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Harris vs. Trump: A cross-platform analysis on the 2024 US presidential election through the lens of affordance and self-presentation theory

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Abstract

This paper presents a cross-platform analysis of the 2024 U.S. presidential election, investigating how the platform affordances of Twitter/X and TikTok influence the self-presentation strategies of candidates Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. Guided by affordance theory, self-presentation theory, and a critical analytics framework, the study comparatively examines the candidates' communication and branding. Using a combination of manual and automated content analysis of official account data collected after the September 10, 2024 debate, the research identifies platform-specific patterns in content, tone, and visual strategy. The findings indicate that candidates adapt their self-presentation to each platform's affordances. On the text-centric Twitter/X, both candidates employ a more formal, professional, and policy-driven approach, using features like threads and retweets to build narratives and critique opponents. Conversely, on the video-based, memetic TikTok, they adopt informal, personality-driven personas, leveraging trends, humor, and influencer collaborations to engage younger audiences. Despite these platform-specific adaptations, the candidates maintain consistent core brands: Trump as a combative, dominant leader and Harris as a collaborative, solution-oriented changemaker. The study concludes that while platform affordances shape the form and style of political communication, a candidate's fundamental self-branding remains consistent, confirming and extending existing theories on digital political strategy.

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1 Introduction

On June 27, the long-awaited debate between Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden and Republican candidate Donald Trump took place at CNN studios and brought millions of viewers in front of their screens, causing a tidal wave of reactions across social media. Many Biden supporters expressed disappointment with his performance and pointed out his incoherent speech and weak rebuttals. Associated Press (AP), one of the leading news agencies, and CNN described the debate as “Biden’s disastrous debate”, with POLITICO calling it a “*shipwreck and carnage*” (Long, Miller, and Superville 2024; Collinson 2024; Starcevic 2024).

It came as no surprise that the Democratic party swiftly forced Biden’s withdrawal from candidacy and announced current Vice President Kamala Harris as their new presidential candidate. If she were to be elected, Harris would be the first Black, South Asian and female president of the United States which stands in stark contrast with former president Trump who split the country in two with his polarizing discourse. Both the way candidates promote themselves and the way they tie in their public image with the issues they associate themselves with are important for gaining electoral power. As Iyengar (2022) notes, it is possible to anticipate the greater use of direct politician-to-voter communication through social media, as it expands its reach on a global scale.

The development of vast social online networks has made it possible to reach the public without encountering gatekeepers and intermediaries such as journalists - in other words, politicians have full control of their self-presentation on these platforms (Iyengar 2022). Given this, we are conducting a comparative cross-platform analysis to uncover what this self-presentation looks like and how different platform affordances influence the way it takes shape and form. The two chosen platforms to conduct this analysis are Twitter/X and TikTok. As a highly politicized platform, Twitter/X is a very relevant choice to study this (Iyengar 2022). Moreover, TikTok has a global impact in the shaping of public discourse and news delivery to global audience, particularly when it comes to Gen Z, making TikTok an interesting platform to study this topic.

This leads us to the following research question: *How do the platform affordances of TikTok and Twitter/X influence the self-presentation of the 2024 US Elections candidates, and how does this self-presentation compare on both platforms?* To answer this, the candidates’ self-presentation practices will be analyzed comparatively. Our theoretical framework is grounded in affordance theory, self-presentation theory and vanity metrics with an extension of critical analytics. We will first elaborate on our methodology and operationalization as well as subsequent findings, followed by a discussion that will comprehensively scrutinize the implications of our findings. Conducting this research is socially relevant because global social media stands at the center of the presidential elections and dominates platform discourse all over the globe. Given that we are using digital research tools and existing literature in this research, it is also academically relevant by contributing to the field of media studies.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Affordance theory

One of the key concepts that guide our analysis is affordances. Affordance theory is rooted in the relational study between people and environments, and was first conceptualized in the 1960s and 1970s (Davis 2020). Today, affordances are often theorized in the context of studying the relationship between people and technological change as they play a key role in critical social media studies (Davis 2020; Friz and Gehl 2016).

Affordances are traditionally understood as “the multifaceted relational structure between

an object/technology and the use that enables or constraints potential behavioral outcomes in a particular context” (Davis 2020, 4–5). In other words, affordances are built-in suggestions of how an object is to be used that allow for as well as limit user behavior. How these behaviors and usages play out is “relational and conditional” (7), given that objects are “de-inscribed” (Friz and Gehl 2016, 688) differently depending on people and context.

Although they tend to be built into objects with an ideal user and usage in mind (Friz and Gehl 2016), they merely “mediate between a technology’s features and its outcomes” (Davis 2020, 5) rather than making people deterministically act a certain way. It is thus worth noting that “materiality and human agency always operate together” (5). Affordances play a key role in how individuals present themselves online, which ties in with our second key concept.

2.2 Self-presentation vs. self-branding

While self-presentation in daily life is an ongoing performance, on social media it manifests more so as a premeditated display of oneself (Whitmer 2019). A separate branch of self-presentation is the concept of self-branding, which is about promoting and marketing oneself as a product to gain a competitive advantage (Whitmer 2019). The consensus is that “self-branding is accomplished through careful audience management, the selective disclosure of personal information” (3). This is particularly helpful when studying something such as the competitive US elections.

Moreover, research on the concept of self-branding has revealed that those who engage in it adjust and adapt their practices to the particular platforms they use by “putting forth different information” (5) on different platforms. On TikTok in particular, self-presentation has been argued to be tied more to virality than to persona and driven by audio memes (Abidin 2020). These are interesting points to analyze with our case study.

2.3 From vanity metrics to a critical analysis

Vanity metrics also play an essential role in our analysis. Although they have been critiqued for being limited, we are using them to help organize our data and guide our methodology before eventually moving on to critical analytics as proposed by Rogers (2018). In short, vanity metrics refer to likes, comments, retweets and so on that “indicated how well one is doing online” (450). However, when analyzing socio-political issues they tend to be limited, which is why the literature suggests alternative metrics seeing that social media are more than just sites to present oneself (450). In particular, Rogers (2018) proposes issue networks as an alternative to traditional vanity metrics with emphasis on the following key factors: dominant voice, concern, commitment, positioning and alignment. In our case, we will focus our discussion on the dominant voice.

3 Methodological approach

To answer the research question, we conducted a cross-platform analysis. This type of analysis provides researchers with a comparative perspective on a societal issue, trends or phenomena (Rogers 2023). As Rogers (2024) highlights, cross-platform comparison as a medium-specific approach requires sensitivity to specific platform metrics, vernaculars of use and user subcultures. Digital objects such as hashtags, likes, posts, videos, and images should therefore not be treated equivalently across platforms.

3.1 Research design

We chose Twitter/X and TikTok as the platforms for analysis because, while both platforms can be studied as “event-following machines”, they represent two different digital spaces for political communication (Sánchez-Querubín et al. 2023). Twitter/X has been traditionally used as a public arena for political news, discourse and debates, where news organizations, politicians and ordinary users express their opinions and learn what is happening during and after events (Rogers 2024). In contrast, TikTok has emerged as a novel and default platform for millions of young users worldwide who want to learn about issues, express their political ideologies and organize to take action (Lorenz 2020).

Given the difference in user culture and demographics, the 2024 US presidential candidates have maintained their routine communication practices on Twitter/X such as policy messaging, campaign rallies speeches, and ‘attacking’ their opponents, which are traditional political communication strategies. However, on TikTok the candidates have adopted a different approach, leveraging its creative tools such as trending sounds, memes, influencer endorsements, and pop culture references to connect with Gen Z audiences and potential first-time voters who are harder to engage with via the means of traditional media channels (Grantham 2024). Our analysis focuses on two key aspects: the type of platform-specific content and the tone of the platform-specific content. By doing so, we aim to comparatively explore the way affordances and self-presentation tie in with each other.

3.2 Operationalization

3.2.1 Step 1. Query design

We identified the candidates’ accounts by searching their names on both platforms. Harris has two accounts on Twitter/X with one being a campaign account, and another one associated with her role as the current Vice President. After selecting the campaign account to compare to Trump’s, we conducted a preliminary close reading to help inform our approach. We started by examining the candidates’ respective TikTok profiles and Twitter/X handles, focusing on key vanity metrics, such as followers, likes, reposts and total number of videos (Rogers 2024). These metrics allowed us to form an initial evaluation of how the candidates’ content is performing in terms of reach and visibility.

3.2.2 Step 2. Data Collection

Our data collection combined a manual content analysis with the use of automated tools. We used ‘Zeeschuimer’ to record the posts’ metadata and imported this into 4CAT for analysis (Peeters 2024). On TikTok, the data sample was smaller because both candidates only created their accounts in June and July 2024. As of October 17, 2024, we collected 36 videos from Trump’s account, and 100 videos from Harris. To ensure comparability between TikTok and Twitter/X datasets, we “demarcated our dataset more specifically” (Peeters 2024) by using a defined timeframe for sampling. We identified September 10 of this year, which is the date of the first televised presidential debate between Harris and Trump, as a key turning point because the event influenced both candidates’ campaign communication and social media strategies. Given this, our Twitter/X dataset includes Harris’ 457 tweets and Trump’s 159 tweets, collected by Zeeschuimer from this moment onward.

3.2.3 Step 3. Data Analysis

First, we analyzed and categorized the content on both platforms based on themes (content focus) and tone. This categorization allowed us to explore how each candidate adapted their

self-presentation based on the platform. We classified the content as follows:

- Policy-driven: focused on political issues, such as policies, governance and solutions
- Personality-driven: informal content that shows the candidate engage in a more personal and approachable way, such as interacting with supporters and famous endorsers
- “Playful performances” (Sánchez-Querubín et al. 2023): videos that integrate with humor, satire, trending audios and elements of internet celebrity

We then compiled an image wall with TikTok thumbnails as well as Twitter/X images using 4CAT. TikTok video thumbnails represent not only the first frame of the video but also a preview of the content, which gives insights into visual patterns, such as memetic practices (Bainotti et al. 2022). However, we recognize the limitation of the image wall analysis for TikTok, as it is unable to capture TikTok’s inherently interactive and dynamic features.

In addition, we zoomed in on the most watched TikTok videos of both candidates identified by view count. The videos offer insights into the content that resonates most with the platform’s audience and give us an idea of the platform’s culture. Similarly, on Twitter/X, we selected the most retweeted posts of the candidates, because the retweet function, which allows users to simply repost tweets without commentary, is a unique platform affordance that plays a crucial role in shaping discourse. During the 2020 US presidential election period, Twitter/X temporarily suspended the retweet function, encouraging users to use the quote tweet to reduce irrational communication, further demonstrating the power of retweets in political events (Zhang et al. 2024).

To better illustrate our findings, we created a comparative overview table that provides both vertical and horizontal comparisons between the two platforms. Furthermore, vanity metrics are our main proxy for understanding the performative aspects of both Trump’s and Harris’ online self-presentation, but we also acknowledge that social media platforms should not only be seen as “a productive social networking site for self-presentation only”, as it is argued that they are also spaces for studying “social issue networking” (Rogers 2018).

4 Findings and preliminary analysis

Figure 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the presidential candidates’ self-presentation on both platforms. We took vanity metrics alongside content focus, content tone and the overall themes that shape their self-presentation and self-branding into account. This overview provides a starting point to break our cross-platform analysis down into multiple key findings.

4.1 Key finding 1

On Twitter/X, both candidates’ self-presentation is formal, professional, and focused on their identity as a political candidate (Figure 2). Although the candidates’ tone of voice differs, both take on a more or less professional and informative tone. Their Twitter/X content focuses on the candidates’ political stance and their policy-making procedures and decision-making. This ties in with the platform’s affordances: Twitter/X is text-based which allows the candidates to develop and share a comprehensive narrative facilitated through threads by sharing a series of related tweets one after another for continuity and consistency. Contrastingly, TikTok affords a more segmented content approach.

Comparative overview of candidates' self-presentation

	Donald Trump		Kamala Harris	
Platform	Twitter/X 	TikTok 	Twitter/X 	TikTok 
Vanity Metrics	Drives engagement through viral hashtags, threads, and strong emotional hooks.	Emphasizes his "strength/power" his political achievements and hero persona in emotive clips	Professional expertise and rational leader, focus on social awareness and community-driven engagement	Approachable, relatable and focusing on positivity, inclusivity, and solidarity
Content Focus /Theme	Rallies speeches, attacks on Harris, economic policies with misinformation!	Playful political performance engaging with trends and using emotional hooks	Factual, statistic-driven, highlighting policy solutions, focusing on changes, progress, moments, everyday activities, humorous consensus-building	More personal stories, and using casual videos to enhance her engaging persona
Tone	Formal & combative Text-heavy	Joking & Theatrical	Formal & assertive concise	Collaborative & authentic
Self-Representation	<u>"Make America Great Again(MAGA 2024)" advocate</u>	<u>Outsider politician Generous entrepreneur</u>	<u>Harris-Walz Agenda, solution-oriented change-maker</u>	<u>Approachable and empathetic female leader</u>

Figure 1: Comparative overview of the candidates' self-presentation

4.2 Key finding 2

Another key observation is that on Twitter/X, the candidates criticize their opponents and strengthen their own image via the means of the retweet and quote functions. Trump reshares content from his supporters and his endorsement by Elon Musk, while Harris reshares posts from her Vice-President account to leverage her existing leadership role. As Figure 3 shows, Harris' Twitter images are number and text-oriented which provides more detailed insights into her policies. There is also a professional and consistent visual style involved in the design of the images. Trump's images are dramatized and extravagant, and boast short slogans to stir up strong emotional responses. This type of self-presentation may resonate more with layman audiences.

4.3 Key finding 3

The most retweeted posts on Twitter/X since the debate give us insights into how the candidates' self-presentation compares and competes with each other. Harris's most retweeted post was an accusation against Trump posted on 9/11, an important day in the US. Trump's most retweeted post is a religious image, which differs from his usual content where he somewhat aggressively positions and presents himself as the hero and savior of the American people. Instead, this tweet was a more subtle attack on the "evil" side that opposes him as the "good" side. Both candidates actively use Twitter's retweet feature, but Trump uses it more than Harris. The constant retweeting of posts that support these candidates creates an echo chamber that reinforces their community.

4.4 Key finding 4

On TikTok, the candidates' self-presentation is focused on showcasing their individual charisma and aligning with the platform's informal culture. The most-watched TikTok videos from the candidates are vivid illustrations of how their social media teams strategically integrate political messages into short videos by leveraging the platform's culture and creative affordances and leaning into the element of internet celebrity (Abidin 2020). Harris' TikTok content contains celebrity endorsement and popular music templates with intentionally selected lyrics such as

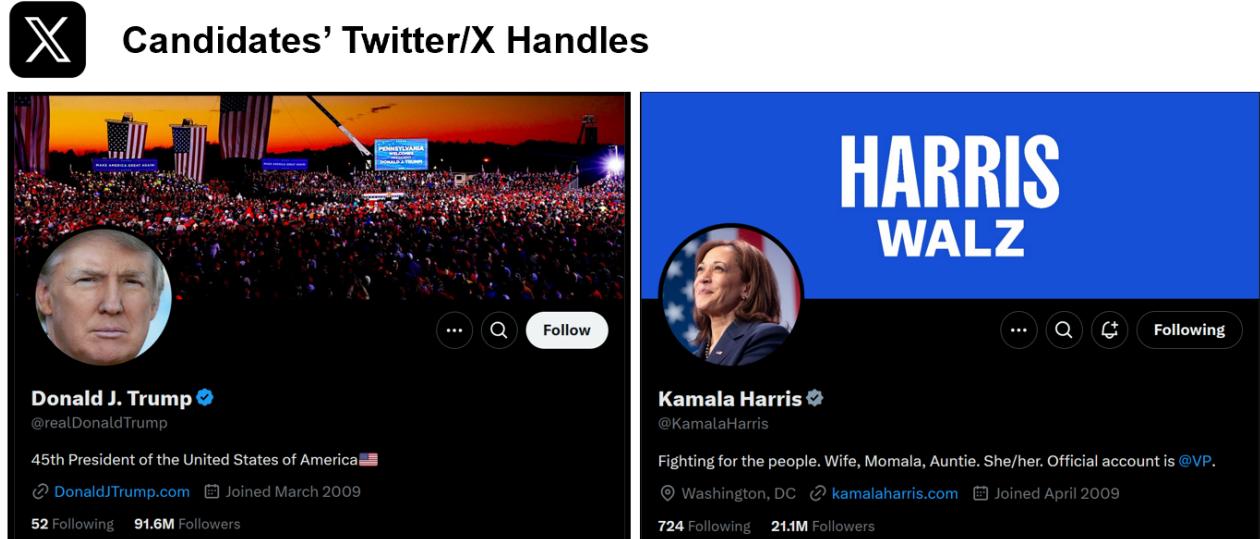


Figure 2: X profiles of the presidential candidates (as of 17/10/24)



Figure 3: Twitter image wall

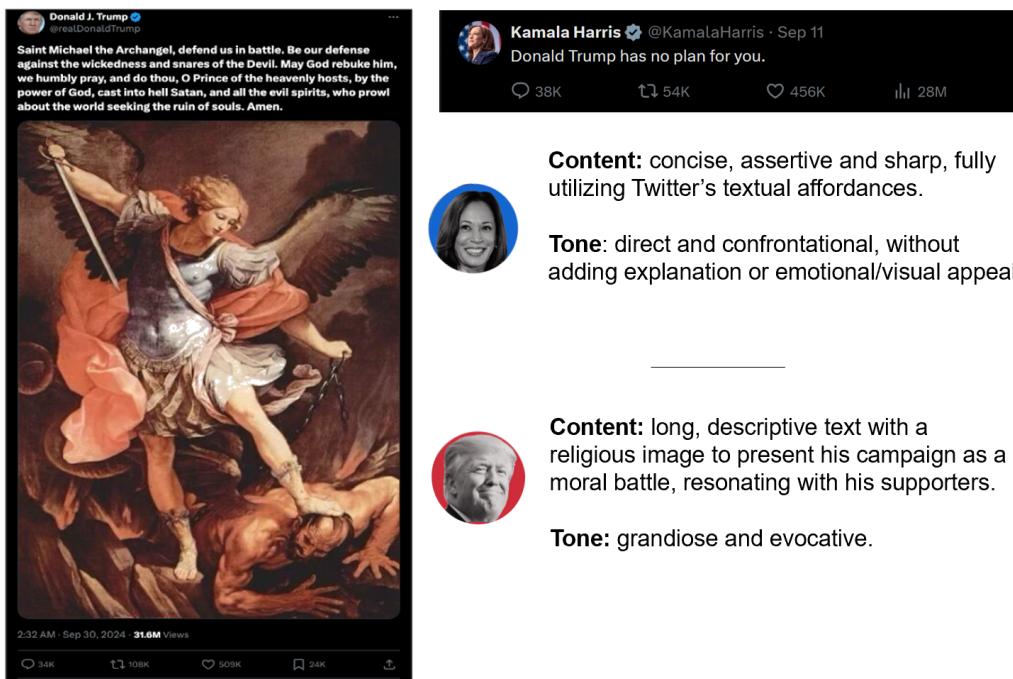


Figure 4: Most-retweeted X posts of both candidates (data collected on 17/10/24)

“bye bye bye” to criticize her opponent, which not only garners significant attention and views from a younger public due to the humoristic element but also remains memorable. Meanwhile, Trump also leverages the platform’s memetic structure, such as showcasing his signature dance moves together with a popular gaming influencer and staging a theatrical confrontation with influencer Logan Paul in a boxing stance to project his power.

4.5 Key finding 5

Although the affordances differ per platform, the two candidates remain consistent with their image strategy on both platforms. Trump emphasizes his past accomplishments as president and leader of the people, while Harris emphasizes unity alongside her social identity to resonate with the public. While platform-specific affordances nudge the candidates’ self-presentation in certain directions, they still have very different personas and approaches to the way they brand themselves as political candidates. This entails that beyond platform-specific commonalities and deviations, there are also candidate-specific ones.

For instance, Trump’s tone is more combative as he presents himself as the people’s hero who is here to make the nation great again. Trump’s tonality is grandeur-esque and full of polarizing promises where he is the top-down leader. Trump’s TikTok videos focus on individual engagements where he speaks directly to his audience. His tone is authoritative and straightforward, often accompanied by short slogans which create a strong emotional hook. Harris’ self-presentation and candidate branding is that of a solution-oriented change-maker who is making efforts to solve national problems through collaboration. She focuses on people-centric policy-making informed by community engagement and exemplified by her frequent use of “we should.”

The TikTok image wall reveals distinct visual patterns and messaging strategies between Harris and Trump. Harris is frequently shown in group settings with members of her community, implying a focus on group participation and presenting her as a cooperative team player and active listener. By sharing personal stories about her family, she presents an approachable and relatable image, rather than an untouchable politician, which resonates with younger audiences.

Content: concise, assertive and sharp, fully utilizing Twitter’s textual affordances.

Tone: direct and confrontational, without adding explanation or emotional/visual appeal.

Content: long, descriptive text with a religious image to present his campaign as a moral battle, resonating with his supporters.

Tone: grandiose and evocative.

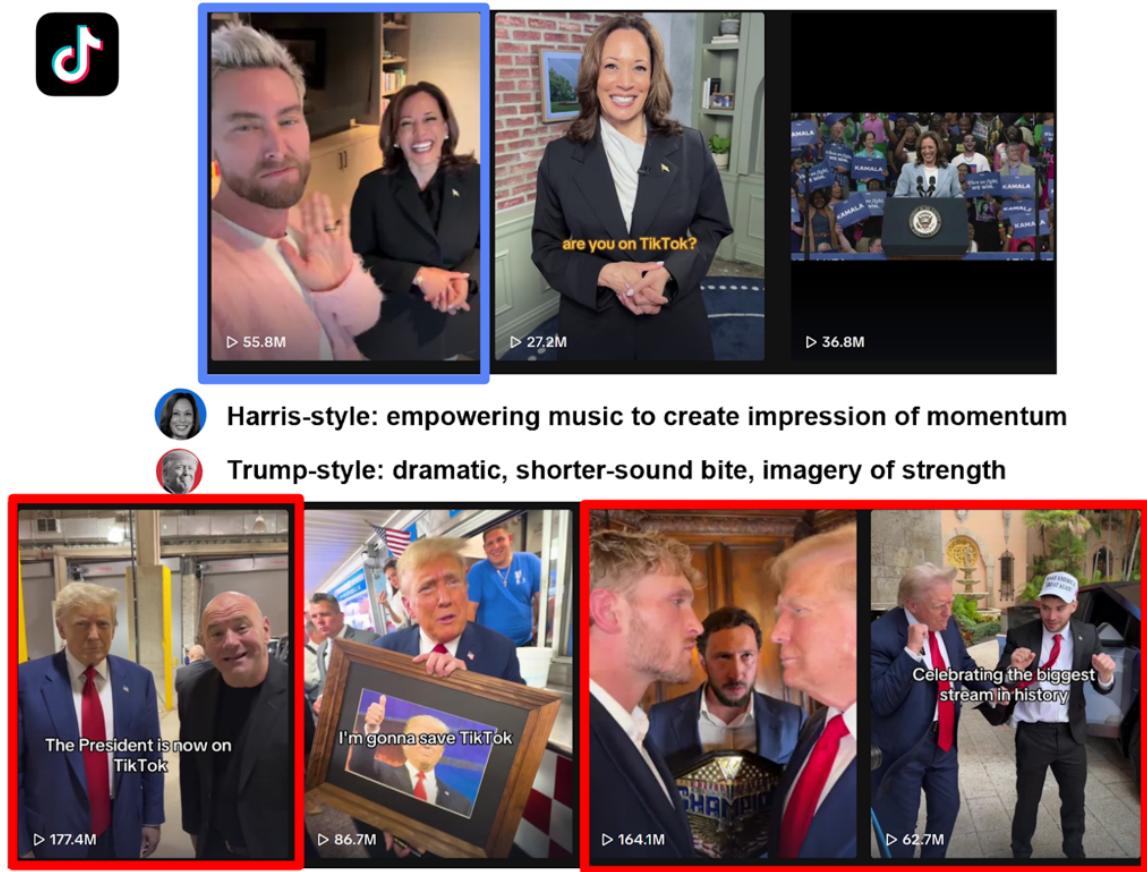


Figure 5: Most-watched TikTok videos of both candidates (data collected on 17/10/24)

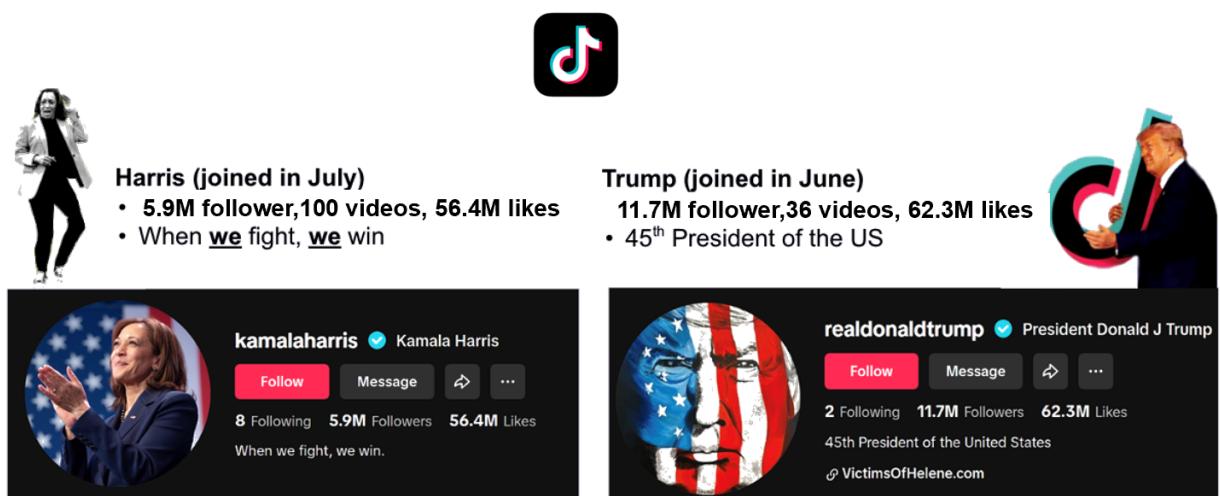


Figure 6: TikTok profiles of the presidential candidates

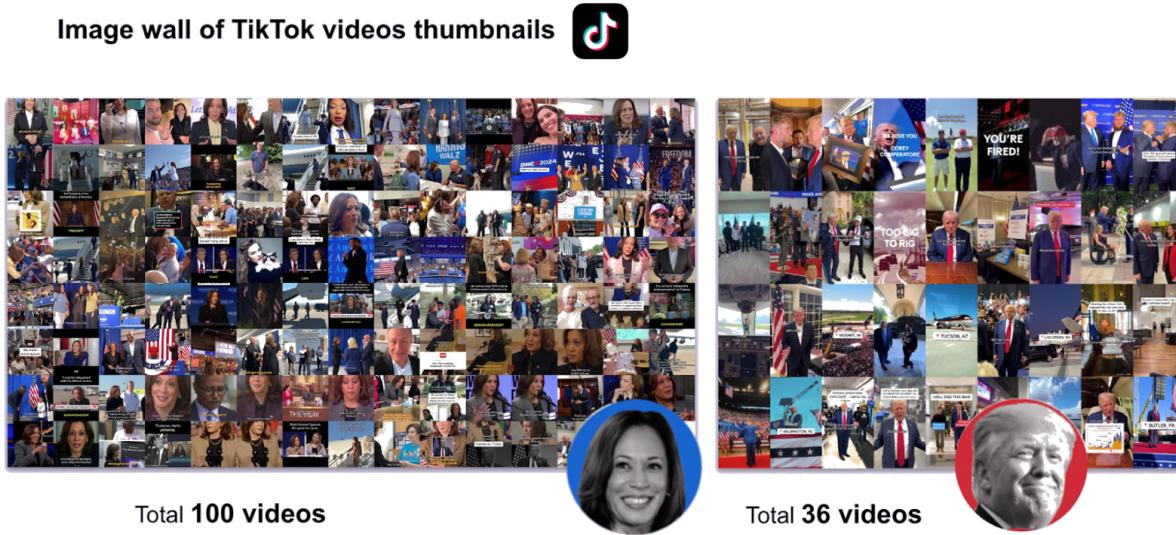


Figure 7: TikTok image wall (data collected on 17/10/24)

Her supportive and encouraging tone promotes a positive and inclusive environment.

5 Critical discussion

The key findings derived from our analysis leave room for a critical discussion on the implications of this research, as well as on how it fits into the larger academic conversation around affordance-based self-presentation on social media.

First and foremost, the nature of fame and virality has shifted on TikTok where it tends to be based on the performance of users' individual posts (Abidin 2020). Trump and Harris have both taken advantage of this post-based virality and TikTok's memetic nature to push their self-presentation as political candidates. The use of audio templates is a key "organizing principle" (80) on the platform, which both candidates have leaned into. Trump and Harris "actively seek out, learn, participate in, and engage in these what is 'going viral'" to maximize their visibility (79). On the other hand, Twitter/X's already heavily politicized environment is being leveraged by both candidates in a different way than on TikTok. Key affordances such as retweets and threads inform the candidates' strategy on the platform, which is more formal and professional compared to the informal and memetic strategy both employ on TikTok. This ties in with what we mentioned in our literature review, namely that individuals who engage in self-branding adjust their practices depending on the platform (Whitmer 2019).

Although part of our findings were organized based on vanity metrics, there is room to expand beyond that and look at different modes of measurement. It is clear that in the case of both candidates, they present as dominant voices (Rogers 2018) - although to varying degrees. As we have illustrated, Trump presents himself as the hero, the leader and the savior who has all the answers and solutions. His communication style makes his polarizing voice an undeniably dominant one in US politics. While Harris' voice also comes with authority, it operates differently. Rather than dominating and taking over the national discourse, her voice resonates more in certain circles rather than on a large scale. This is reflected for instance by the fact that, although she has much more content available on TikTok than Trump, she gathers less engagement (see Figure 6 and Figure 7).

Since we focused on the candidates' self-presentation rather than on user engagement and the community that both candidates have online, it poses rather difficult to analyze an issue

network as proposed by Rogers (2018). Therefore, analyzing factors beyond just the dominant voice, such as concern, commitment, positioning or alignment, is not entirely applicable to our case. However, this research could be extended further by analyzing the way users engage with the candidates' self-presentation. Expanding in this direction would create an opportunity to look into these other metrics.

6 Conclusion

In this study, we conducted a cross-platform social media analysis of the US presidential elections through the lens of self-presentation and affordance theory, guided by the following research question: *How do the platform affordances of TikTok and Twitter/X influence the self-presentation of the 2024 US election candidates, and how does this self-presentation compare on both platforms?* Our research combined manual and automated data collection to comparatively analyze the findings of the two candidates' self-presentation practices on the two social media platforms.

Our findings revealed that the text-based affordances of Twitter/X lead the candidates to lean into formal self-presentation practices, whereas TikTok's memetic nature and audio template affordances allow for more informal and playful self-presentation practices. The research results also showed that, although platform-specific affordances inform how the candidates self-present, they still brand themselves in very different ways. Despite Harris' leading in the polls, Trump rules the national discourse with a dominant voice. Altogether, our results build on and confirm existing affordance-based self-presentation theory.

While our research is both socially and academically relevant, we also encountered limitations. First, we recognize that compiling an image wall of TikTok thumbnails does not account for the dynamic entirety of a TikTok video. Second, we had to limit our dataset to a specific timeframe due to the scope and context of this research. Third, we understand that, although we've explored Rogers' dominant voice metric (Rogers 2018), there is room to expand this study further and explore the entirety of the issue network around the US presidential election.

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