Thirst Traps and Quick Cuts:The Effects of TikTok "Edits" on Evaluations of Politicians

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Introduction

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- Research question: Can TikTok "edits" change voter perceptions of politicians?

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Lay Researchers As Early Warning Sign

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- Supply of video a key input

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- We test whether these highly stylized videos can change voter perceptions

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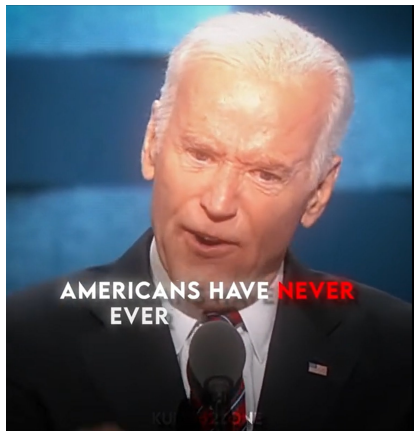
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- Traditional research treats candidate appearance as fixed
- Social media/CapCut erode control over politician appearance

Example Screenshots

(a) Trump Badass

(b) Trump Thirst Trap

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- Tradeoff: Control vs. Edit Quality

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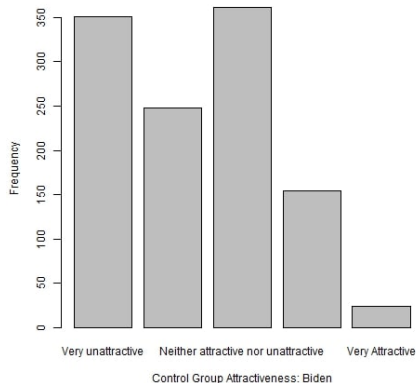
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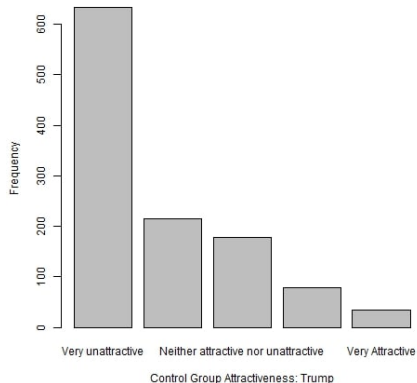   - One Trump edit (randomized: thirst trap or badass)

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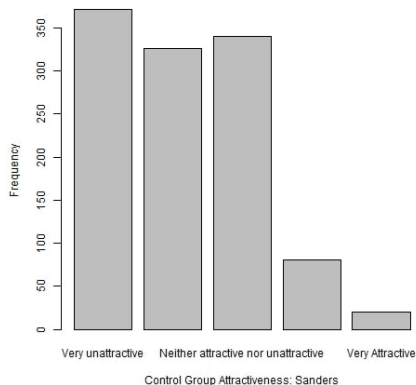   - One RFK edit (thirst trap only)

(a) Biden Attractiveness

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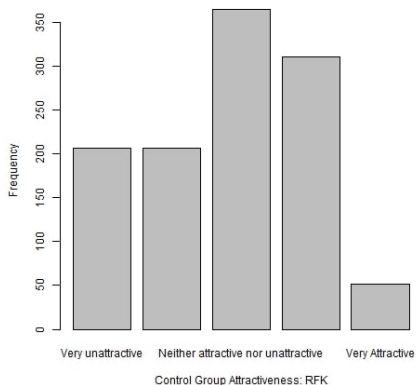
Descriptive Results: Attractiveness Ratings

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- Internet usage: Negatively correlated with attractiveness ratings

Main Effects: Attractiveness

Treatment	Trump	Biden
Thirst Trap Edit	+0.201***	+0.354***
Badass Edit	+0.177***	+0.109**

$^{*}p < 0.1$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{***}p < 0.01$

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- For Biden, thirst trap effect was 250% larger than badass effect

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- Possible explanation: Trump edits were higher quality

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- Surprising null results for gender and partisanship

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- Stimuli quality may explain differential effects for Trump vs. Biden

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- Democratized video editing technology affects political communication

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- Image manipulation a post-rational form of persuasion

Post-Rational Persuasion

Questions?