

TikTok is not the Only Echo Chamber: A Rhetorical Analysis

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Introduction

What techniques do opinion columnists use to persuade us? This question is at the heart of Lauren Bayne's rhetorical analysis of Tasha Kheiriddin's *National Post* opinion piece: "We said we'd never forget the Holocaust, but Gen Z has nothing to remember." Kheiriddin argues that TikTok is undermining Gen Z's understanding of the world, especially when it comes to historical issues like the Holocaust. As Lauren deftly points out, rather than persuading audiences who might disagree with her position, Kheiriddin uses various rhetorical strategies to confirm and reinforce the opinions of her existing readers.

Keywords: logical fallacies, Gen Z, Holocaust, rhetorical analysis, stasis questions, TikTok



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Current events in Palestine are generating divisive reports. In an opinion article that appeared in the *National Post* in November 2023 titled “We said we’d never forget the Holocaust, but Gen Z has nothing to remember,” columnist Tasha Kheiriddin responds to rising tensions by pointing out a documented increase in anti-Semitism across Canada. She believes that the problem is Generation Z learning all their information on TikTok rather than from their schools or more traditional popular media sources. The author’s argument relies heavily on the unwavering support from her target audience and their shared biases, thus failing to create an argument that persuades anyone else. Rather than considering and answering stasis questions—a sequence of questions designed to locate the place where the discussion moves from having common ground to being in disagreement on a topic—the author overutilizes logical fallacies, which effectively alienate any readers who are not already in agreement with her perspective. In this rhetorical analysis, I will dissect Kheiriddin’s article with the goal of proving that she did not intend to use persuasion to sway undecided audiences but rather to reinforce pre-existing opinions and biases.

The audience that Kheiriddin is writing for becomes apparent when looking into what and where she has been writing. She often writes about similar topics, such as the current and ongoing genocide in Palestine and the issues surrounding TikTok and its security. She also integrates these discussions into her online presence. Her biases against TikTok and its generally younger users are as evident on her social media accounts as they are in her writing. She has reposted other people’s posts about their hatred of TikTok (Cardy), as well as the failings of Generation Z (Ali). Additionally, she regularly publishes in the *National Post*, which has been documented as being a conservative media outlet that is read by older generations (Britneff). Her opinion pieces are in line with the *National Post*’s audience and are similar to the majority of the other articles written in this newspaper. To anyone who is not older, conservative, or in agreement with the author on the highly debated topics surrounding Palestine, it is evident that this author does not intend to persuade them.

To appeal to her intended audience, the author leans heavily into her use of the populism fallacy, which creates a strong sense of “us vs. them” between the supposedly wise older generations and the allegedly misinformed Generation Z. This not only reinforces the thinking that the author’s target audience is an older generation but also alienates any members of the younger generations who may be reading. The author goes so far as to use “we” when describing her experiences, marking these as supposedly universal for those reading. This demonstrates that she has an intended audience and she is writing for no one else. This audience seems to find this stylistic choice compelling since one commenter wrote that this article was an “excellent analysis” and specifically states “we, the over-40 generation” when discussing their shared position (O’Malley). Another commenter said that this was a “beautifully written article that makes valid points” and even believes that this

article is too “generous” to Gen Z (Shigaev). These commenters and others who left similar comments see Kheiriddin as more rational and more believable because she is like them: overly critical of the younger generations.

Another logical fallacy that Kheiriddin uses throughout her piece is the appeal to false authority. First, she cites another National Post article by Sabrina Maddeaux called “Israel is the latest victim of TikTok's relentless propaganda” on matters of technology and algorithms (Maddeaux). This article offers no facts or information from experts to back up its claims, and Maddeaux generally has no understanding of how algorithms work. Instead of facts, this article also uses appeals to false authority, citing The Guardian and using federal politicians’ actions as proof. After citing the article by Maddeaux, Kheiriddin cites an interview-based poll of Canadians on their knowledge of the Holocaust (Schoen Consulting, “Canada”) that offers little to no information on how the data was collected or how participants were chosen, making the results less credible to an audience that cares about the methods of this poll. That being said, to an individual who is already in agreement with Kheiriddin, these citations would be a powerful ethos appeal. They would make the author more credible by reinforcing her point using an outside source. Kheiriddin’s third source was a similar poll done by the same company. However, this poll was not even conducted using Canadian participants. Instead, the company polled Americans on their knowledge of the Holocaust (Schoen Consulting, “Holocaust Knowledge”). Using American data to reinforce a point about Canadian youth and Canadian education systems fails to persuade since it uses the sweeping generalization fallacy by generalizing youth across North America despite their obvious differences. For example, education curriculums are vastly different between countries and even between provinces and states within the countries, meaning that generalizing data about knowledge of historical events across the border offers little persuasive power. Kheiriddin uses tactics, including logical fallacies, that she believes will work to persuade her target audience because she is not writing to persuade anyone who does not already agree with her.

In her article, Kheiriddin ignores the first four stasis questions (questions of fact, questions of definition, questions of cause and consequence, and questions of value). While this does not inherently negate the validity of her argument, it does lead to the conclusion that she is not writing to convince an undecided audience. A public debate on the topic is not able to successfully discuss the final stasis questions (questions of procedure, policy and proposal) because this would mean that they had found common ground on the first four stasis questions. That is to say, undecided or opposed audiences have not agreed on the question of values and morality; they haven’t even established the facts. For example, Kheiriddin says that TikTok is a democracy-destabilizing evil that was created to spread misinformation, leading to an entire generation of uninformed people who are forgetting

past atrocities. Within this idea, she both defines her version of the facts (the goal of TikTok is to spread misinformation for the benefit of autocratic governments) and assigns morality (the things that Gen Z is learning on TikTok are bad). From my experience across my university campus and beyond, there are people who would disagree that these are inherently true. Despite a lack of general agreement on the first few stasis questions, the author begins answering the fifth and final question, procedure and proposal, by proposing that Gen Z needs to have the tragedy of the Holocaust more commonly discussed in their pop culture. She is able to successfully skip to this stasis question because she has considered her audience and is aware that she is writing with their shared answers to the first four stasis questions in mind rather than to answer or discuss those questions for those who may not agree. This is a final piece of evidence that Kheriddin's intent was never to join the discussion in a productive way, and rather, her goal was to write to an audience already in agreement with her.

Since the author is overly reliant on the fact that the most common audience for her piece would already agree with her or at least share her same biases, she fails to create a persuasive argument. While I would agree that social media can create political echo chambers, this article is evidence of the fact that we see this phenomenon elsewhere as well, including in published news media. If someone writes only for an audience that is already in complete agreement with them, the persuasive writing techniques being used are not meant for discussion or for swaying audiences to believe in what they are saying. Rather, they are meant to allow the writer and their readers to fall deeper and deeper into the echo chamber they are already in.

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