shows, this brand is racialized and gendered, so that to be a young conservative in the US today is to align with whiteness, nationalism, and gendered norms.

Theoretical Framings: Metapolitical Intimacy and the Friend Enemy Distinction

Work on youth politics in communication and media studies has frequently emphasized the role of media in enabling (Loader 2007) or dampening (Matthes 2022) democratic participation, which is often measured by voting or engagement in party politics. Loader (2007) theorizes instead a shift or “cultural displacement” of political views from party politics and institutional media towards other media, including social media. Wells (2010) shows this displacement shifting understandings of citizenship. Our research extends this work on media’s influence on

youth politics with a close examination of the mediatized discourses, personae, and strategies which are used to shape and promote engagement with a new kind of youth politics that intertwines with Christian nationalism. We do this by drawing on theorizations of political influencers (Ausserhoffer & Maireder, 2013; Perez-Curiel & Limon-Naharro, 2019) or those who use the affordances of social media – chiefly the intimacy created through the public performance of private content, and the ability to sell branded commodities-- to shape and circulate political content.

Each of these aspects – mediatization and metapolitical intimacy - are linked to specific mechanisms of digital politics. Mediatization in communication has been used to theorize the long term effect of media on processes of social change in the context of student protest (Mattoni & Treré, 2014). Our study of conservative student movements brings this together with linguistic anthropology's theory of *mediatization* as the reflexive link of “processes of communication to processes of commoditization” (Agha 2011;163) that is, institutions shaping language into both capitalist media discourse and commodities which are ideologically saturated (or religious, i.e., Thomas, 2009). This branding shapes how conservative political ideologies are realized and circulated (Nakassis, 2012). Second, social media's public performances of friendship constitute *metapolitical intimacy* (Maly, 2020), the political meaning and manipulation of social relationships. Reading our findings through metapolitical intimacy allows us to theorize how political influencers perform idealized gendered personae and communicate conservative and Christian ideology to gendered audiences through lifestyle media. Both branding and metapolitical intimacy are key to understanding the circulation of conservative discourses online and offline, and how they are taken up and understood by conservative American youth, which our blended ethnographic study addresses.

The work of metapolitical intimacy also creates the friend-enemy distinction, which re-affirms in-group/out-group dynamics. Using embattled language as “boundary-work” to fortify group identity (Lamont & Molnár, 2002: 168; Gurrentz, 2014) has long roots in conservative politics and Christianity. Christian Smith (1998) explains that white American evangelicals create an identity based on embattlement which demarcates them from the secular world and strengthens their group identity. Boundary-work has also been essential to white evangelicals' political strategizing and the establishment of the Christian Right over the past several decades

(Williams 2010) and to strengthening contemporary CN (Davis 2018). Like previous generations, campus conservatives create a strong in-group identity through strategic discourses of embattlement and resistance. Our study makes a contemporary intervention by showing how campus conservative social media rebrands this in youth-specific and gender-specific ways. Wearing the right clothes, watching the right media, and following the right people cements the friend-enemy distinction, using the gendered affordances of social media (Miguel, 2016; Raun, 2018), to create metapolitical intimacy linked to Christian nationalism and conservative politics.

The authors have previously explored how gendered social media performances have been used to shape religious and political ideologies and subjectivities (Author 2, 2021; Author 1, 2023). Building on our previous scholarship, we now ask how the highly mediatized political influencers of YAF and TPUSA sell, literally and metaphorically, the conservative resistance to young college-aged Americans. In the process we reveal how ICTs such as social media serve as a new site for religious-political interpenetration and metapolitical intimacy while demonstrating a rightward shift within conservative politics.

Methods and Data

Blended Ethnographic Methods

This article uses qualitative methods to investigate how the virtual relationships constructed in conservative youth media impact social structures in the real world. To do this it combines Author 1’s digital ethnographic research on campus conservative information and communication technologies (ICTs) with data on conservative youth organizations and lobbyists taken from Author 2’s ongoing ethnographic research with white evangelical conservatives (Author 2, 2020-present), to examine first how conservative youth organizations use social media analyzed by Author 1 and then the broader social, economic and cultural impact using the research from Author 2. Together these findings make the case for the importance of youth conservative media to contemporary politics. Using Apify, Author 1 scraped 3059 posts from 12 influencers including all female influencers employed by TPUSA and Calvary Chapel Chino Hills, an evangelical church associated with TPUSA. She then created an Instagram account called “researcher on the right” to follow all 12 conservative influencers, the accounts they follow or interacted with, and the people the algorithm’s “for you” page suggested in order to

create a conservative Instagram that could approximate what a young conservative Christian user might be exposed to, drawing on the methods of digital ethnography (Hine, 2017). Finally, Author 1 closely analyzed the TPUSA website, and media featuring TPUSA-affiliated influencer Erika Kirk (the wife of Charlie Kirk) and Kyle Rittenhouse.

Concurrently, Author 2 interviewed TPUSA members and conservative evangelical youth activists which allowed us to explore the affects, production and reception of these mediatized images in the material world. Questions were asked about their social media consumption, which influencers they followed, and where they obtained their news. These interviews were conducted during Author 2's ongoing ethnographic research on white evangelicalism and Trumpism in the US, and are richly contextualized by participant observation (e.g. attending church services and political rallies) at field sites in North Carolina and California, her insider position as a former evangelical Christian and the relationships she holds with the evangelical community from ten years of research in this area. Ethical approval was sought and granted by the ethical review committee at Author 2's university in 2020 and again in 2022 corresponding to different phases of the project and to include the analysis by Author 1.

Iterative analysis was conducted with the following repeating steps: observation and fieldnotes, data analysis, analytic memo writing with emergent codes, discussion. Contextualizing digital data with ethnographic findings allow us to show how conservative religious-political discourses operate, travel, and resonate with college-aged youth online and off, to examine how mediatized friendship shapes real world relationships, how the friend-enemy distinction is politically operative in conservative Christian spaces, and the material consequences of such online discourses. Few studies offer this type of blended ethnography in which the institutions which shape the circulation, uptake and intersection of different ideological formations can be explored at a granular level.

Analysis

In an iterative interpretative analysis (Faulkner, Vis & D'Orazio, 2018), we blend semiotic analysis of social media to explore how discourses are constructed and to what effect, and content analysis of ethnographic data (Krippendorff, 2019) to explore their effects on the social world. This relies on linguistic anthropological understandings of discourse as a non-neutral medium

where ideology, identity and authority are contested and circulated-- a space where the friend-enemy distinction is constructed.

Content analysis focused on performances of normative gender and political identities and was conducted with an initial coding system developed by Author 2, which was then applied and refined through Author 1's analysis of the social media data and refined again when Author 1 and 2 together analyzed interview data. Semiotic analysis explored elements of the influencer genre, including citationality (Nakassis, 2012) or how brands can repeat and communicate ideology, the discursive construction of friends and enemies, using Gal and Irvine (2019)'s theory of differentiation or the ideological creation of semiotic difference, and to the entwining of god, capitalism, and nationalism, using Urciuoli's (2008) mutual enregisterment. The iterative process meant an ongoing conversation, so semiotic analysis was brought together with content analysis and Author 2's codes to check for convergences and divergences. Our different backgrounds and foci meant that at times analytic emphasis was placed differently. Ultimately, however, these differences strengthen our analysis and lend a cross-disciplinary quality to the article.

Findings

Enemies

YAF and TPUSA discursively mobilize in-group/out-group identities intensified as friend-enemy distinction. First, we examine the enemies, frequently characterized as socialist (16 #socialismsucks in our data) or statist (22 #biggovsucks) but most prominently in TPUSA's speeches and podcasts as *cultural Marxists*. Cultural Marxism is positioned as a fundamental threat to American greatness and democracy, which flows from a long history of pitting Marxism against a Christian capitalist nation (Kruse, 2015). Framing communism as antithetical to American Christianity only intensified during the Cold War and the decades that followed (Storrs, 2010) and is re-purposed in the present day to encompass cultural elements of Marxism associated with leftist politics. Cultural Marxism serves as a floating signifier of opposition for conservative white evangelicals associated with a host of figures such as Vice President Harris, President Biden, President Obama, Nancy Pelosi, the BLM movement, Antifa, and George Soros. By linking an individual or group to cultural Marxism – regardless of economic policies - young conservatives

construct an enemy who threatens American-Christian values on a socio-cultural level, comprised of democracy, capitalism, and whiteness.

Amongst campus conservative organizations in the US, Marxism is figured as a dangerous and stealthy enemy. TPUSA influencers compare campuses to gulags in one September 15, 2021, post:

As socialism and Marxism have taken root on campuses nationwide, Yeonmi faced a strikingly familiar totalitarianism at @columbia after fleeing North Korea and the Kim regime.

Through such language, capitalism is framed as an inherently Christian value (Brown, 2006, 2020; Connolly, 2005; Guest, 2022). Online Christian capitalist discourses are mirrored offline . At a faith and politics class hosted by a politically conservative evangelical church in Northern California, the leader opened the first session by stating:

We are pro- ethical capitalism ... Conservatism is about respect for the created order and it's also about being able to maximize what God has entrusted to our hands. Innovation, creativity – all those things should come out of a conservative flow.

The linking of capitalism to Christianity and to broader conservative values by this church leader is broadly echoed, Opposition to cultural Marxism is a driving force of CN globally (Barbosa and Casarões, 2022; McDonald, 2011).

The term “cultural Marxism” suggests that in the absence of *actual* communism, Marxists have power in the cultural sphere, and are part of a progressive agenda, a word that arose often in our study and which denotes secrecy, fraud, or underhanded deception (see Author 2, 2022). By highlighting culture over economics, youth conservative movements bring a historical opposition to Marxism into the long-standing US “culture wars”, repurposing it to position LGBTQIA+ people and pro-Black groups (such as BLM) as enemies of capitalism and Christianity, and thus the nation. This is shown clearly in figure 1 below, a meme circulated by TPUSA.

[fig 1 here]

“Destroy” is a central element of differentiation (Gal & Irvine 2019) across our analysis of campus conservative media. Here, it is used to characterize the left across multiple media forms – from memes to #democratsdestroyamerica in our instagram data (20/) to Kirk’s speech opening Americafest2022 decrying the “destroying of distinctions “ by a “totalitarian left”. Later we show how “destroy” is also used to characterized as masculine and militaristic this media and its users, as in YAF’s youtube videos which characterize a debate as “destroying” an enemy. Destroying linked content and semiotic analysis—language was as a battle weapon, fighting enemy ideas. This is not new. Referring to Marxism as “destroying religion” harkens back to a popular argument advanced by personalities such as Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck that leftists want to destroy Christianity so Americans will rely on the state. Defending Christianity from cultural Marxists is thus equated to defending personal liberty against government tyranny, an argument which equates capital, Christ and American nationalism.

The opposition to cultural Marxism is also racially coded. The ideal nuclear family unit depicted in Figure 1 is white while BLM become Black Lives *Marxists*, as figure 2 below demonstrates:

[Fig 2]

Here the nation is embodied by white, Christian, conservative baseball player Sam Coonrod. In contrast, BLM embodies anti-Americaness. Evangelical interlocutors in Author 2’s study associated BLM with violent language, calling the group “scary,” “violent,” “anarchy,” and “trained Marxists.” Such language shows how BLM is configured as a particular dangerous blackness for white evangelical conservatives since the 2020 protests following George Floyd’s death. Conservatives frame BLM protests as violent riots, a disruption to the social order, private property, and the hetero-nuclear family (and the Christian values such as the gender binary and capitalist private property it represents). Associating BLM with Marxism/ cultural Marxism becomes a heuristic, a conspiratorial narrative through which right-wing figures cast Black Americans as violent and Black protest as illegitimate attacks on whiteness (Jarmin, 2014).

These discourses show cultural Marxism as deeply racialized, which reframes movements for Black liberation, much like communism before it, as attacks on a white Christian nation.

Campus conservative organizations position the liberal university as a training ground for cultural Marxism, using the friend-enemy distinction to identify professors as enemies who run universities where liberalism and political correctness are imposed. Threatened conservative young people on campus are thus identified as friends. Here again, the embattled trope thrives, and conservative and Christian students appear in this relationship as fighting for free speech and American values. TPUSA's Professor Watchlist and ongoing speeches about the high costs of university, as well as campus activism for "free speech" (TPUSA.org) show how prominently universities feature in conservative youth organizing.

This is reflected on by Dylan, who works for a Christian-conservative lobby group in California that engages in youth activism. Dylan grew up in a conservative evangelical home and reported that during high school he was "a full-blown liberal." It wasn't until he enrolled at a "very liberal" college in California that Dylan started to move right. This framing of the university as hegemonically liberal and opposed to Christians, characteristic of conservative media, shaped a narrative of individual free thought as opposition to liberalism. He explains:

Both experiences were very antithetical to my own personal beliefs. But it was good. I think everyone should have to go through that at some level to come to the conclusion that I believe what I believe **because I've come to that conclusion myself**. As soon as I started exploring that more progressive ideology, so much of it conflicted with my religious convictions.

Dylan describes his experience at a secular university as "strength-building," and key preparation for his role as a conservative lobbyist. His take follows a well-accepted script from YAF and TPUSA, whose influencers long videos in which they describe suffering "liberal indoctrination" (tpusa.com/alexclark). Politicizing social isolation, YAF's homepage asks their users if they feel "out of place as a conservatvive" (yaf.org). Their paid influencers empathize with people like Dylan and reinforce the narrative of the strong counter-cultural conservative, providing community and identity while painting universities and the left as elite, powerful and insane. TPUSA.ORG's trending topics on December 12, 2022, include "campus crazy," which detail

universities “gone full woke” and “insane professor trashing conservative [and] praising Marx.” Similarly, YAF trains debaters to resist so-called “indoctrination” and its attempts to “destroy” America.

This is a friend-enemy distinction which uses strongly militaristic language to reinforce in-group cohesion and draws strong boundaries around what it means to be an American. Leftists are “woke” “crazy” and “snowflakes” a term McIntosh (2019) explains has origins in military speech. They are indoctrinating youth in cultural Marxism a term as we explain above is linked to antisemitism, racism and homophobia. In contrast, campus conservative actors position themselves as strong, manly, not be easily offended, soldiers against the left’s attempts to “destroy” the family. If men are fighting the enemy, female influencers mediatize conservative “friendship” Mediatized friendship have real political consequences, as we show next.

Cuteservatives

This section centers on “cuteservative” female influencers who circulate distinctly gendered and Christianized political ideas through the medium of social media. Cuteservatives, a portmanteau of cute and conservative, is an emic term in Turning Point USA (46 mentions) for female influencers who embody the norms of white conservative attractiveness—girlishly unthreatening yet sexually desirable --and use this to make conservatism seem relevant and attractive. Influencer Isabel Brown (tpusa.com) makes this metapolitics explicit:

At TPUSA we understand that politics is always downstream from culture^[vi], and if we can reach people where they’re at culturally—that’s how we influence our nation.

Cuteservative female influencers equate conservative politics with attractiveness through slogans such as “conservatives are hotter,” but they do not project hotness so much as desirable norms of white heterosexual evangelical femininity (Author 2, 2021). On social media this looks like carefully produced relatability, a girl-next-door who can recruit members to campus organizations and the conservative movement more broadly. The sexualization of white conservative women also has a long history in the US, exemplified by Ann Coulter and Sarah

Palin, who ran for Vice-President in 2008 (Baird, 2004). Cuteservatives show us two distinct developments: one, the sexualization of conservative women is now being enacted through social media, and two, the prominence of *young* conservative women, most of whom are in their twenties, who represent ideal big sisters or crushes rather than Palin's style of momma bear politics. Cuteness emphasizes women as submissive, girlish, innocent; this is evident in a larger Instagram dataset where "girl" is mentioned 10 times more than "woman." Cuteservatives create intimacy by disclosing stories of being oppressed as conservatives on college campuses, reproducing the friend-enemy distinction, and sharing photos of their everyday lives. The mediatized "cuteness" of the cuteservatives relies on conservative forms of femininity and encodes particular values: the strict heterosexual gender binary of conservative Christianity (Author 2, 2022; Kobes du Mez, 2020), and "pure white womanhood" (Author 1, 2023, Mikkelsen and Kornfield, 2021).

We looked at 2012 posts, 1177 of which promote another account or product, and focus on case studies from three prominent influencers: Erika Kirk, founder of the Christian clothing brand Proclaim Streetwear and Christian podcaster; Isabel Brown, a TPUSA influencer with a large social media following; and Morgan Zegers, a contributor to TPUSA and podcaster who also founded Young Americans Against Socialism. These women draw on the tools of influencer culture to form mediatized relationships and to sell and circulate ideologically conservative branded goods.

Cuteservatives utilize the affordances of social media, in particular Instagram with its ability to share intimate images, mention, repost and connect, to bring their private lives into the public. These relationships build a sense of trust, and through the figure of the idealized best friend, young people are drawn towards the youth conservative movement. For example, Brown reposted a follower's comment, "The Mainstream Media wants you to feel alone. You are not!" Such statements deepen campus conservative's friend-enemy distinction and forge highly mediatized forms of intimacy through gendered norms.

Cuteservatives further build intimacy by sharing minute details of their daily life, such as diet and dating tips, photos with pets and friends. For example, on October 22, 2022, Brown captions a beach photo "don't wait until you are thirty to fall in love" and says independence is a waste of a woman's time. The intimate genre rebrands conservative sexual politics as something youthful and quotidian, like advice between friends. On the TPUSA website Brown shares an

Instagram post of her and Alex Clark, another young, slender white TPUSA influencer, in softball clothes captioned: “Always a home run hanging with my bestie,” accompanied by a pink heart and a plug for her new clothing line. This branded friendship circulates TPUSA’s message between the official channels, i.e., the TPUSA website, and their social media page, which links the subscriber into this friendship and, they hope, into this ideology. And ideally, you also purchase a shirt.

Examining the merchandise sold and endorsed by college conservative organizations sheds light on the broader branding of conservatism. Cuteservatives sell branded goods which link conservative, capitalist, and Christian ideas, styling them to appeal to youth. Cuteservatives shore up conservative identity by advertising t-shirts emblazoned with slogans such as Socialism Sucks or Big Government Sucks (fig. 3d). YAF also brands sportswear such as in Figure 3a below where the popular brand Supreme’s logo is replaced by the word Conservative, constituting what Nakassis (2012) refers to as a citation in the politics of branding. When worn by the “cute” (young, white, heterosexual and conservative) girls, these images present Christianity and capitalism as marketable, fashionable, attractive –supreme.

[Fig 3 here]

Proclaim streetwear [fig. 3c] is run by Erika Kirk, wife of TPUSA’s leader. Her clothing brand Proclaim references the exhorted practice of ‘proclaiming the good news’ (Luke 1:9, NIV) or proselytizing to unbelievers. She uses her platform to endorse conservative and Christian values, especially traditional gender roles and the heterosexual family (Author 2, 2021; Bjork-James, 2021). Kirk specifically targets young conservative women –who she calls “Proverbs 31 girls”-- with a podcast and the Biblein365 project, a digital Bible study group which creates mediatized, Christianized, intimacy.

In addition to t-shirts like the one pictured above [figure 3c], Kirk’s company sells socks emblazoned with Proverbs 16:9 (“the Lord directs your steps”), hats with Isaiah 61:1 (“the Lord’s anointing and the call to evangelize”) and t-shirts with a crowned lion and lamb, all explicit biblical references. These are modern, fashionable re-brandings of Christian clothing that are geared toward young, college-aged women. Selling Christian branded books, clothing, or other products spreads the word - *evangelizes*- at the same time as it funds religious-political

movements (Thomas, 2009). This is especially true on Instagram and other social media sites where influencers can sell products and earn revenue.

Branded political-religious clothing, such as Kirk's Proclaim streetwear and YAF's sportswear, is also a feature of many Cuteservatives' social media feeds. **Figure 4** is a picture from Brown's. In addition to work for TPUSA, Brown wrote *Frontlines: Finding my Voice on an American College Campus*, which discursively compares liberal colleges to war. Here, Brown wears a top which cites the Supreme logo but replaces it with "former fetus," which links her to the so-called war on abortion in the US, and the conservative argument for fetal personhood. This repackages a decades-long political issue central to the Religious Right for a new generation. Brown's shirt, her conformity to normative heterosexual femininity, read as "cuteness", and her conservativeness, becomes part of the Christian message of salvation. Moreover, Brown embodies a message that she herself is the type of former fetus that merits saving.

[fig 4 here]

The connection between large campus conservative organizations, conservative politics and Christianity is borne out in over 300 mentions of Jesus or God in our Instagram data of Cuteservatives. Au2's (forthcoming, 2023) ethnographic data shows that for white evangelicals, opposing abortion remains the number one political issue driving their voting activities in the 2020 election, and is a space where religion and conservatism mutually enregister. This was evident with Guy, a 22-year-old Christian conservative lobbyist and former campus conservative youth activist:

Like abortion, like homosexuality – these aren't political issues, they [liberals] have just labelled them as political and because they're abrasive we don't want to talk about them. But they're actually not political issues, they're issues of morality that are clearly addressed in the Bible.

Guy demonstrates the in-group/out-group distinction by repeatedly referring to liberals as "they" and himself (and conservatives) as "us." Moreover, he shows how conflated Christian and conservative identities truly are by replacing the political with the moral. The blurring of

religious/moral and political was summed up by another research participant in Author 2’s study: “The question is: what is most important? A Christian identity or a political identity?” The intertwined relationship of Christianity, conservative politics also appears on social media and is again linked to capitalism.

Morgan Zegers’ social media shows this merger explicitly. A TPUSA influencer who founded *Young Americans Against Socialism* which uses “peer to peer communication to enlighten young Americans to the dangers of socialism,” Zegers explicitly uses intimacy to spread TPUSA’s message and build the evangelical-political entwinement by pairing highly relatable images with anti-socialist sentiment. The importance of Christianity to this is evident in Zegers’ November 2021 post of her speech at Liberty University, which was characterized by by Adam, a 20-year-old college student in Georgia who works for TPUSA, as “like the epicenter for Conservative views”

Zeeger’s speech, entitled Freedom is a Lifestyle, was posted online as in figure 5 below:

[fig 5]

While many influencers link Christian beliefs to capital through branded merchandise, Zegers makes Christianity and capitalism central elements of her political platform. Using the term “survivor”, Zegers acknowledges the importance of Christian organizations for conservative politics. Survivors of communism are likened to religious martyrs, while communism is described as locked in a battle not (only) with capitalism but with God. And by extension, the campus conservative is also an embattled – but adorable–martyr. Calling both capitalist and the Christian freedom fighters, Zegers uses the friend-enemy distinction to link capitalism with Christianity.

Cuteservatives discursively re-align religion and politics all while making themselves emotionally engaging, attractive, and appealing to college students. Through branded t- shirts and Instagram posts, Cuteservatives repackage conservative values like anti-abortion- in youth-friendly, contemporary messages and merchandise. They create desirable personae by making traditional white femininity attractive and construct the image of a fun best friend, the “former

fetus”, the survivor of secular universities – all mobilized for political purposes. Cuteservatives performance of ideal gendered persona create metapolitical intimacy – aligning desirable subject positions and mediatized relationships which make conservative politics highly relatable within a rigid conservative white Christian sexual politics (Bjork-James, 2020) that precludes feminism, trans rights or marriage equality. The friend-enemy distinction relies on the strategic use of these idealized gendered personae. In the next section, we examine their male counterparts.

Everyday ‘Heroes’

In this final section, we explore the young, white conservative everyday hero exemplified by Kyle Rittenhouse – chosen because he is so admired by TPUSA that at America Fest he entered the stage to his own theme song, a “rock star reception” as Fox News anchor Elex Michaelson tweeted on December 21, 2021. Charged with murdering BLM protestors in Kenosha, WI in August 2020 when he was just 17 years old, Rittenhouse became a right-wing political influencer after he was acquitted on the grounds that his fatal shooting of two men and wounding of a third was self-defense. In Rittenhouse’s own words, he simply wanted to “protect businesses.” TPUSA and some Christian groups saw Rittenhouse as a powerful symbol of Christian battle for freedom and prosperity (Faithonview, 2021). Or as TPUSA’s University of Illinois chapter put it in a November 16 tweet: “Kyle Rittenhouse is epic”.

As we see in the array of photos from his Instagram in figure 5 below, Rittenhouse has become a core influencer in TPUSA, often featuring in photos with TPUSA leader Charlie Kirk. Rittenhouse also embodies the mutual enregisterment of right-wing discourses in this page where photos with far-right (including Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene), Christian worship and white evangelical manhood, and worship of guns unite.

[Fig 6]

In these tweets from the day after his acquittal, Rittenhouse becomes highly relatable, an everyman, *and* a hero at the same time. TPUSA’s characterizes him as an everyman and implies that Rittenhouse stood for every single one of its (white, male) readers [figure 6a], while The Boston University YAF stated on Twitter that the verdict was “a reminder that America remains

a bastion of freedom” frames Rittenhouse as a freedom fighter [6b]. These social media posts endorse masculinized conservative values, such as physical strength, and forge intimacy with audiences by suggesting that it was not just Rittenhouse on trial but every conservative American male and implying that tomorrow *all* conservatives will be on trial.

[fig 7]

Dual characterizations – of an everyday friend and hero – continue in a series of December 2021 interviews with Rittenhouse from TPUSA and TPUSA-affiliated media designed to make Rittenhouse an influencer, including one by Elijah Schaffer (who called politics “the friend-enemy distinction”) and Sarah Gonzales entitled “Chillin’ with that One Kid from Kenosha.” They interview Rittenhouse about his trial for the murder of BLM protesters in a joking register designed to demonstrate his strength and heroism. For example, at one point Rittenhouse mocks the man he shot as not able to raise his hand. He also establishes his heterosexuality with an open discussion of his love of “rans” women, a term which fetishizes Black women’s bodies, and his old social media handle “four doors more whores.” This is echoed on Twitter where images of him at TPUSA events with busty blondes circulate. Together these discourses contribute to a masculine persona embraced by many Christians after Donald Trump’s highly gendered strongman posturing (McIntosh, 2020), continuing a long tradition of linking conservative values with performances of hypermasculinity (Kobes DuMez, 2020). Rittenhouse is framed as the conservative masculine ideal, first as a heroic defender of white property from the Black Lives Matter movement, then through transgressive humor which re-entrenches heterosexual masculinity (McIntosh, 2020) and perpetuates the “conservative resistance” to liberal norms.

While Rittenhouse is elevated as an everyday hero by Schaffer’s jocular male intimacy, co-host Sara Gonzales characterizes Rittenhouse as “one of the greatest American heroes with definitely in the 21st century other than like maybe Donald Trump [*sic*]” but also– “literally just a kid who’s like I like dogs do you like dogs like here look at my puppy he’s so cute. [(12/6/2021)]” In these quotes she flirtatiously points to a normative American boyhood, an image echoed in Rittenhouse’s Instagram that shows him with puppies and conservative influencers.

[fig7]

Rittenhouse is characterized as an everyday kid, and a heroic defender of businesses and by extension the white Christian moral order. Adam, a white, college aged student who worked for TPUSA, stated: “Obviously, I’m anti-riots, pro law-and-order, pro law-enforcement.” He went on to describe how Rittenhouse shot and killed “people [who] were looting some stores.” Adam normalizes and then defends Rittenhouse:

End of story is that no 17-year-old should be put into a situation where he has got to go and kill people. And that’s on him for thinking, ‘Okay, my only resort now is that I’m going to have to go and kill people.’ It’s also on the fact that, you know, he thinks he’s got to defend his livelihood, he’s got to defend his family’s livelihood.

Referring to his actions as “defending his family’s livelihood” justifies Rittenhouse’s violence by holding it in close linguistic proximity to deep-seeded American values of family and property. It echoes TPUSA’s slogan stating that “the right to self-defense is one of the most basic liberties we hold”, making Rittenhouse’s actions a defense of freedom itself.

This basic liberty, however, does not extend to BLM protesters or unarmed Black people facing police brutality in the US. This contradiction reflects a broader Christian nationalist position on police violence (Perry & Whitehead 2019) and gun control (Whitehead, Schnabel & Perry, 2018). It affirms the racialization of the friend-enemy dichotomy; white friends (Rittenhouse) are positioned as rightly defending their liberty and livelihood, whereas Black enemies (BLM) are violent and threatening.

Celebration of Rittenhouse makes TPUSA’s “conservative resistance” frightening. Previously, this was intellectual resistance or verbal transgression showing idealized masculine strength— using martial metaphors to destroy an enemy in a battle for freedom. However, with Rittenhouse’s actions, strength is realized in armed resistance, which raises the question: what kind of friends do these discourses create? And what will they do to their enemies? Campus conservatives’ media does not merely rebrand Christian nationalism for the youth market in the digital sphere, but shows a blurring between religious-political participation and violence with real-world, everyday consequences.

Conclusion

This paper has explored conservative campus movements mediatized political organizing, which centers on creating a friend-enemy distinction that unites conservatives in two senses: it brings together multiple political discourses, and it constructs intimacy in a battle to destroy the left. It has shown how ICTs such as social media plays a key role in campus conservative organizing, in partly through forging metapolitical intimacy, linking friendship to Christian nationalist politics to forge affective connections online, but which also shape offline religious-political events. Moreover, by bringing together social media and ethnographic data, this article has demonstrated how discourse travels and is re-articulated through everyday political performances and branded consumption. We argue that campus conservatives’ mediatized organizing can be a site for assembling, rebranding, and disseminating Christian Nationalist discourses, showing another impact of digital media on youth politics, and US politics moreover.

Future research may consider longer blended ethnographic studies of campus conservative organizations as sites of persistent, powerful intersections of Christianity and conservative politics, as well as Christian nationalism. It is important to also examine the strategic connections between college campuses and churches. We have found campus conservatives’ social media forges connections between Christian, capitalist, and conservative political beliefs and argue that this demonstrates the need to explore how youth politics exists in this nexus. Doing so will reveal a new branch of the religious-political interpenetration that has characterized US politics for decades.

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[i] <https://www.podgist.com/glenn-beck-program/kenosha-is-a-war-zone-guests-abby-johnson-elijah-schaffer-82620/index.html> Transcript available here : <https://www.podgist.com/glenn-beck-program/kenosha-is-a-war-zone-guests-abby-johnson-elijah-schaffer-82620/index.html>

[ii] We use far-right to refer to explicit racist ideology including, but not limited to, white nationalism and white Christian nationalism. We use the umbrella term right-wing to refer to groups which unite conservative and far-right beliefs (much of the contemporary US), or to those whose political affiliation remains to the right of mainstream conservatism but could not be characterized as far-right. We use conservatism when it is used emically, or as a term for the belief in fiscal or social conservatism.

[iii] The term LGBTQIA+ has been used in this paper for its wider inclusion of non-majority sexual identities.

[iv] For a list of TPUSA’s conservative funders and their major media scandals see: https://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php/Turning_Point_USA

[v] See for example: <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/south-florida-proud-boy-rey-perez-tied-to-stone-tpusa-11094551>

[vi] this citation borrows from far-right media mogul Andrew Breitbart's definition of metapolitics, showing again the interpenetration of far-right and conservative discourses in this media.

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Figures



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3 a-d. a

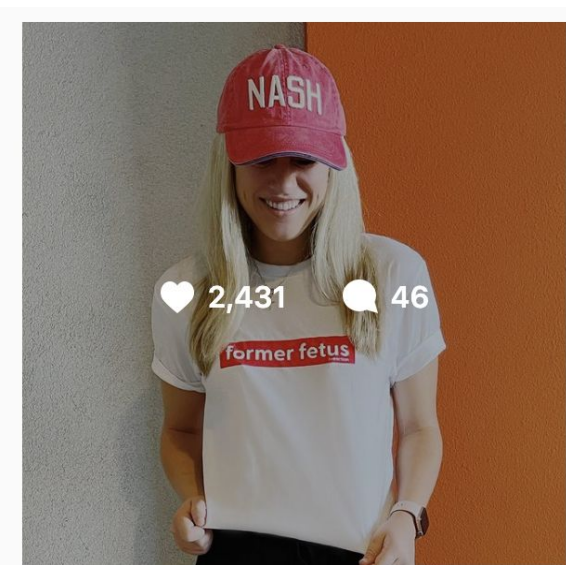


Figure 4.



Figure 5



Figure 6

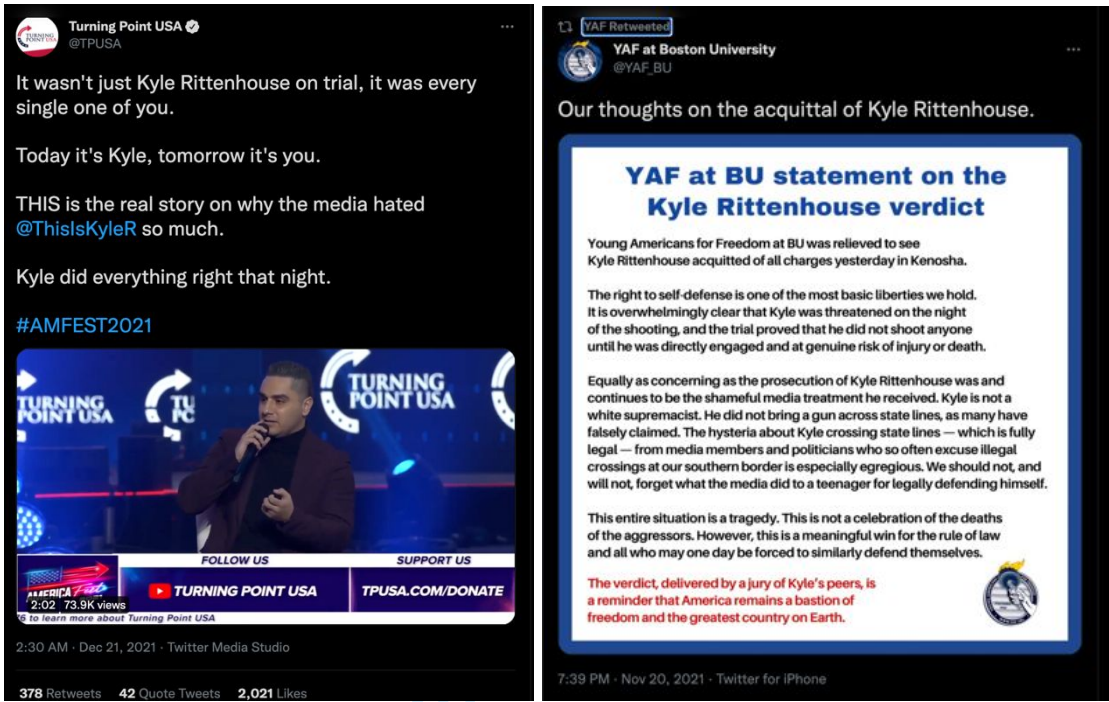


Figure 7 a-b:

List of Captions

Figure 1. a frequently circulated meme from Turning Point USA

Figure 2. Image from a tweet by @TPUSA, captioned ‘marxism is anti American #Iheartamerica’ 7/26/2020

Figure 3 a-d. a, an image from YAF selling a tee shirt with ‘conservative’ in red, next to b, the supreme logo which it is stylistically citing, c, proclaim streetwear with similar font and placement, d, TPUSA tee shirt with logo sharing similar stylistic elements

Figure 4. screenshot from Isabel Brown’s Instagram post from January 20, 2022

Figure 5. screenshoot from Morgan Zeeger’s Instagram post from November 19, 2021

Figure 6. screenshot showing Rittenhouse’s Instagram

Figure 7a-b: screenshots of tweets about the Rittenhouse verdict from chapters of the two major campus conservative organizations.