Targeting Young Men: An Analysis of 2024 U.S. Election Advertising on Meta Platforms

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Abstract:

After the 2024 U.S. election cycle, many people pointed to young men as a pivotal group that swung big towards President Donald Trump and Republican candidates compared to previous years. There has been a lot of public discourse since then, with a big focus on cultural or ideological explanations for this shift. I took a different angle with this project, focusing specifically on the advertising realm. I analyzed political advertisements posted in the United States between July and November 2024 using data from Meta's Ad Library, filtering for ads in which men aged 18–34 represented a significant share of impressions.

Once I had access to this data, I was able to observe variation in the different levels of advertising volume, spending, impressions, and content/tone coming from each party. The results among ads targeting young men showed that Republican-aligned advertisers consistently spent more money, generated more impressions, used more negative language, and put a greater emphasis on border security. Conversely, Democratic-aligned advertisers spent less, garnered fewer impressions, and utilized more positive messaging. These findings suggest that differences in campaign advertising strategy may help explain observed shifts among young male voters in the 2024 election.

Introduction:

After every major U.S. election, pundits and media outlets quickly look for numbers and data to explain why the results happened as they did, and any noticeable shifts and trends in voter behavior. Meanwhile, the losing party typically reflects on what "went wrong" or what voters they were banking on that didn't go their way.

In both cases, people were frequently led back to young men. The Survey Center on American Life details this in great detail[1], displaying the following shift over the past few election cycles - **See Figure 1.**

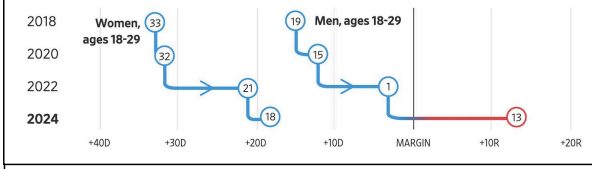

Figure 1. Percentage point difference in vote by gender and age. Source: Survey Center on American Life (2024). Reproduced for analytical purposes.

A quick Google search leads to hundreds of articles or reports pondering why this demographic group shifted, some diagnosing reasons, and others puzzled by the shift and leaving the reader with more questions than answers.

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[1] Cox, Daniel A. "2024 Election Edition: Young Men Swing toward Trump - the Survey Center on American Life." The Survey Center on American Life - A Nonprofit Organization Dedicated to Understanding the Way Cultural, Political, and Technological Changes Are Shaping the Lives of Ordinary Americans., 7 Nov. 2024, www.americansurveycenter.org/newsletter/2024-election-edition-young-men-swing-toward-trump/.

There has been a lot of commentary on cultural shifts and the power of right-wing influencers like Joe Rogan and the late Charlie Kirk, or social science theories about the role of men and masculinity in society.

These, among many other theories, would certainly be interesting to dive into. However, I wanted to investigate an area that is:
1) Measurable, tangible, and data-oriented
2) Relatively uncharted territory in media and literature that is already out there

Thus, I landed in the advertising realm. While much of the public discussion has focused on cultural or ideological explanations for this shift, less attention has been paid to how campaigns strategically attempted to reach young men through political advertising, and I wanted to shed some light on this. **In ads targeting young men, how did Democratic and Republican-aligned advertisers differ in their volume, spending, impressions, content, and tone?**

In this paper, I will dive into my process for answering this question, including how I gathered and cleaned the data, the results of the party comparison models I ran, major takeaways from the data, any limitations of this observational study, and future research plans.

In the remainder of this paper, I will detail the data and methods used to answer this question, present the results of the analysis, discuss key findings and limitations, and outline my plans for future research to expand upon this report.

Data & Methodology:

As mentioned previously, I gathered all of my data for this project through the Meta Ad Library[2], which provides publicly available information about advertisements published on all Meta platforms. The Ad Library Database had a couple of features that made this project more feasible to complete. They have a filter feature that allowed me to filter by Ad Type: Political & Issue Ads, Country: United States, Date Range: July – November 5, 2024.

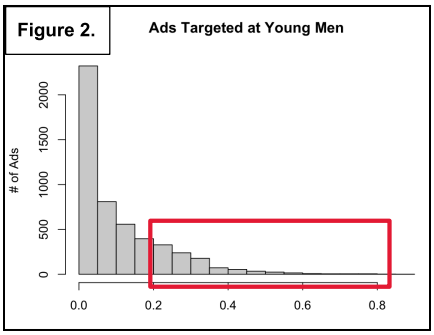
Additionally, they have an integrated CSV file export feature, which allowed me to download the data and use it in R. Once the data was downloaded, which included 5,054 ads after the initial filtering, there were a couple of measures I had to take to clean and prepare the data for analysis.

First, I had to ensure I was focusing on ads targeting young men. For each ad, there was a demographics column that gave a long string like:

{"age":"18-24","gender":"male","percentage":0.006536},{"age":"25-34","gender":"female","percentage":0.039216},{"age":"25-34","gender":"male","percentage":0.045752},{"age":"35-44","gender":"female","percentage":0.071895},{"age":"35-44","gender":"male","percentage":0.065359},{"age":"35-44","gender":"unknown","percentage":0.006536},{"age":"45-54","gender":"female","percentage":0.150327},{"age":"45-54","gender":"male","percentage":0.156863},{"age":"55-64","gender":"female","percentage":0.111111},{"age":"55-64","gender":"male","percentage":0.163399},{"age":"65+","gender":"female","percentage":0.098039},{"age":"65+","gender":"male","percentage":0.084967}

[2] Meta Ad Library." Meta, Meta Platforms, Inc., 2025, https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/

This provides a proportion of impressions of each advertiser that targeted each age + gender combination. From this, I pulled the 18-24 and 25-34 male proportions, and added them together into a new column, “pct_young_male”. From here, I wanted to determine where to make the cutoff for this value, and what was considered high, while still leaving a large enough n of ads. To answer this question, I created a histogram displaying varying levels of pct_young_male for all ads in the dataset (**See Figure 2**).



As you can see, this was a right-skewed distribution, with a majority of the data falling between 0 and 0.05. With this in mind, I chose to isolate the data that was 0.2 or above, which represented ~ the upper 19% of data when it came to the propensity of their impressions that targeted young men. This left me 971 observations out of the original 5,054 advertisements.

Next, I separated advertisements by party alignment. With a combination of Candidates, PACs, and advocacy groups, the only reliable way to distinguish parties that I conceived of was to manually separate them out. Each advertisement had a page name, representing the page the ad was published on, as well as a byline that provided the name of the person/group that paid for the ad. I used this information, as well as the text of the ad, to determine party alignment. If an ad showed clear, consistent support for one party over the other, it would fall under the category of Democratic or Republican-aligned advertisements, respectively. Those that didn't clearly fall under either side were dropped from the dataset. Of the 971 observations that made it to this point, 279 were placed in the Democratic-aligned category, 384 were placed in the Republican-aligned category, and 308 were dropped.

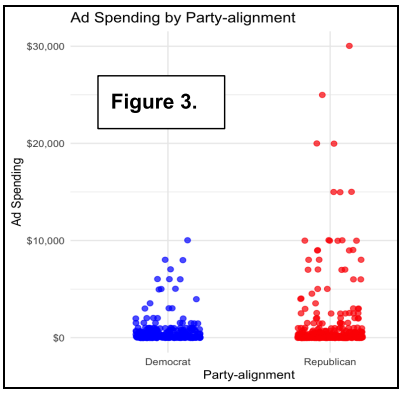
A list of the advertisements that were selected for each respective category can be found in the appendix.

Ad Spending & Impressions

With party alignment and demographic targeting accounted for, I was then able to move on to comparing and analyzing the data by party. Before proceeding, I needed to take one additional step to prepare the data. For both impressions and spending data, the Meta CSV provided them as ranges like "lower_bound: 600, upper_bound: 699". Thus, I decided to convert them all to the lower bound value for consistency's sake. Alternatively, I could’ve converted them to upper bound values, or kept them as ranges; however, I chose to stick with lower bound values here. Using dplyr and stringr, I mutated the data and added a column for the lower bound # of impressions and lower bound $$ spent per ad.

Starting with spending data, I created both a 2x4 table displaying party alignment, total amount of money spent, average amount of money spent per ad, and total number of ads per row (**See Table 1**). Additionally, using ggplot, I created a jittered scatter plot, displaying each ad as one point, separated by party on the x-axis, and varying by the amount of money spent on the ad on the y-axis (**See Figure 3**)

Table 1.			
$$$ Spent by each party-aligned ads targeting young men on Meta Platforms (July → Nov. 2024)			
Party Alignment	Total $ Spent	Average $ spent Per Ad	Total # of Ads by Party Alignment
Democrat	$168,300	$605	278
Republican	$431,900	$1125	384



As you can see in both Table 1 and Figure 3 here, there is a clear difference in Spending by party alignment, with Republican-aligned ads accounting for more than 2.5x more $ spent, and nearly 2x more spent on average per ad, among ads targeting young men on Meta Platforms from July to November 2024. The Figure displays that this was also not only skewed by a few high-end ad buys.

However, money spent is only significant if it translates to impressions and results. And that's where my analysis of impressions comes into play. The CSV provided total impressions per ad, but I wanted to focus on the number of impressions by that young men demographic specifically. Thus, I multiplied the "pct_young_male" number I previously got by the total number of impressions for each ad, creating a new column "young_men_impressions". With this, I was able to create a simple breakdown of total impressions by party alignment (**See Table 2**). As detailed in the table, the higher money spent also translated to a trouncing in the total number of impressions by young men for ads aligned with each respective party.

Table 2.	
Total impressions by Party Alignment on ads targeting young men on Meta Platforms (July → Nov. 2024)	
Party Alignment	# of Impressions by Young Men
Democrat	5,217,241
Republican	12,279,474

Further, I was interested in seeing which individuals or groups were driving up these numbers for each party. Thus, I created tables displaying the top five pages responsible for the highest number of impressions by party alignment (**See Table 3 & Table 4**).

Table 3.		
Impression Leaders: Republican-Leaning Advertisers		
Page Name	Description	Total Impressions
NumbersUSA	Anti-Immigration PAC	4,597,877
Citizens For Free Enterprise	Right-leaning advocacy org focused on free enterprise	647,405
Turning Point USA	Conservative Advocacy group founded by Charlie Kirk	577,989
Right For America PAC	Super PAC supporting Trump, led by Trump ally, Sergio Gor	325,284
Ben Shapiro	Conservative political commentator, ads funded by The Daily Wire	238,929

Table 4.		
Impression Leaders: Democratic-Leaning Advertisers		
Page Name	Description	Total Impressions
The Daily Scroll	(Paid for by Harris For President)	1,326,581
NowThis Impact	American progressive social media-focused media organization	841,383
Kamala Harris	Harris for President	449,926
WinSenate	PAC that works to elect Democrats to the Senate	436,386
House Majority PAC	PAC that works to elect Democrats to the House	403,390

Interestingly, in the tables above, I observed a bit of a difference in who the leading voices are in ads targeting young men. The Republican-aligned side in Table 3 displays a significant variety of voices, including young conservative voices like TPUSA and The Daily Wire. Conversely, the Democratic-aligned side in Table 4 consists primarily of political insider/establishment groups, including the Kamala Harris Campaign, and the primary Senate/House PACs for Democratic candidates. Many point to the gap in young political influencers as a big reason Republican Candidates overperformed - this gap appears to be present in the advertising realm as well.

Ad Content - Comparing Words and Tone

In addition to the raw spending and impression numbers, I wanted to truly capture the content of these ads and observe any similarities or differences by party alignment.

To begin, I honed in on the individual words that made up each ad by conducting a word-frequency analysis on the text used in advertisements that targeted young men. My primary tool in completing this was the "ad_creative_bodies" column, which provided the full text of each ad. A bit of cleaning was required, however, in which I converted all text to lowercase (so the same word with different cases were grouped), removing punctuation, and removing common stopwords (such as "the," "and," or "to") that do not carry substantive meaning on their own. Additionally, I removed words that were very common in the political advertising realm that didn't add significant information, like "state" and "district", to better isolate the more meaningful terms. Next, I tokenized each advertisement's text into the individual words that constructed it, counting the frequency of each word across all ads. **Figure 4** displays the result of this analysis, with the ten most frequently used words for ads targeting young men, controlling for party alignment:

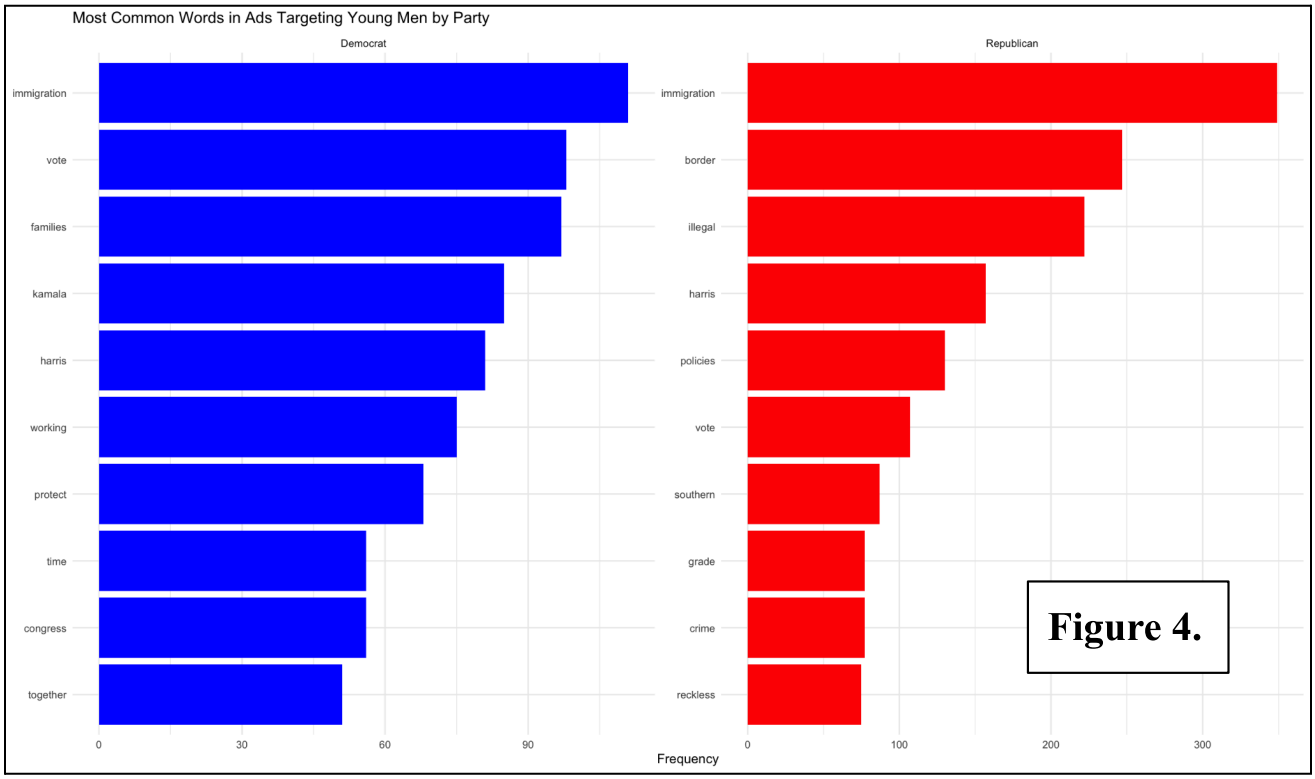


Figure 4.

Figure 4, pictured above, shows some interesting information about common words by party alignment. While Immigration pops up for both parties, there appears to be a higher emphasis on border security from the Republican side, with “border,” “illegal,” “southern,” and “crime” all appearing in the top ten as well. Additionally, there is a noticeable difference in tone, with softer words like “families” and “together” appearing frequently in Democratic-aligned ads, contrasting with more aggressive words like “illegal” and “reckless” in Republican-aligned ads.

However, the most common words are not always the most revealing. To better understand what truly distinguishes each party’s messaging, I next examined which terms were used disproportionately more by one side than the other.

To do this, I conducted a keyness analysis of the text contained in these ads. This approach differs from and builds upon Figure 4 - rather than focusing on just the raw word counts, this analysis compares the frequency of words appearing in Republican-aligned ads relative to Democratic-aligned ads, while accounting for differences in overall advertising volume (so it isn't swayed by there being more Republican ads overall in this dataset).

This analysis begins similarly to the word-frequency analysis by tokenizing ad text, removing stopwords and non-substantive terms, and grouping advertisements by party alignment. Where it differs is that keyness identifies words that appear disproportionately more often in one party’s ads than the other, accounting for differences in overall advertising volume. Each term is assigned a keyness score, with higher values indicating language more distinctive to a given party. With that in mind, here are the results of the keyness analysis in **Figure 5:**

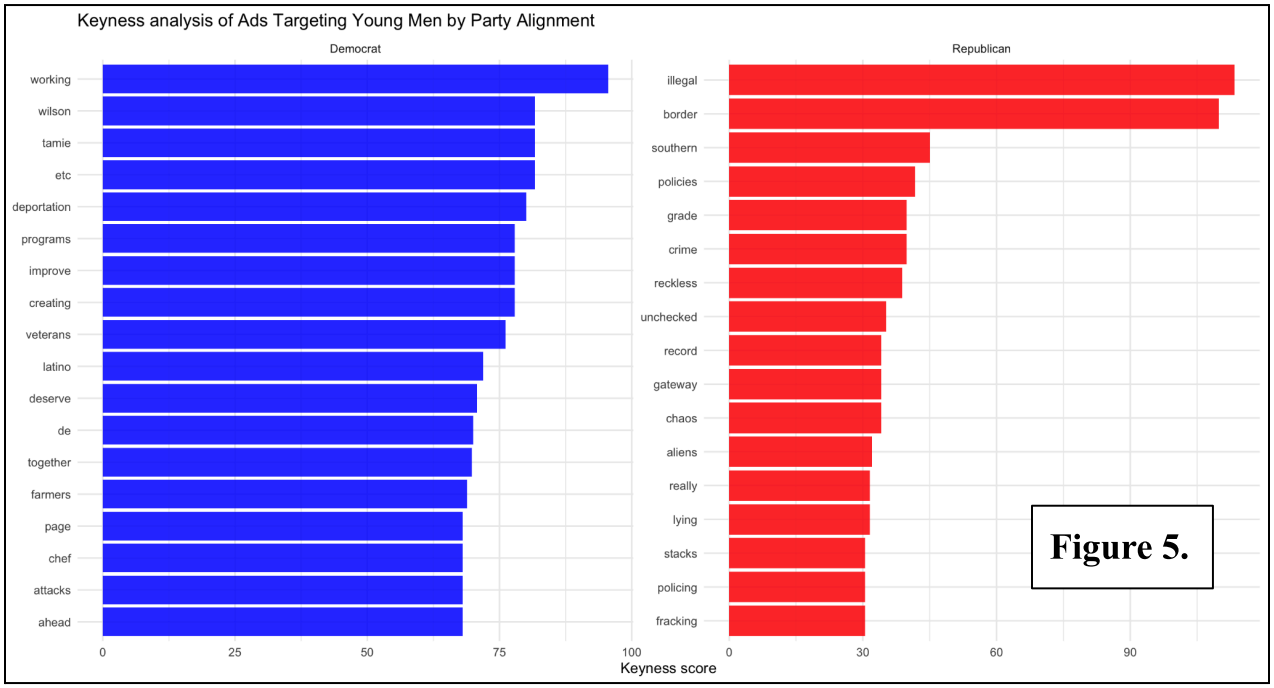


Figure 5.

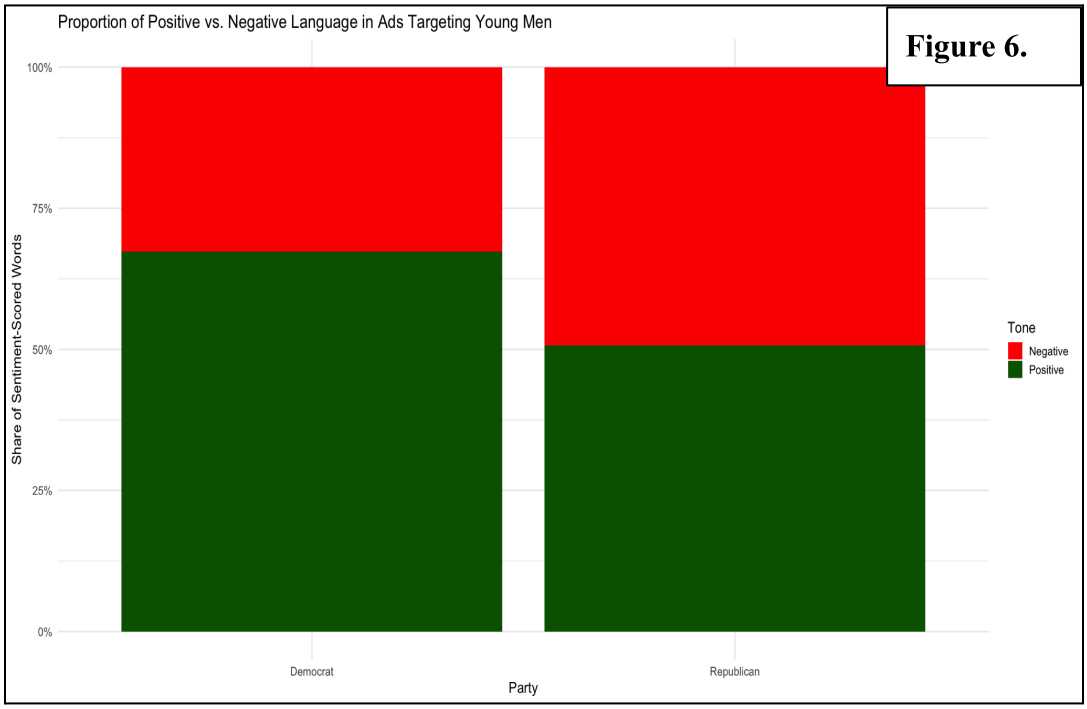
You can see similar results reflected here as in Figure 4, with some additional nuances as well. This Keyness analysis adds more validity as it controls for overall advertising volume, meaning these differences reflect messaging priorities rather than simply which party ran more ads. While it is clear both

touch on immigration, the republican side shows both more emphasis on the issue, and more aggression with terms like “illegal,” “aliens,” and “reckless”. This figure also reaffirms the previous observation of Republican-aligned ads exhibiting a more aggressive tone in their rhetoric.

In addition to words, I wanted to find a measurable and numeric way to capture tone across ads. This led me to AFINN, a sentiment dictionary (a list of words that have been pre-scored based on how positive or negative they usually are). AFINN is a large dataset that was created by Finn Arup Nielsen, containing approximately 2,500 words from the English Language, each assigned a score from negative 5 to positive 5 with the following scale:

-5 = extremely negative (i.e., “terrible,” “horrible”)
0 = neutral
+5 = extremely positive (i.e., “excellent,” or “awesome”)

Sentiment dictionaries like this are commonly used in text analysis to measure the emotional tone of writing. Researchers and data scientists often use it to analyze things like tweets, speeches, product reviews, news articles, and ads - thus, I found it to be a relevant and useful tool in this case. **Figure 6** displays the results of this model, showing the proportion of sentiment-bearing words that were positive or negative within ads aligned with each party. I also ensured that the data was scaled proportionally, such that I could compare tone independent of how many ads or words each side produced.



This figure shows that Republican-aligned ads contained a higher share of negative language compared to Democratic-aligned ads, even after accounting for volume differences. Specifically, Democratic-aligned ads displayed a 0.327 - 0.673 negative-positive ratio, while Republican-aligned ads had a near 50/50 ratio of 0.493 - 0.507 negative-positive ratio.

Results / Takeaways

After downloading, preparing, cleaning, and analysis of Meta's data, I was able to come to a few solid takeaways. In the months leading up to the 2024 election (July-November 2024), compared to Democratic-aligned ads, Republican-aligned ads on Meta platforms spent more money, received more impressions, focused more on border security, and used more negative tonality in their ads that targeted young men. Here are the specific numbers:

Republican-aligned advertisers that met the young men-targeting criteria (≥ 20% of impressions came from men 18-34)…

- Spent ~2.5x more $$ total
- Received ~2.35x more impressions
- Disproportionately used the words: "Illegal," "Border," "Southern," Policies," "Grade," "Crime," "Reckless," "Unchecked," "Record," "Gateway," "Chaos," "Aliens," "Really," "Lying," "Stacks," "Policing," and Fracking" (per Keyness)
- Utilized 50% more negative words (per AFINN)

…when compared with Democratic-aligned advertisers.

I will touch on some of the limitations of this study and future research I plan on doing to strengthen this analysis. But as it stands, I can confidently say in the months leading up to the 2024 election, compared to their Democratic-aligned counterparts, Republican-aligned advertisers reached more individuals on Meta platforms, and had a different approach in regards to tone and content of their ads that (among ads that targeted young men).

Limitations & Future Research

While I am appreciative of my findings thus far, I am not entirely content and finished with this study as a whole. Thus far, I have only analyzed ads that have targeted young men, and thus am not able to conduct a comparison to the entire dataset of ads from the same time period. This would give more validity to my results and determine whether these findings are consistent among all ads or if these trends are exclusive to ads targeting young men. The reason that I have yet to do this was that initially, the best method I could conceive for separating out ads by party was to do so manually. However, after a first round of feedback, I believe I can translate the byline for each ad into an FEC ID, thus automating the process of assigning party alignment. This will not only allow me to analyze this set of data further, but will also help in any future similar research. Additionally, it is inconclusive whether Meta ads are representative of the political ad landscape in its entirety. Thus, an expansion of this study to other platforms would be beneficial in capturing the entire scope of political ads, rather than just those posted on Meta Platforms.