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In the Hot Seat, TikTok CEO Channels a Silicon Valley Style Icon: Mark Zuckerberg

Facing questions from U.S. lawmakers, Shou Zi Chew shared a video statement this week wearing a hoodie and T-shirt, a combination that has become trite for tech execs



By [Jacob Gallagher](#) [Follow](#)

March 24, 2023 at 8:32 am ET

TikTok Chief Executive [Shou Zi Chew appeared before House lawmakers](#) on Thursday to face questions about [potential Chinese government influence](#) on the [popular social-media app](#). Mr. Chew's armor for this inquest? A staid navy suit, pressed white shirt and finely patterned blue tie.

The conservative, don't-buck-the-boardroom combination made Mr. Chew look like so many execs recently grilled by Congress about security and safety, in business attire meant to engender trust—or at the very least express innocence.

If Mr. Chew adhered to a generalist business-casual dress code in front of Congress, he relied on a more distinct—and frankly trite—tech-world tactic for his direct-to-audience address on TikTok two days earlier: the hoodie.

In [a roughly minute-long video](#) posted to the company's account, Mr. Chew wears a navy zip-up hoodie that could have been plucked directly from [Mark Zuckerberg's armoire](#). Though Mr. Chew runs TikTok from Singapore, he looked as if he'd arrived in Washington on a direct flight from Silicon Valley. TikTok did not respond to a request for comment on Mr. Chew's outfit.

Here he was in jeans, a slightly off-center sweatshirt and white T-shirt, treading the same calculatedly casual path that so many aspiring tech CEOs hoping to fill Zuckerberg's zip-ups had tread before.

"It's taking a page out of Zuckerberg's playbook," said Dan Ives, a managing director and senior equity analyst covering the technology sector at Wedbush Securities. The hoodie, Mr. Ives said, could be seen as an attempt to show that Mr. Chew is an "approachable Silicon Valley CEO" and that TikTok is "just [Facebook](#), we just happen to be Chinese-owned." (TikTok's parent company, ByteDance Ltd., is based in Beijing.)

Facebook, a unit of Meta Platforms Inc., did not respond to a request for comment.

In his appearance before House lawmakers, Shou Zi Chew opted for a staid navy suit. PHOTO: NATHAN POSNER/SHUTTERSTOCK

In his zippy TikTok clip, Mr. Chew said the app has 150 million users in the U.S., nearly half the country's population. But until this week few Americans could have picked the executive out of a lineup.

Since assuming the role of CEO in 2021, the 40-year-old Singaporean has kept a low profile, doing few interviews and rarely appearing on the platform he operates. Unlike Mr. Zuckerberg, it is doubtful that David Fincher is going to make a movie about him anytime soon.

So it's notable that for his first true introduction to the American people, Mr. Chew picked a dressed-down look familiar to anyone who has ever turned on MSNBC.

Since Zuckerberg first zipped into his gray hoodie a few decades ago, we've become so used to founders in frumpy sweatshirts that it has become trite—a cotton caricature of the bullet-coffee guzzling, [Tesla](#)-driving, emails-at-all-hours founder. This limp look may have [reached its nadir with Sam Bankman-Fried](#), who managed a [now-collapsed crypto empire](#) in stretched-out tees and seen-better-days sneakers.

It's perhaps no wonder that in recent years, at those [masters-of-the-universe summits like Sun Valley](#), attendees have brandished more idiosyncratic clothes: pricey Rick Owens puffers, Dior button-ups, even cowboy hats. The better to distance yourself from those move-fast-and-break-stuff tech founders who just can't seem to stop getting called in front of Congress.

"It doesn't feel current," said Lauren Rothman, a personal stylist to politicians and businessmen in Washington, D.C., of Mr. Chew's hoodie-centric outfit. She would have advised the embattled exec to throw on a half-zip or a button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up for an outfit that has "a little bit more presence" than his cliché casual look.

But for TikTok's Mr. Chew, that cliché could be considered a kind of strategy. His sweatshirt and jeans screams (as loudly as a mundane zip-up can), "Don't fear me! You've seen plenty of techies just like me before!" While his company is being painted as a threat to American national security, the sweatshirted Mr. Chew is wisely playing into our assumptions of what a tech CEO is *supposed to* look like. His safe sweatshirt could be an attempt to convey that he and TikTok are both harmless.

"The hoodie helps him look more unassuming, like he's not a threat to national security," said Laura Huang, distinguished professor of entrepreneurship at Northeastern University. "And that by association, the company that he's the CEO of also is not a threat."

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