

TikTok Targeted Female Exec In 'Kill List,' Bias Suit Says

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By **Grace Elletson** · [Listen to article](#)

Law360 (February 8, 2024, 9:26 PM EST) -- TikTok put a former marketing executive on a company "kill list" because she was a woman nearing 50 and ultimately fired her from her role after she complained about the prejudice she faced, according to a lawsuit filed against the social media company in New York federal court Thursday.

Katie E. Puris said TikTok Inc. and its parent company, ByteDance Ltd., **violated** Title VII, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act and New York City law when they discriminated and retaliated against her for complaining about a corporate culture that she said favored pliable, younger employees and women who exhibited "docility and meekness."

"As a woman who started her career in 1995, I was taught to be quiet if I wanted to be successful," Puris said in a news release. "Wisdom has taught me that I no longer need to be silenced or afraid to fight for change."

Puris, who formerly worked at Google and Facebook, said she joined TikTok as managing director and U.S. head of business marketing in December 2019, and was tasked with building out the company's North American marketing unit. She said she quickly found success in the role and was soon promoted to lead the global business marketing team.

In late 2020, Puris said, she shared her team's successes and achievements in biweekly meetings with Lidong Zhang, chairman of ByteDance. But she said it became apparent that Zhang didn't like her communication style.

"He believes that women should always remain humble and express modesty," Puris said. "Essentially, Lidong Zhang believes women should be quiet."

During one presentation, Puris asked for control over a document, but Zhang found this offensive because he believed women shouldn't ask for such control in meetings, she said. When she asked for feedback on the meeting, sensing it wasn't received well, the request was refused and she was never allowed to present in the biweekly meetings again, Puris said.

She said men were not criticized in the same way at the company. And while male executives were given one-on-one meetings with Zhang, Puris said, she was not.

Leadership "determined that Ms. Puris lacked the docility and meekness specifically required of female employees," the former executive said. "Lidong Zhang had a stereotypical view of the way women should behave and Ms. Puris, an accomplished executive who celebrated and advocated for her team's successes, did not fit that stereotypical gender mold."

In the beginning of 2021, Puris said, her team began seeing micromanagement from leadership and critiques of their marketing plans that had them working around the clock. A human resources employee also began pressuring Puris' workers to report negative feedback about her, she said.

Puris said that TikTok is known to create "kill lists" of executives it wants to force out of the company, and that by the second quarter of 2021, it was very clear she was on such a list. She said she also attended a meeting with the founder of ByteDance, where he shared that the company wanted to prioritize hiring young, inexperienced employees over those who are older with more experience. Puris said she was 49 years old at the time.

The former executive said she began to face health issues brought on by the company's pressure-cooker culture, including ulcers, migraines, irritable bowel syndrome and other issues. She said she was transferred to a new role as head of the global brand and creative organization around June 2021.

In February and March 2022, Puris said, she made complaints about how the extreme workload leadership put on her team was hurting the mental health of her employees. Shortly after, Puris was given an "extremely rare" "I" performance review signifying that she needed to improve, feedback that didn't track with previous responses she received on her performance, she said.

She continued to receive poor reviews, and said she expressed concerns in April 2022 that the feedback had to do with her age and health issues. Puris said that soon after, she was cut out of creative sessions and meetings critical to her role and saw her team hit with layoffs.

In June 2022, Puris said she attended Cannes Lions, a creative industry event in France. When she attended a dinner sponsored by an advertising agency, an executive for the agency became intoxicated and cornered Puris into a conversation where he repeatedly touched her arm and spilled wine on her plate, she said. Puris said a colleague eventually pulled her away from the executive out of concern for his behavior.

Puris said she reported the incident as sexual harassment to her supervisor, but the company didn't properly respond, allowing the executive to attend a TikTok panel event days later — a session that Puris said she felt forced to skip.

In September 2022, Puris said, she made another complaint raising concerns about the way women and older employees were treated at TikTok and ByteDance. Days later, she was fired due to "performance issues," she said.

Representatives of Puris, TikTok and ByteDance did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Puris is represented by Marjorie J. Mesidor, Michael J. Willemin and Monica Hincken of Wigdor LLP.

Counsel information for TikTok and ByteDance was not yet available.

The case is Puris v. TikTok Inc. et al., case number 1:24-cv-00944, in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York.

--Editing by Abbie Sarfo.

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Case Information

Case Title

Puris v. TikTok Inc. et al

Case Number

1:24-cv-00944

Court

New York Southern

Nature of Suit

442(Civil Rights: Jobs)

Date Filed

February 08, 2024

Law Firms

Wigdor LLP

Companies

- ByteDance Ltd.
- Google LLC
- TikTok Inc.

Government Agencies



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