

**“kamala IS brat:” How Exposure to Online Campaign Content Impacts Young Adults’
Political Organization-Public Relationships and Political Participation**

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Graduate Thesis

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March 12, 2025

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Abstract

The 2024 United States presidential election saw political campaigns leverage social media trends, including memes, AI-generated visuals, policy-focused messaging, and attack ads, to engage young voters. Despite these efforts, youth voter turnout declined, raising questions about the effectiveness of these digital strategies. This study examines how exposure to these four major campaign content types influences young adults' political organization-public relationships (POPR) with their parties and political participation, with social media engagement and perceived political authenticity as mediating variables.

A survey of 496 United States citizens (ages 18-29) tested the impact of these content types on POPR and participation. Findings show that policy-focused content was the most effective, increasing engagement, authenticity, participation, and POPR. AI-generated visuals boosted engagement and POPR but did not enhance authenticity, while opponent attacks weakened authenticity and party relationships. Notably, political memes had no significant effect on engagement, authenticity, participation, or POPR, challenging their assumed effectiveness as a mobilization tool.

These results suggest that digital campaign strategies should prioritize substantive policy messaging over viral content. While AI can drive engagement, it does not necessarily foster trust, and negative campaigning may alienate young voters rather than mobilize them. The study emphasizes the need for credible, policy-driven, and strategically balanced digital campaign communication to translate online engagement into real-world political action.

Introduction

About three months before the 2024 United States presidential election, Charli XCX, a pop singer from the United Kingdom, posted “kamala IS brat” on her X account, drawing a connection between her recent album, *brat*, and then-candidate Vice President Kamala Harris (Charli XCX, 2024). This started a frenzy of posts from users across the Internet, creating and sharing related jokes and memes; Harris’ campaign quickly bought into the trend and began its own popular meme-oriented strategy for targeting young voters (Klein et al., 2024). At the same time, in what was also a first for a major political candidate, Donald Trump’s campaign leaned into artificial intelligence on social media, where it shared AI images and videos of President Trump, Elon Musk, Taylor Swift, and more (Chatterjee, 2024). Campaigns used these memes and AI-generated visuals to convey various messages, including calls to action, attacks on opponents, and policy information.

Despite this innovation, the adoption of social media into campaign communications is nothing new. Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential bid is often cited as the first to be avidly pro-social media and sparked widespread research into the role of these platforms in political campaign communications (Abid et al., 2013). Since Obama’s use of Twitter and MySpace, this social media strategy has grown so popular and sophisticated that much official campaigning for major candidates now occurs online. These efforts by each campaign were aimed at mobilizing young voters via the Internet due to their higher levels of social media use and online political participation (Abid et al., 2021; Kayne & Bowyer, 2018). In light of these efforts, the results of the 2024 election showed two interesting trends: fewer young people voted than in previous elections, and many of them who did vote moved to the right, bringing the Democrats’ use of

these strategies into question (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2024).

The use of social media has become a fundamental aspect of political public relations: applying public relations (PR) strategies and tactics for political purposes (Strömbäck & Kiouisis, 2019). In the 2024 election, the online strategies aimed at engaging and building relationships with young voters represent an evolution in campaign public relations, adopting current formats of social media posts in an unprecedented way.

Because presidential political campaigns are the highest profile and most common channel through which many citizens engage with the major political parties, it is essential to understand how even the slightest variations in communication strategies impact those relationships, particularly with young adults—a demographic with a high online presence and traditionally low voter turnout. As is prevalent in traditional PR research, recent political PR studies have begun looking at the use of social media by political entities through a relationship cultivation lens, adopting the concept of political organization–public relationships (POPR), where the end goal of political PR initiatives can be understood in terms of the public’s perceived relationship with the entity (Browning & Sweetser, 2020; Seltzer & Zhang, 2011; Sweetser et al., 2015). This previous research has revealed concepts like social media engagement—the level to which users engage with political entities and each other on social media—and perceived political authenticity—how true to themselves voters perceive candidates and politicians—to be significant predictors of a citizen’s POPR (Painter, 2015; Sweetser, 2017; Sweetser et al., 2015). These variables similarly impact one’s political participation (Dankwah & Mensah, 2021; Xenos et al., 2014).

To the author's knowledge, no existing research has been done on how the specific content and format of campaigns' social media posts influence POPR and political participation. This study employed a survey method to examine how exposure to current trends in campaign social media posts (attacks on opponents, policy content, political Internet memes, and AI-generated visuals) impacts young adults' relationship with their party (POPR) and their intended political participation through social media engagement and perceived political authenticity.

Literature Review

Theoretical Background

Political Public Relations

As Strömbäck & Kiouisis (2019) write, the practice of political public relations goes back to the advent of politics and society itself, influencing the relationships between political decision-makers and citizens for millennia. Political public relations, which is simply the application of public relations (PR) strategies and tactics to specific fields for political purposes, includes many different areas, such as government communications, campaign communications, and digital and social media; however, the field has a dearth of theoretical work and empirical research despite its long history of practice and modern importance, requiring more research to be done with a theoretical foundation (Strömbäck & Kiouisis, 2019).

As elections play such a prominent role in representative democracies, the public relations functions of electioneering have garnered significant attention. Jackson (2012) lays out the various objectives of campaigns, including securing victory, a coalition partnership, influence, and representation. Each of these has its own goals, but persuasion and hype are often at the center, keeping the practice and study of such activities focused on the promotional aspect of public relations (Jackson, 2012; Lilleker, 2020). Modern United States presidential campaigns employ online relationship-building strategies to achieve their goals, including promoting organizationally beneficial political participation, brand awareness, and more (Sweetser, 2020).

These campaigns often impact the party's relationships as well. With the growth in campaign professionalization and party centralization, major candidates and leaders, like those running for president, have become the face of the party in American politics (Farrell & Webb, 2000). This change has led to political parties being more involved in party candidates'

campaigns and a public perception of the party as being led and represented by the current leader. Thus, the actions of a political campaign directly impact those of the party, which typically have a longer-lasting impact than the public's relationships to a specific campaign. Because of this, all aspects of a campaign have the potential to affect party relationships for years down the line.

Political Organization-Public Relationships (POPR)

Organization-public relationships (OPRs) are a common theoretical lens through which to study PR. Defined by Ledingham and Bruning (1998) as “the state which exists between an organization and its key publics, in which the actions of either can impact the economic, social, cultural or political well-being of the other,” the framework of OPRs is built on the concept of a two-way relationship between the organization and its various publics (p. 62). Hon and Grunig (1999) developed measures to determine the perceptions of OPRs based on four dimensions: (a) *trust*, (b) *satisfaction*, (c) *control mutuality*, and (d) *commitment*. The *trust* dimension relates to one party's level of confidence in the other and its perception of the other's integrity, dependability, and competence. The *satisfaction* dimension measures how favorably each party views the other. *Control mutuality* focuses on how power and influence are distributed in the relationship, emphasizing a strive for balance between the two. Lastly, the *commitment* dimension centers on both parties' motivation to maintain and promote the relationship emotionally and actively.

This relational perspective of public relations has since been adopted by Seltzer & Zhang (2011) into a concept for use by political PR researchers, conceptualizing what is known as political organization-public relationships (POPRs). This is predicated on the idea that political parties and citizens' relationships are subject to dimensions, antecedents, cultivation strategies,

and outcomes like traditional OPRs. Examples of previously researched POPR antecedents include strategic communications, media diet, candidate traits, social media engagement, political cynicism, political trust, ideological strength, political information efficacy, and exposure to specific messages (Browning & Sweetser, 2020; Painter, 2015; Seltzer & Zhang, 2011; Sweetser & Tedesco, 2014; Sweetser et al., 2015). Since Seltzer and Zhang's (2011) pioneering study on political parties, others have applied POPR theory to other political organizations like political action committees and presidential candidates (e.g., Browning & Sweetser, 2020; Sweetser et al., 2015).

Social Media for Political Campaigns

The development of the Internet and social media has fundamentally changed public relations, and political PR is no exception. With 18% of United States adults and 48% of United States 18- to 29-year-olds primarily accessing political and election news on social media, political entities have come to understand the impact and importance of digital political PR (Mitchell et al., 2020). Many scholars highlight Obama's 2008 presidential campaign as the first to integrate social media holistically, but campaigns had used websites and blogs for several election cycles before that, indicating an understanding of the Internet's impact, even in its earlier days (Sweetser, 2020). This understanding has become so advanced that campaigns are now tailoring their content and messages to each platform, considering the nuances, opinion leaders, and demographics of each, including using a combination of platform and user data to target specific groups of users (Bossetta, 2018; Endres & Kelly, 2018; Schmuck et al., 2022).

Utilizing digital PR allows political actors new opportunities for building relationships and genuinely connecting with citizens and their publics through social media's various capabilities, like interacting with people through comments, hosting live streams, marketing

through influencers, and traditional posts about policy and current events (Sweetser, 2020). This study focuses on two main post topics and two main post formats of social media content that were the most popular and/or most talked about on social media in the 2024 presidential election: attacks on an opponent, policy content, political Internet memes (PIM), and AI-generated visuals. Because the first two are simply popular topics posted about by campaigns in their social media posts, they may be communicated using PIM and/or AI-generated images, meaning that these categories are not mutually exclusive; they are simply common trends on these pages that are worth studying due to their prevalence on social media. For an example of each, please see Appendix B.

Attacks on Opponents. The first popular topic in recent political campaigns' social media content, attacks against an opposing candidate, is a long-standing staple of politics. This content, which has often historically taken the form of negative paid advertisements and been aimed at denigrating a political opponent, has warranted significant research on strategies and empirical impacts at all levels of elections (e.g., Lau & Pomper, 2004; Theilmann & Wilhite, 1998). With the use of social media, however, it has become much easier (and cheaper) for politicians to attack their opponents in various countries, resulting in it taking up much of a candidate's social media pages (Buccoliero, 2020; Graham et al., 2013; Larsson, 2015).

Policy Content. The second popular topic is policy information, where a campaign or candidate elaborates on their position on a particular issue, event, or topic; the subject of these posts varies significantly depending on country, party, candidate, and atmosphere (Dobber & de Vreese, 2022; Stier et al., 2018). Turnbull-Dugarte's (2019) analysis of social media content in Spanish elections shows that, despite not being as popular on social media as other content, these campaigns often post policy information to platforms like Instagram. Moreover, Adams and

McCorkindale (2013) found that the 2012 United States presidential candidates mainly used Twitter to communicate policy information, indicating that social media was a popular channel for policy communication among voters. Conway et al. (2015) and Towner and Muñoz (2018) even found that the topics discussed in these posts on Twitter and Instagram by politicians, campaigns, and parties have an agenda-setting effect on traditional media, emphasizing their impact.

Political Internet Memes (PIMs). The third content type is the use and spread of political Internet memes (PIM) by official campaign sources on social media. According to Shifman (2014), an Internet meme is an umbrella term for various digital items like phrases, images, GIFs, videos, etc., that share “(a) common characteristics of content, form and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (p. 41). Becoming a *political* meme simply requires that it has to do with societal interests, conflicts, political actors, representative acts, or political decisions (Johann & Bülow, 2019). While these are not necessarily considered a traditional political PR tactic, they are becoming increasingly popular, having seen a significant surge of growth in the 2016 presidential election and now the 2024 election (Halversen & Weeks, 2023; Johann, 2022; Ross & Rivers, 2017). PIMs are typically created and shared by regular users, but there are increasing instances of them being fully adopted as a part of modern campaign strategies (Hawkins, 2024; Klein et al., 2024; McLoughlin & Southern, 2021; Padilla, 2024).

AI-Generated Visuals. The final popular type of content from recent campaign social media strategies is a new phenomenon that has grown in popularity just in the 2024 election cycle: the use of photos/videos created by artificial intelligence (AI), spurred on by the popularity of generative AI software such as DALL-E. Donald Trump and his campaign often

used these images to depict events that never happened or are pure fantasy, similar to political cartoons, attacking his opponent or bolstering his own political statements (Chatterjee, 2024; Lee & Hernández, 2024). However, Trump's campaign has also reposted AI images of Taylor Swift endorsing him (before she later endorsed Harris) in what some argue counts as a deepfake: "(AI)-driven manipulated media made to look convincing enough, in which people's words and actions are fabricated" (Ahmad, 2021, p. 2; Tenbarge, 2024). The origins of this image as a pro-Biden meme show the use of them by citizens on both sides; however, the only official campaign page to share one was Trump's (Tenbarge, 2024).

The rise of AI in society has been met with mixed reactions, including disdain, suspicion, tolerance, and acceptance. Appel et al. (2020) predicted that the future of social media marketing and communications would include the infusion of non-human content, but this future is already here. Despite many scholars' fears of AI's implications for the digital environment and trust, demanding harsher governance and policy around AI, brands have been using it for tasks like online chatbots and environmental scanning for years (Chung et al., 2020; Guzman et al., 2020; Haleem et al., 2022; Karnouskos, 2020; Kerr et al., 2020; Song et al., 2022; Valle-Cruz et al., 2020). Many of these concerns come from evidence that the untrained eye can seldom tell the difference between what is made by a human and what is made by AI, particularly regarding deepfakes (Jakesch et al., 2023; Köbis & Mossink, 2021; Köbis et al., 2021). This was among many circumstances that led to an election full of misinformation, disinformation, and fake news, resulting in a potentially under- and misinformed voting public. Because of the recency of Donald Trump's adoption of AI-generated images in online political communications, no research currently exists investigating its impact on politics.

Social Media Engagement (SME)

Users' social media engagement has been studied as a predictor of relationships, perceptions, and opinions across various fields, with PR being no exception. Lim et al. (2015) proposed three dimensions of social media engagement when studying sports fans' online interactions. The first is *functional engagement*, typically the most recognized dimension, which centers on the technical process of users co-creating, conversing, and sharing social media content. *Emotional engagement*, the second dimension, refers to how users engage with their emotional responses toward an event or organization online. Acknowledging the importance of community on social media platforms, the third dimension, *communal engagement*, measures a user's likelihood to discuss the topic with other users.

Since social media has become ubiquitous in political campaigning, this engagement has been increasingly treated as a measure of political and societal impact and public opinion (Lee & Xu, 2018; Rathje et al., 2021). Like with other forms of online content, each dimension proposed by Lim et al. (2015) can be seen in how users engage with political posts online. Ross et al. (2020) suggest that the most common form of social media engagement on the Facebook pages of political candidates is simply liking the post rather than sharing or commenting. While liking a post is relatively passive, Sweetser et al. (2015) also noted that citizens can engage via social media more actively through actions like directly tweeting at the organization/candidate, promoting a perceived sense of dialogue. Moreover, many young people, in particular, use online spaces to share political information with their networks (Vromen et al., 2015).

Research shows that individuals are more likely to engage in political discussions online when a particular post or topic triggers an emotional response. For example, many studies have been done regarding engagement with negative campaign posts, indicating a positive relationship

with higher engagement (e.g., Boulianne & Larsson, 2023; Buccoliero et al., 2017; Heiss et al., 2019). People are also more likely to share, like, and comment on humorous or controversial content (Bene, 2017; Heiss et al., 2019; Lam et al., 2021).

Connecting with other users about politics and treating social media as a facilitator for political discussion has been a primary use of the Internet since its inception, going so far as to lead to societal upheavals like the Arab Spring (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). On a smaller scale, Vromen et al. (2015) suggest that politically motivated young people prefer discussing politics online and use these platforms to facilitate interactions about political topics. Users often congregate online to specifically talk about political issues that interest them (Kahne & Bowner, 2018). Scholars also argue that social media provides a “new political communicative space” where users can participate in discussions that do not happen offline (Vromen et al., 2015, p. 92).

Perceived Political Authenticity (PPA)

Perceived political authenticity (PPA) in communications is a topic that has received a lot of attention in recent years as studies continue to show the growing importance of authenticity to a voter’s decision on election day (Gilpin et al., 2010; Grow & Ward, 2013; Stier et al., 2019). PPA is defined as the process by which citizens develop impressions of politicians’ authenticity, judging whether they are true to themselves in their daily activities, motives, positions, and associations (Luebke, 2021; Pillow et al., 2018). This concept is predicated on the idea that the audience is active in forming an impression of politicians, which is impacted by their environment, context, and attitudes (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Hahl et al., 2018; Luebke, 2021). Luebke (2021) proposes four dimensions of political authenticity: (a) *consistency*, (b) *intimacy*, (c) *ordinariness*, and (d) *immediacy* to distinguish this concept from integrity and sincerity. *Consistency* refers to the perception that a politician acts true to themselves and expectations;

intimacy relates to a politician's private persona and the level to which citizens feel they know that side of them; the *ordinariness* dimension assumes that citizens perceive politicians as more authentic when they appear to be ordinary people; and *immediacy* refers to citizens' perceptions of a politician as being true to themselves in public, including being spontaneous rather than strategic in their communications. Luebke and Engelmann (2023) built on this, creating a multidimensional PPA measurement scale, which was used to study PPA in German politics.

Political Participation among Young Adults

The definitions of political participation in academic research vary significantly, with some scholars adopting a broad definition that includes any political action or engagement and others breaking it down further into civic engagement, online political engagement, and offline political engagement, for example (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Xenos et al., 2014). This study leans toward the conceptualization of offline engagement—behavior that seeks to influence government action by affecting public policy-making, specifically beyond social media (Verba et al., 1995; Zukin et al., 2006). This includes actions such as voting in an election, donating to a campaign or party, participating in protests, attending a public hearing, sending a letter to a public official, speaking to a public official in person, volunteering for a political organization, and attending a political rally (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Tang & Lee, 2013).

Young adults' disenchantment with the political system and political participation has become a challenge for many democracies across the world. According to the Pew Research Center (2023), those in the United States between the ages of 18 and 29 made up only 10% of voters and 20% of nonvoters in the 2022 elections. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (2021) found that less than half of eligible young voters cast a ballot in the 2020 election, still an increase from previous years. Immediately prior to the 2024

election, the number of young adults registered to vote was lagging behind the 2020 numbers in most states, raising concerns about how to engage those who are not yet registered and increasing the voting bloc's impact in the election (Hilton & Searles, 2024). As Loader et al. (2014) note, however, young voters are just as interested in politics as other generations; they simply participate more via discussion and discourse online than traditional participation metrics.

Turning traditionally under-participating young adults into voters has long been a struggle for political campaigns and parties on both sides of the aisle, requiring them to adapt their strategies to target this age group specifically, including a turn to data-driven microtargeting and social media communications (Endres & Kelly, 2018; Leppäniemi et al., 2010). This use of social media by political campaigns is significant for young adults because of their increased use of the Internet and social media compared to other generations. Social media play an integral role in young adults' political interactions, both formally and informally, requiring that campaigns and parties invest in reaching young voters through these channels if they aim to earn their vote (Dabula, 2017; Edgerly et al., 2018; Vromen et al., 2015).

Hypothesis Development

This study sought to examine how young voters' exposure to online campaign content influences their long-term relationships and political participation. As Farrell and Webb (2000) argue, the connection between a presidential candidate and their party is so strong that they are often associated, meaning that the actions of a candidate impact the relationships of the party. Furthermore, because POPRs are focused on long-term relationship cultivation, it is beneficial to study the impacts of presidential candidates' campaign strategies on parties' POPRs, as these campaigns (which only occur every four years) are the most interaction that regular citizens have with political parties.

Political Campaign Content on Social Media and Social Media Engagement

The goal of most social media posts—political or otherwise—is often to generate social media engagement. Four topics/formats were at the center of political campaign social media content in the 2024 presidential election: attacks on an opponent, policy content, political Internet memes (PIM), and visuals created by artificial intelligence (AI). Examples of each from the 2024 presidential election are provided in Appendix B.

Opponent Attacks and Social Media Engagement. Negative communications about one’s opponent can create hype and controversy, mobilizing strong partisan supporters, painting engagement as a republican duty, and creating the perception of the other candidate as a genuine threat (Martin, 2004; Lilleker, 2021). As such, according to Lee and Xu (2018), the 2016 United States presidential nominees, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, experienced significantly higher likes and retweets on Twitter when they posted negatively about their opponent, a strategy they both often employed (Buccoliero et al., 2017). This use of conflict and emotion in posting about political opponents is known to increase social media engagement across various platforms like Twitter and Instagram, while posting this to Facebook may not result in the same increase in engagement (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023; Bene, 2019; Heiss et al., 2019; Peng, 2021; Sahly et al., 2019).

Policy Content and Social Media Engagement. Policy content was also common to see on a campaign or candidate’s social media page in 2024, albeit less common than attacks on an opponent. Going back to Barack Obama’s 2012 presidential campaign, Gerodimos and Justinussen (2014) found that Twitter followers often engaged more with policy-oriented posts than promotional ones, suggesting that there is a positive relationship between discussing policy on social media and user engagement. Boulianne and Larsson (2023) confirm that while this

relationship is not as strong as with other content, policy content has a significant impact on engagement across platforms.

Political Internet Memes and Social Media Engagement. Political Internet memes (PIMs) have grown in popularity in recent years and are posted by regular users, political campaigns, political candidates, and political parties. As McLoughlin and Southern (2021) show, these memes are created primarily by regular individuals, but campaigns and parties are now taking part more often. A variety of studies have suggested that PIMs and content similar to PIMs increase social media engagement. Halversen and Weeks (2023) show that the use of and exposure to PIMs increases one's motivation to make fun of candidates, persuade and inform others, express one's opinion online, and participate politically. The use of videos, photographs, and humor by campaigns has been shown to increase social media engagement with political campaign pages through comments, likes, and shares (Heiss et al., 2019; Lam et al., 2021; Lee & Xu, 2018). Bene (2017) found that virality in political campaign content is often driven by the use of these PIMs, with their relevant and funny nature causing it to be shared across the Internet, increasing social media engagement.

AI-Generated Visuals and Social Media Engagement. Because of the recency with which AI-generated images and videos have burst into the scene of political public relations, there are no existing studies that explore their impact on engagement in the realm of public relations. Still, some preliminary research suggests that those with higher levels of political interest are more likely to engage with and share AI-generated deepfakes (Ahmad, 2021). Not all AI-generated visuals of politicians are deepfakes, but the tendency to engage with them may shed some light on other forms of AI visuals. Furthermore, just as visuals and conflict are likely to increase engagement for different content, the controversy and nature of AI-generated political

images/videos as visual content is predicted to have the same effect (Lam et al., 2021; Lee & Xu, 2018).

***H1.** Young adults who report higher exposure to (**H1a**) attacks on an opponent, (**H1b**) policy information content, (**H1c**) political Internet memes, and (**H1d**) AI-generated visuals posted by presidential campaigns and candidates on social media will report higher levels of social media engagement.*

Political Campaign Content on Social Media and Perceived Political Authenticity

Opponent Attacks and Perceived Political Authenticity. Regarding posts that contain attacks on an opponent, Hahl et al. (2018) suggest that the violation of established political norms (e.g., respectability) may resonate with voters who perceive the current political system as illegitimate or flawed, leading to a higher perception of authenticity. In this vein, Theye and Melling (2018) noted that Donald Trump's attacks on opponents via Twitter, which were often ad hominem and politically incorrect, lent him a sense of perceived authenticity with his base, giving them the impression that he was willing to stand up for his genuine, anti-establishment values. Thus, it appears that when a voter perceives a flaw in the opponent of a particular candidate, they are more likely to interpret attacks by that candidate against the other as authentic forms of communication. In today's political environment, where a significant portion of both sides perceive the other as morally flawed, this may ring particularly true, as it aligns with Luebke's (2021) *immediacy* dimension of PPA, which assumes citizens find politicians with these spontaneous and volatile qualities to be more authentic.

Policy Content and Perceived Political Authenticity. There is no existing literature on how a candidate's openness and elaboration surrounding their policy stances impact the perceptions of authenticity among voters. Jones (2016) argues that authenticity is critical to

voters when it comes to how politicians will act in contexts where the public is unable to influence decisions that impact them, including the creation, proposal, and passing of legislation. So, being exposed to a candidate's policy goals gives voters a look into how the candidate would interact with policy once voters no longer have a direct impact on it, suggesting they might perceive candidates as more authentic than if they were not exposed to policy-related content.

Political Internet Memes and Perceived Political Authenticity. Luebke's (2021) four dimensions of authenticity include the dimension of *ordinariness*, which refers to a politician's sociopolitical and cultural closeness to the average voter. According to McLoughlin and Southern (2021), the most common creators and sharers of PIMs are regular citizens. Seiffert-Brockmann et al. (2018) argue that PIMs build social cohesion between those who use them and allow individuals a common frame of expressing political beliefs. Because of PIMs' connection to the concepts of social cohesion and common frames, if a political candidate uses popular meme formats, they may be cultivating a perception of themselves as being more involved with online users and regular people who also communicate about politics via these formats. PIMs' use by political campaigns may be perceived by particularly young voters as a symbol of *ordinariness* and authenticity, leaning into the aspect of perceived political authenticity that emphasizes being in touch with culture and everyday people (Valgarðsson et al., 2024). This heightened communication of *ordinariness* was predicted to increase young people's perceptions of the candidate's authenticity in this study.

AI-Generated Visuals and Perceived Political Authenticity. While there is no research on the relationship between AI and political authenticity, Brüns and Meißner's (2024) experimental studies, as well as a survey done by Anandaputra et al. (2024), indicate that corporate brands' use of generative AI on social media is negatively associated with consumers'

perceptions of the brands' authenticity. Applying this to the exposure to AI-generated visuals' relationship with perceived political authenticity, this study examined a potential negative relationship between the two.

***H2.** Young adults who report higher exposure to (H2a) attacks on an opponent, (H2b) policy information content, and (H2c) political Internet memes posted by presidential campaigns and candidates on social media will report higher levels of perceived political authenticity. Young adults who report higher exposure to (H2d) AI-generated visuals posted by presidential campaigns and candidates on social media will report lower levels of perceived political authenticity.*

Social Media Engagement and Political OPR

Many studies suggest a relationship between social media engagement and POPR. Among various other variables, relevant examples of POPR antecedents include media diet, exposure to specific messages, and social media engagement (Browning & Sweetser, 2020; Seltzer & Zhang, 2011; Sweetser et al., 2015). Seltzer and Zhang's (2011) work found that mediated and dialogic communication, often conducted online through social media engagement, increases a constituent's perception of the various dimensions of POPRs. Sweetser et al. (2015) then also suggested that active social media engagement with a political organization, such as a political action committee (PAC), like tweeting at them directly, increases one's perception of their relationship quality through the creation of a dialogic relationship.

***H3.** Young adults who report higher levels of social media engagement will report a more favorable relationship with their preferred political party.*

Perceived Political Authenticity and Political OPR

In political communications research, many studies have found that citizens prefer political candidates they perceive to be authentic (Grow & Ward, 2013; Kenny et al., 2021; Stiers et al., 2019). Sweetser (2017) found that the perceived political authenticity of a candidate was a significant predictor of one's POPR with one's party in the United States 2016 presidential election among first-time voters, which Browning and Sweetser (2020) corroborated. Young adults are shown to perceive a higher level of authenticity from politicians via social media than other demographics, indicating a relationship between social media use, authenticity, and POPR (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). Party-favorable opinions and participation have been shown to increase with higher perceptions of authenticity, as demonstrated by Kenny et al. (2021) in the 2020 Iowa Democratic Caucus. These studies have shown that the use of social media by political candidates can increase a voter's perception of the politician's authenticity and their relationship.

***H4.** Young adults who report higher levels of perceived political authenticity will report a more favorable relationship with their preferred political party.*

***H5.** The effect of exposure to attacks on an opponent (**H5a**), policy content (**H5b**), political Internet memes (**H5c**), and AI-generated visuals (**H5d**) on POPR will be mediated by social media engagement and perceived political authenticity.*

Social Media Engagement and Political Participation

Among the many antecedents to political participation among young people are media use and exposure. Esser and de Vreese (2007) conducted a comparative analysis across various democratic countries, determining that a young person's media use—which can include anything

from television to the Internet—can be related to both one’s lack of participation and subsequent motivation to participate, highlighting the media’s power on both sides of this issue.

Research on social media’s impact on political participation has shown encouraging but mixed results among younger demographics. The use of social networking sites seems to have a positive relationship with one’s political participation, both online and offline (Ahmad et al., 2019; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Xenos et al., 2014). This social media use, according to Xenos et al. (2014), has a positive relationship with young adults’ political participation. According to this study, “if one were seeking an efficient single indicator of political engagement among young people..., social media would appear to be as good as, or better than [socioeconomic status],” with other studies breaking this relationship down further and exploring specific differences in social media use, like network size, platform, exposure to political content, and the frequency with which one shares that content (e.g. Halpern et al., 2017; Kahne & Bowyer, 2018; Tang & Lee, 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2017) (Xenos et al., 2014, p. 13). Kahne and Bowyer (2018) show that one’s network with which they can discuss and engage on political issues is a positive indicator of their offline political participation as well, suggesting a relationship between social media engagement with other regular users and participation (communal engagement). Knoll et al. (2020) proposed that this relationship between social media use and political participation is not as simple as it appears; their model emphasizes the necessity of (a) exposure to social media political content, (b) relevance to the user, and (c) alignment with the user’s priorities or goals. They argue that political participation will only increase when each of these is present in social media political content (Knoll et al., 2020). Supporting this, Pennington et al. (2015) found that simply following candidates on these sites may not have a substantial impact on political engagement, implying that increasing participation may not be as simple as just

using the platforms. Ohme et al. (2020) corroborate the power of social media but note that in-person political and civic education events may go further in encouraging participation among young people.

With the abundance of other research related to social media and political participation in mind, many campaigns have turned to digital communications for its adaptability and direct access to young voters via online media (Leppäniemi et al., 2010). Dabula (2017) and Dankwah and Mesah (2021) showed that campaigns engaging in political communications via social media could increase various aspects of political participation among this voting bloc, including one's intention to vote. According to Abid et al. (2021) and Anim et al. (2019), campaigns and parties' establishment of a relationship with young voters via social media can be a strong determinant in whether and how they participate politically, indicating promise in the use of these channels for increasing electoral participation among younger demographics.

H6. Young adults who report higher levels of social media engagement will report higher levels of political participation.

Perceived Political Authenticity and Political Participation

Authenticity, like many other leadership traits studied in electoral politics (e.g., competence, integrity, etc.), has been shown to not only have an impact on the perception of an individual candidate but also the likelihood that the individual citizen will get out to vote for them on election day. Stiers et al. (2019) and Kenny et al. (2021) found that authenticity was significantly related to voting intentions on both the left and the right and for both local and national candidates. The latter study suggests that specific candidates who attract voters based on their authenticity rather than their policies will benefit from this increase in participation even more than others who are popular for their platform; the authors point to the difference between

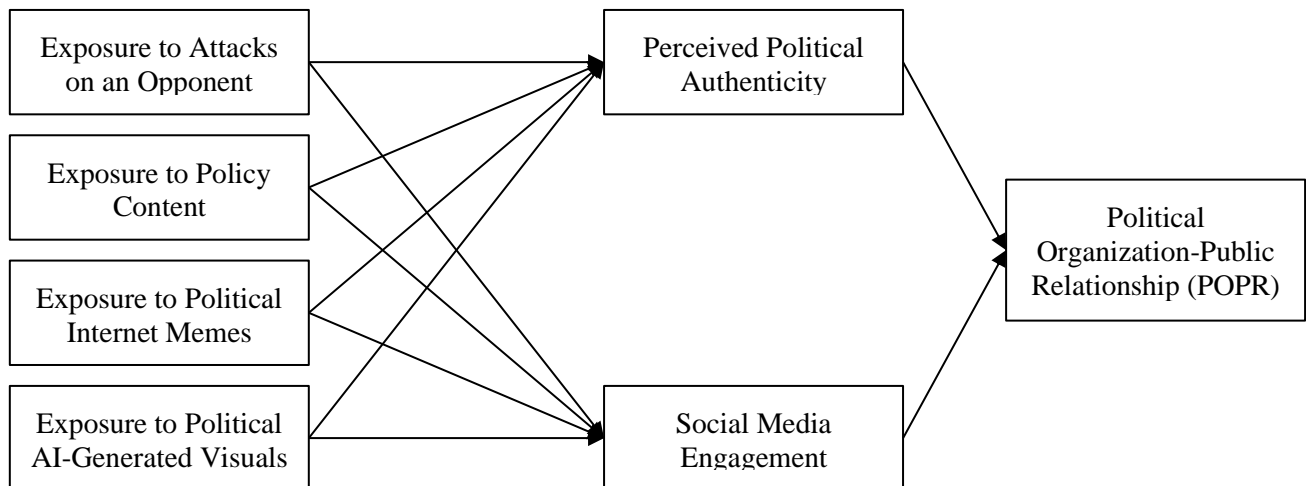
Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders in the 2020 Iowa Caucus, where Sanders' platform was the main driver of his supporters, while Biden was spurred on mainly by a perception of authenticity. If the intention to vote can be affected by perceived political authenticity, it raises the question: how does authenticity affect the intention to participate in the political system holistically?

***H7.** Young adults who report higher levels of perceived political authenticity will report higher levels of political participation.*

***H8.** The effect of exposure to attacks on an opponent (**H8a**), policy content (**H8b**), political Internet memes (**H8c**), and AI-generated visuals (**H8d**) on future political participation will be mediated by social media engagement and perceived political authenticity.*

Figure 1.

Model with POPR and Future Political Participation Intention as Dependent Variables.



Methodology

Study Design

This study sought to understand the relationships between exposure to political campaigns' social media content, social media engagement, perceived political authenticity, political organization-public relationships (POPRs), and future political participation. Research in this field most often employs survey methodologies to understand the relationships between these variables (e.g., Browning & Sweetser, 2020; Sweetser, 2015; Valenzuela et al., 2017). As such, this study conducted a survey with the target population being young adults in the United States; the sample included only United States citizens between the ages of 18 and 29 who have U.S. citizenship. This age group is commonly categorized as the young voting bloc across the world, both in and out of academia (Dankwah & Mensah, 2021; Esser & de Vreese, 2007; Pennington et al., 2015). The survey was created with Qualtrics, a web-based survey management software, and distributed online via Prolific, an online data collection service. Using Prolific's built-in screening feature, a requirement was set for recruiting participants between the ages of 18 and 29 who reside within the United States. To further ensure United States citizenship, a filter question was included at the beginning of the survey. The participants received \$1.50 compensation via Prolific upon their completion of the survey.

The survey was conducted on Prolific in February 2025. Two respondents were removed for reporting no social media use, which could have impacted the results in a study about social media. The final sample included 496 participants, all between the ages of 18 and 29, with an average age of 25.19 (SD = 2.99). Of the participants, 45.6% (n = 226) identified as male, 53.0% (n = 263) as female, and 1.4% (n = 7) as non-binary or third gender. For a detailed breakdown of demographics, social media usage, and political affiliation, see Table 1.

Table 1.*Demographic Information (N = 496)*

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	226	45.6
Female	263	53
Non-Binary/Third Gender	7	1.4
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
White	295	59.5
Black or African American	101	20.4
Mixed	38	7.7
Asian	35	7.1
Other/Data Expired	27	5.4
<i>Political Affiliation</i>		
Strong Republican	84	16.9
Republican	79	15.9
Lean Republican	64	12.9
Independent (No Affiliation)	63	12.7
Lean Democrat	73	14.7
Democrat	62	12.5
Strong Democrat	71	14.3
<i>Time Spent on Social Media</i>		
Less than 30 Minutes	6	1.2
30 Minutes to 1 Hour	24	4.8

1 to 2 Hours	59	11.9
2 to 2.5 Hours	56	11.3
2.5 to 3 Hours	68	13.7
3+ Hours	284	57.1
<i>Age</i>	Mean	SD
	25.17	2.99

Note: Due to Prolific’s screening and demographic data reporting methods, Prolific no longer provides information about race for users after a certain amount of time, leading to data expiration.

Measures

To ensure that respondents filled out the questionnaire with one specific candidate and party in mind, the following item was included: “Please select the candidate in the 2024 presidential election with whose policies and platform you most closely associate. This question is not asking which candidate you voted for. Your response is confidential and anonymous.” The answers to this were *Donald Trump (Republican)* and *Kamala Harris (Democrat)*. Because of the flexibility of surveys constructed via Qualtrics, the remainder of the survey was tailored to each of the two candidates, depending on how the respondent answered. For example, if the respondent selected *Donald Trump (Republican)*, questions specifically asked about Donald Trump, the Trump campaign, and the Republican Party, and vice versa for those who answered *Kamala Harris (Democrat)*. This was included to ensure a strong connection between the questions and a specific candidate and party.

The survey studied four independent variables:

Exposure to Campaign-Related Social Media Content. The study assessed how often participants encountered campaign-related social media content posted by presidential political

campaigns during the 2024 election, including pages for the candidates and their teams (e.g., Donald Trump’s Instagram account and the official Team Trump Instagram account). The study categorized social media content into four types: attacks on an opponent, policy information, political Internet memes, and AI-generated visuals. To provide context and facilitate responses, participants were shown an example of each content type from either the Kamala Harris or Donald Trump campaigns before answering the question. Because AI-generated visuals were only posted by Trump, all examples were from his campaign. All examples are provided in Appendix B. Participants reported their exposure frequency on a five-point scale from *1: Never* to *5: Very Often* for each content type: attacks on an opponent ($M = 3.09, SD = 1.06$), policy information ($M = 3.41, SD = 1.06$), political Internet memes ($M = 3.31, SD = 1.16$), and AI-generated visuals ($M = 2.55, SD = 1.25$) (Naderer et al., 2020).

This study also had two variables hypothesized to mediate the relationships between political campaign content, political organization-public relationships (POPRs), and political participation. They were as follows:

Social Media Engagement. Because of previous research that suggests engagement with campaigns and other users impacts participation and relationships, this study understood social media engagement as the level to which individuals interact with official campaign content and unofficial campaign-related discussions online (e.g., Kahne & Bowyer, 2018; Sweetser, 2015). This variable, which mediates the connection between exposure to forms of content and POPR/future participation, adapts aspects of the framework from Lim et al. (2015), which separates engagement into three distinct categories: functional, emotional, and communal. In alignment with that, this study asked respondents to mark their agreement with certain statements on a four-item, five-point Likert scale from *1: Strongly Disagree* to *5: Strongly Agree* for each

dimension of engagement, including questions like, “I would retweet or reply to others’ posts discussing the political campaign’s activities” and “I would post my feelings toward the campaign in online conversations.” Each dimension was then indexed into one measure of social media engagement ($\alpha = 0.97$, $M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.13$). To view all measures of social media engagement, see Appendix A.

Perceived Political Authenticity. The second mediator was perceived political authenticity ($\alpha = 0.87$, $M = 3.94$, $SD = .65$). This study adapted Louden and McCauliff’s (2004) and Sweetser and Tedesco’s (2014) measures of perceived political authenticity. The participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with various statements about their preferred political candidate on an 11-item, five-point Likert scale from *1: Strongly Disagree* to *5: Strongly Agree*. For example, one statement reads, “The candidate presents positions consistent with his/her true beliefs.” For all measures of perceived political authenticity, see Appendix A.

Two dependent variables were studied:

Political Organization-Public Relationships. This study measured political organization-public relationships on four dimensions: (a) trust, (b) satisfaction, (c) control mutuality, and (d) commitment, using measures adopted from Seltzer and Zhang (2011) measures of each dimension. Respondents indicated agreement with a series of statements describing their relationship with their political party via a five-point Likert scale from *1: Strongly Disagree* to *5: Strongly Agree* (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011). For example, measures of trust included statements like “My political party treats people fairly” and “My political party considers the impact of its decision on people.” Measures of satisfaction included “My political party and I benefit from our relationship with each other” and “I am satisfied with my interactions with my political party.” Each dimension was indexed to create one measure of

POPR ($\alpha = 0.95$, $M = 3.52$, $SD = .84$). For a complete list of measures for each dimension, see Appendix A.

Future Political Participation Intention. The second dependent variable in this study was future political participation, including attending a public hearing, town hall meeting, or city council meeting; calling or sending a letter to an elected public official; speaking to a public official in person; donating to a political party or candidate; volunteering for a political organization, party, or candidate; attending a political rally; participating in any demonstrations, protests, or marches; and voting in a presidential election in the future (de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Tang & Lee, 2013). Respondents indicated their likelihood of participating in each of these activities in the future on a five-point Likert scale from *1: Not Likely at All* to *5: Very Likely* ($\alpha = 0.91$, $M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.05$).

Control Variables. This study includes two control variables. The first is political cynicism. Given that Dancey (2012) found that political cynicism—a lack of confidence in the overall political system and its institutions—affects the perception of politicians' actions, and the results of various studies (e.g., Kim & Krishna, 2018; Sweetser et al., 2015) suggest cynicism's impact on the perceptions of political communications, participation, and POPR, this study treated political cynicism ($\alpha = 0.77$, $M = 3.35$, $SD = .74$) as a control variable (Pinkelton et al., 1998). This study adopted measures for political cynicism from Sweetser and Lee Kaid (2008). Respondents rated their agreement with a series of items on a five-point Likert scale from *1: Strongly Disagree* to *5: Strongly Agree*. One item reads, "People like me don't have any say about what the government does." See Appendix A for the complete list of items.

The second control variable is past political participation. This variable was measured using the same eight items as future political participation intention. However, respondents were

asked to indicate whether they had participated in any of the eight listed events in the past 12 months by selecting either “yes” or “no.” The index was created by summing the number of “yes” responses, with higher scores indicating greater involvement in political events over the past year ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 2.38$).

Results

A parallel mediation analysis was conducted using Mplus to test the hypotheses. This was done to test two models; both treated exposure to forms of campaign content as the independent variables and social media engagement/authenticity as the mediating variables, but one used POPR as the dependent variable, and the other used the intention to participate politically in the future as the dependent variable. Past political participation and political cynicism were controls. Indirect effects were tested using 95% bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals based on 5,000 resamples. Table 2 presents the direct and indirect effects among variables.

Model 1: POPR as Dependent Variable

The first model treats POPR as the dependent variable. H1 hypothesized that higher exposure to each type of content would be positively related to social media engagement. This rang true with only policy content ($\beta = .162$, $SE = .034$, $Z = 4.787$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: .095 to .228) and AI-generated visuals ($\beta = .086$, $SE = .035$, $Z = 2.463$, $p = .014$, 95% CI = .018 to .154), meaning those exposed to more policy content and AI visuals were more likely to engage with the campaign online. Exposure to attacks and memes had no significant effects on engagement. Therefore, H1b and H1d were supported, while H1a and H1c were not (Table 2).

Table 2.

Estimated Standardized Coefficients of Direct and Indirect Paths

Direct Paths	β	S.E.	Z	95% CI	
				Lower (LLCI)	Upper (ULCI)
ATTK → ENG	.023	.034	.674	-.043	.088
POLI → ENG	.162	.034	4.787***	.095	.228
MEME → ENG	.031	.035	.895	-.037	.099

AI → ENG	.086	.035	2.463*	.018	.154				
ATTK → AUTH	-.110	.044	-2.505*	-.196	-.024				
POLI → AUTH	.211	.044	4.822***	.125	.297				
MEME → AUTH	.059	.046	1.286	-.031	.148				
AI → AUTH	-.088	.046	-1.925	-.178	.002				
ENG → POPR	.201	.047	4.252***	.108	.294				
AUTH → POPR	.476	.033	14.234***	.410	.541				
ENG → PART	.395	.039	10.031***	.318	.472				
AUTH → PART	.050	.031	1.604	-.011	.112				
Mediation Analysis									
ATTK→ POPR	β	S.E.	LLCI	ULCI	ATTK→ PART	β	S.E.	LLCI	ULCI
Total Indirect	-.048	.022	-.072	-.003	Total Indirect	.003	.014	-.024	.030
ATTK→ ENG→ POPR	.005	.007	-.007	.014	ATTK→ ENG→ PART	.009	.013	-.017	.035
ATTK→A UTH → POPR	-.052	.021	-.074	-.008	ATTK→AUT H → PART	-.006	.004	-.013	.002
POLI → POPR	β	S.E.	LLCI	ULCI	POLI → PART	β	S.E.	LLCI	ULCI
Total Indirect	.133	.024	.067	.141	Total Indirect	.074	.016	.043	.104
POLI →ENG → POPR	.033	.010	.010	.041	POLI →ENG → PART	.064	.015	.034	.092
POLI → AUTH → POPR	.100	.022	.044	.113	POLI → AUTH → PART	.011	.007	-.003	.024
MEME→ POPR	β	S.E.	LLCI	ULCI	MEME→PAR T	β	S.E.	LLCI	ULCI

Total Indirect	.034	.023	-.008	.057	Total Indirect	.015	.014	-.011	.039
MEME → ENG → POPR	.006	.007	-.006	.014	MEME → ENG → PART	.012	.014	-.013	.035
MEME → AUTH → POPR	.028	.022	-.011	.051	MEME → AUTH → PART	.003	.003	-.003	.008
AI → POPR	β	S.E.	LLCI	ULCI	AI→PART	β	S.E.	LLCI	ULCI
Total Indirect	-.025	.024	-.047	.014	Total Indirect	.030	.015	.000	.049
AI→ ENG →POPR	.017	.008	.001	.022	AI → ENG → PART	.034	.014	.005	.052
AI→ AUTH → POPR	-.042	.022	-.057	.001	AI → AUTH→ PART	-.004	.004	-.010	.002

Note. ATTK: exposure to content that attacks an opponent; POLI: exposure to content that contains policy information; MEME: exposure to content that contains a political Internet meme; AI: exposure to content that includes AI-generated visuals; ENG: social media engagement; AUTH: perceived political authenticity; POPR: political organization-public relationship; PART: future political participation intention.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

H2 predicted that exposure to attacks, policy, and memes would increase the perception of authenticity, while exposure to artificial intelligence would have the opposite effect. The analysis showed exposure to attacks on an opponent ($\beta = -.110$, $SE = .044$, $Z = -2.505$, $p = .012$, $95\% CI = -.196$ to $-.024$) was negatively related to a perception of candidate authenticity. In contrast, exposure to policy content ($\beta = .211$, $SE = .044$, $Z = 4.822$, $p < .001$, $95\% CI = .125$ to $.297$) was positively correlated to authenticity. However, no significant relationship was found

between authenticity and memes or artificial intelligence. This means that the data supported H2b but not H2a, H2c, or H2d (Table 2).

H3 hypothesized that social media engagement would be positively related to POPR. The results showed that engagement ($\beta = .201$, $SE = .047$, $Z = 4.252$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .108 to .294) has a significant positive relationship with POPR. Engaging with a political campaign online seems to translate to a higher perception of one's relationship with that political party. H3 was supported. H4 hypothesized that perceived political authenticity would be positively related to POPR. According to the analysis, perceived political authenticity ($\beta = .476$, $SE = .033$, $Z = 14.234$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .410 to .541) has an even stronger positive relationship with POPR than social media engagement, affirming H4's posit (Table 2).

H5a hypothesized that the effect of exposure to attacks on an opponent on reported POPR would be mediated by social media engagement and authenticity, respectively. A significant negative indirect effect was found between the content and POPR ($\beta = -.048$, $SE = .022$, $Z = -2.132$, $p = .031$, 95% CI: -.073 to -.004); between the two mediators, only authenticity ($\beta = -.052$, $SE = .074$, $Z = -2.457$, $p = .014$, 95% CI: -.074 to -.008) was found to have a significant effect, while social media engagement's effect was insignificant. This means the effect of exposure to attacks on perceived authenticity affects POPR, partially affirming H5a (Table 2).

H5b posited the same with policy content. Results indicated a significant positive indirect effect between policy content ($\beta = .133$, $SE = .024$, $Z = 5.557$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: .067 to .141) and POPR. Both social media engagement ($\beta = .033$, $SE = .010$, $Z = 3.180$, $p = .001$, 95% CI: .010 to .041) and perceived political authenticity ($\beta = .100$, $SE = .022$, $Z = 4.519$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: .044 to .113) had significant positive mediating effects between the two, fully supporting H5b (Table 2).

H5c expected similar results with exposure to campaigns' political Internet memes and POPR. Because neither engagement nor authenticity showed significant mediation, H5c was not supported. This means that there is no relationship between exposure to memes and POPR, mediated by social media engagement and perceived political authenticity (Table 2).

H5d focused on POPR and the final content type: AI-generated visuals. While the total and indirect effects on POPR were insignificant the relationship, as mediated by social media engagement, was significantly positive ($\beta = .017$, $SE = .008$, $Z = 2.129$, $p = .033$, 95% CI: .001 to .022). Authenticity, however, showed no significant mediated relationship. As such, H5d was partially supported, as exposure to artificial intelligence's positive effect on engagement continued to impact an individual's perception of their relationship with their party (Table 2).

Model 2: Future Political Participation Intention as Dependent Variable

The second model treats future political participation as the dependent variable. Like Model 1, Model 2 also tested H1: the relationships between the various content types and social media engagement with the same results. The same is true for H2.

H6 predicted that social media engagement would be positively related to future political participation. The results show this to be true, with a significant positive indirect effect between the two ($\beta = .395$, $SE = .039$, $Z = 10.031$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = .318 to .472), affirming H6.

Similarly, H7 predicted that perceived political authenticity would be positively related to future political participation. However, the data indicated that perceived authenticity did not seem to have a significant effect on an individual's future participation. Therefore, H7 was not supported (Table 2).

According to H8, the effects of content exposure on political participation would be mediated by social media engagement and perceived political authenticity. H8a, which relates to

exposure to attacks on opponents, was not supported, as the total indirect and individual relationships were not proven to be significant (Table 2).

H8b asks the same question of exposure to policy content. Data showed a significant total indirect relationship ($\beta = .074$, $SE = .016$, $Z = 4.674$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: .043 to .104). For the mediators, social media engagement had a significant positive effect ($\beta = .064$, $SE = .015$, $Z = 4.294$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: .034 to .092), and authenticity had an insignificant effect. H8b was partially supported (Table 2).

For content including political Internet memes, H8c had the same prediction. The total indirect effect, social media engagement, and perceived political authenticity were all shown to be insignificant. H8c was not supported (Table 2).

Lastly is H8d, pertaining to content with AI-generated visuals. The total indirect effect was significantly positive ($\beta = .030$, $SE = .015$, $Z = 1.995$, $p = .046$, 95% CI: .000 to .049). While social media engagement significantly mediates the relationship ($\beta = .034$, $SE = .014$, $Z = 2.387$, $p = .017$, 95% CI = .005 to .052), authenticity does not. As such, H8d was partially supported (Table 2).

Regarding each claim in H8, exposure to attacks on an opponent does not increase one's intention to participate, nor is it affected significantly by social media engagement or perceived political authenticity; exposure to policy content, however, shows a significant relationship with future participation, mediated only significantly by the increase in social media engagement; exposure to campaigns' political Internet memes has no significant relationship with participation and is not mediated significantly; exposure to visuals created by artificial intelligence has a small but significant positive effect on participation, as mediated only by social media engagement.

Discussion

This study examined the impact of exposure to different types of campaign-related social media content on young adults' political organization-public relationships (POPRs) and political participation. By assessing social media engagement and perceived political authenticity as mediators, the findings provide a nuanced understanding of to what extent campaign strategies influence political relationships and participation intention among young people.

The results indicate that exposure to policy content was the strongest predictor of social media engagement and perceived political authenticity among the studied content types. It also had a substantial impact on POPRs and political participation. This aligns with previous research that substantive policy discussions enhance political trust and engagement (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023; Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2014). Not only did policy-related content encourage interaction, but it also positively influenced perceptions of political authenticity, reinforcing the idea that voters view candidates as more credible when they articulate clear policy stances, with this study adding social media content into that equation (Jones, 2016). Furthermore, the positive relationship between policy content exposure and political participation builds on previous evidence that well-informed voters are more likely to engage in the political process (Ohme et al., 2020; Xenos et al., 2014).

Exposure to AI-generated visuals also increased social media engagement, POPR, and participation through engagement but did not significantly impact perceived political authenticity. This suggests that AI-generated content may attract attention and interaction but does not necessarily affect how authentic the candidate is viewed. It stands to reason that the controversial and visual nature of such content drives engagement on social media platforms, increasing an essential predictor of POPR and participation. However, unlike what was

hypothesized, young voters may not be disenchanted by the computer-generated visuals, signaling less interest in *how* something is said and more interest in *what* is said (especially when considering the results regarding policy content).

In contrast, exposure to attacks on opponents negatively influenced perceived political authenticity, which in turn weakened party relationships. Interestingly, while previous research indicates that negative campaigning can increase a sense of authenticity (e.g., Buccoliero et al., 2017; Martin, 2004), other research—including this study—suggests it may erode trust and reduce confidence in public figures (e.g., Luebke, 2021; Stiers et al., 2019). This discrepancy may stem from the changing media landscape and generational differences—younger voters, accustomed to personalized and interactive political communication, may perceive attack ads as manipulative rather than informative or persuasive. They also may be growing weary of campaign cycles focused only on attacking opponents. It is possible that this could have contributed to the challenges some candidates faced in 2024 when trying to mobilize young voters.

Finally, political Internet memes had no significant effect on social media engagement, authenticity, POPR, or participation. This contradicts expectations based on prior research indicating that memes contribute to political discourse and engagement (Halversen & Weeks, 2023; Johann, 2022). One possible explanation is that while memes may entertain or inform, they do not necessarily prompt deeper engagement or political action. When made and shared by regular citizens, other users may become curious about the topic and interested in a solution; when only made and shared by political campaigns, however, no critical analysis, discussion, or engagement is required or incentivized, ultimately having a moot effect on individuals. Previous research suggests that political Internet memes get their power from their humor and

democratizing effects—the former may be present in campaigns’ posts, but the latter is removed when the content is artificial and manufactured by a candidate or party.

Between social media engagement and authenticity, the latter significantly outperformed the former in terms of the strength of the relationship with POPR. In line with previous research, this suggests that young people are increasingly looking for a political party made up of what they perceive to be authentic, genuine people. It also shows that simply getting people in the door (metaphorically) and getting them liking and discussing campaign content can be a steppingstone to a quality party-public relationship. It begins building the bridge necessary for such connection.

Regarding participation, authenticity played no role, while engagement remained an important predictor. Although authenticity has a powerful impact on party relationships, its influence does not extend to political participation. It is important for any relationship, but it is not necessarily a mobilizer; young people may not view candidate authenticity as a reason to get involved, but they do seem to view it as a point in the party’s favor. Unlike authenticity, online engagement can successfully create a level of involvement that moves people to offline action, once again supporting previous research that indicates the same.

Practical Implications

There is a resistance to follow polls and research among many political PR practitioners, but these findings suggest that political campaigns and parties are incentivized to prioritize content that drives engagement and enhances a perception of candidate authenticity, particularly policy-driven content, in their youth-oriented digital strategies. Policy discussions not only increase engagement but also enhance candidates’ perceived authenticity, strengthen voters’ relationships with their parties, and provide individuals with enough knowledge to engage more

in politics. This confirms the long-standing importance of substantive political communication over superficial or purely emotional appeals, like memes or negative attacks (Browning & Sweetser, 2020). Based on these results, this sort of content needs to be at the forefront of any presidential campaign going forward.

Even so, a focus on aesthetics has its place. This study highlights the potential of the newly introduced AI-generated content. It can be impactful in increasing engagement—which was central to the Trump and Harris campaigns—and POPR/participation as a result. Although many decried the use of artificial intelligence in any official campaign at the time, these results indicate that campaigns can—and have—made worse choices than using DALL-E. If a campaign is looking to use every tool in its toolbox for engagement, relationships, and mobilization, AI-generated visuals seem to deserve a spot; however, this may change as the engagement brought by the content’s controversy dies down and AI becomes more accepted and common place in art and politics.

Similarly related to aesthetics is the less impactful political Internet meme. The addition of these memes was one of the most significant changes in campaigning that took place in 2024. The campaign season was saturated with political memes, and countless donated dollars were spent on that strategy. Yet, this study finds no evidence that memes do what they were intended to do: build a relationship with young people and get them to participate. Humor and familiar formats can undoubtedly be helpful tools in enhancing visibility and grabbing attention, but memes fail to achieve the basic needs of the campaigns and parties’ political PR. In the future, a more balanced digital strategy—incorporating humor alongside substantive political messaging—may be more effective. Practitioners want to grab users’ attention, which is great. They can do that while also communicating about the topics young people care about.

What the study shows may need to be on its way out, however, is negative attacks via social media. While negative campaigning remains a common strategy (and is not likely to go away), campaigns moving forward should consider the potential costs and trade-offs, particularly among younger demographics who prioritize authenticity and may disengage from campaigns that rely too heavily on such content. There is, of course, in the mind of practitioners, a need to attack the extremes and avoid posting potentially alienating policy content, all in hopes of attracting the center. This seemed to be the goal of the Harris campaign, especially later in the cycle, but this research (and the results of the election) indicates that this may not be the way forward.

Whereas everyday discourse paints the younger generation as inattentive and wholly concerned with the aesthetics and design of a message, this heavily suggests that they deserve more credit. Young people are interested in the policy being proposed, and their exposure to it significantly drives the outcomes sought by campaigns and political parties. Campaigns should post accordingly.

Limitations

This research is not without its limitations. Firstly, the collected data is entirely self-reported. Self-reported data for certain variables, particularly regarding exposure to campaign content and political engagement, may introduce recall bias or social desirability bias, affecting the quality of the results. For example, some users may prefer to report that they were more exposed to and interested in policy content than memes, inflating and deflating their numbers, respectively. Secondly, the data collection itself was done via non-probability sampling. It was conducted with purposive sampling via Prolific, a platform through which researchers pay constituents for their responses; such data collection may affect the generalizability and

reliability of the results. The use of the platform brings into question its ability to be truly representative of the entire population of 18- to 29-year-old United States citizens. Thirdly, the timing of the survey may have affected the results. Having been administered in February 2025, knowing the results of the election in November 2024 and the ensuing actions of the second Trump administration may have influenced how respondents perceived their own exposure, engagement, opinions, and participation.

Finally, while content types may have some overlaps—such as a political Internet meme created using generative AI that criticizes an opponent’s policy, which engages all four types—it remains a valuable contribution to the field. The decision to analyze each content type separately was based on their distinct theoretical backgrounds and communication functions. Policy content aims to inform and persuade, attack ads seek to discredit opponents, AI-generated visuals enhance engagement through imagery, and memes leverage humor and cultural references for virality. By examining these content types independently, this study provides insights into their individual effects on the mediating and dependent variables. Moreover, campaigns themselves often categorize and deploy these strategies deliberately, with each post having a deliberate purpose—whether to inform, attack, entertain, or visually enhance their message. By analyzing it in this way, this study offers practical takeaways for campaign strategists.

Future Research

Future research could expand on this study’s results in various ways. As other researchers have done in similar studies, one could employ experimental designs to manipulate content types to determine causal effects on engagement and political behavior. It also may be worth the effort to conduct a similar study in the lead-up to the presidential election rather than several months afterward, as it will be timelier for the participants, reducing their reliance on their potentially

biased recollection. While this paper focuses on four types of content (attacks, policy, Internet memes, and artificial intelligence), other researchers can expand this to include other popular online strategies, including but not limited to influencer endorsements, livestreams, and videos of speeches or rallies. Other opportunities to build on this study are to focus on or compare specific social media platforms, recruit participants from different age groups, or conduct a longitudinal study to track how exposure to campaign content affects political relationships and participation over a single election cycle.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing field of political public relations by empirically examining how exposure to different types of campaign content impacts social media engagement, perceived political authenticity, POPR, and political participation. The findings demonstrate that policy-focused content is the most effective at fostering engagement, creating a sense of candidate authenticity, strengthening relationships with political parties, and encouraging participation. AI-generated content can increase engagement (and party relationships by extension) but does not significantly enhance authenticity or participation. Negative campaign attacks weaken authenticity and POPR, while political memes, despite their popularity, do not appear to influence engagement or mobilization meaningfully.

As youth voter turnout continues to decline, campaigns must refine their approaches to ensure that digital engagement translates into real-world political participation. By providing empirical insights into the effectiveness of digital campaign strategies, this study offers a foundation for future research on the evolving role of social media in political communication. As digital platforms continue to shape political discourse, understanding their influence on voter behavior will remain a critical area of inquiry for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike.

The practical implications are clear: the current environment is one in which young voters are tired of political fights and ready for substance. As such, political campaigns should invest in substantive, policy-driven messaging to cultivate long-term relationships with young voters and combat the epidemic of disenchanting youth. AI and other digital tools may enhance engagement but must be deployed strategically together with messaging that resonates. Young people are more than short-form-obsessed dopamine addicts; they are a demographic that prefers officials with authenticity and well-communicated stances over inauthentic, pop culture-driven

campaigns. Ultimately, while bells and whistles may make for an interesting campaign season, there is no substitute for a transparent platform, and young voters recognize that. If we want them to participate and care, simply giving them enough knowledge to do so is the path forward.

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Appendix A

Survey Questionnaire

1. Are you a U.S. citizen between the ages of 18 and 29?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No (end survey)
2. Please select the 2024 presidential candidate with whose policies and platform you most closely align. This question is not asking which candidate you voted for. Your response is confidential and anonymous.
 - a. Donald Trump
 - b. Kamala Harris

Exposure to Campaign Social Media Content

(5-point Likert-scale, *Never* -> *Very Often*) (From Naderer et al. (2020))

3. During the 2024 election, how often did you encounter the following type of content posted by presidential political campaigns or candidates in your social media feed?
 - a. Attacks on an Opponent: Content that attacks a political opponent (Figure B1 and Figure B2).
 - b. Policy Content: Content that conveys the candidate's policy plans if elected (Figure B3 and Figure B4).
 - c. Political Internet Memes: A viral, humor-driven digital image, video, or text that conveys political ideas, critiques, or cultural references to shape public discourse and engagement online. (Figure B5 and Figure B6).
 - d. AI-Generated Visuals: Images or videos created by generative artificial intelligence software like DALL-E (Figure B7 and Figure B8).

Social Media Engagement

(5-point Likert-scale, *Strongly Disagree* -> *Strongly Agree*) (From Lim et al. (2015))

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

4. Functional Engagement:

- a. I retweeted or replied to others' posts discussing the campaign's activities.
- b. I shared materials about the campaign's activities on social media, such as texts, videos, and photos.
- c. I brought up things that I learned about the campaign's activities on social media.
- d. I used trending words such as hashtags while sharing the campaign's activities on social media.

5. Emotional Engagement:

- a. I posted my feelings toward the campaign in online conversations.
- b. I posted my feelings when I liked/disliked the campaign's activities.
- c. I quoted from the campaign's communication materials when they were informative or educational.
- d. I expressed my feelings about the campaign.

6. Communal Engagement:

- a. I shared my opinions about the campaign with other people who were also interested through social media.
- b. I liked to share the campaign's messages.
- c. I contributed to an online community focused on this campaign by adding useful information.

- d. I interacted with other people on social media using hashtags related to the campaign's activities.

Perceived Political Authenticity

(5-Point Likert scale, *Strongly Disagree* -> *Strongly Agree*) (From Louden & McCauliff (2004) and Sweetser & Tedesco (2014))

7. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:
 - a. The candidate is comfortable in his/her own skin.
 - b. The candidate presents positions consistent with his/her true beliefs.
 - c. The candidate consistently represents his/her true beliefs.
 - d. The candidate has messages that reveal his/her true self.
 - e. The candidate believes what he/she says he/she believes.
 - f. The candidate does what he/she says he/she will do.
 - g. The candidate has messages that are authentic.
 - h. The candidate has a public persona that is authentic.
 - i. The candidate has a private persona that is very different from his/her public persona. (Reverse-Coded).
 - j. The candidate is too political. (Reverse-coded).
 - k. Based on what the candidate says, we can trust our interpretation of him/her.

Political Organization-Public Relationships

(5-point Likert-scale, *Strongly Disagree* -> *Strongly Agree*) (From Seltzer & Zhang (2011)).

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

8. Trust
 - a. My political party treats people fairly.

- b. My political party considers the impact of its decisions on people.
 - c. My political party can be relied on to keep its promises.
 - d. My political party takes my opinions into account when making decisions.
 - e. My political party has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do.
9. Control Mutuality
- a. My political party believes my opinions are legitimate.
 - b. My political party has neglected me. (Reverse-coded).
 - c. My political party has a tendency to throw its weight around. (Reverse-coded).
 - d. My political party really listens to what I have to say.
 - e. My political party seems to ignore my opinions when making decisions. (Reverse-coded).
10. Satisfaction
- a. My political party and I have benefited from our relationship with each other.
 - b. I am dissatisfied with my interactions with my political party. (Reverse-coded).
 - c. I am happy with my political party.
 - d. I am pleased with the relationship that my political party has established with me.
11. Commitment
- a. My political party is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to me.
 - b. My party wants to maintain a positive relationship with me.
 - c. I value the relationship with my political party more than with other organizations.
 - d. There is a long-lasting bond between me and my political party.

Political Participation

12. How likely are you to engage in the following channels of political participation in the future? (5-Point Likert, *Extremely Unlikely* -> *Extremely Likely*)

- a. Attend a public hearing, town hall meeting, or city council meeting (de Zúñiga et al., 2012)
- b. Call or send a letter to an elected public official (de Zúñiga et al., 2012)
- c. Speak to a public official in person (de Zúñiga et al., 2012)
- d. Donate to a political party or candidate
- e. Volunteer for a political organization, party, or candidate (Tang & Lee, 2013)
- f. Attend a political rally (de Zúñiga et al., 2012)
- g. Participate in any demonstrations, protests, or marches (de Zúñiga et al., 2012)
- h. Vote in the next presidential election (de Zúñiga et al., 2012)

Other

13. This is a scale with strong Democrats on one side and strong Republicans on the other, and with independents in the middle. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

(From Green & Schickler (1993)).

- a. I strongly prefer the Democrats.
- b. I prefer the Democrats.
- c. I am basically independent but lean toward the Democrats.
- d. I am independent and do not identify with either party.
- e. I am basically independent but lean toward the Republicans.
- f. I prefer the Republicans.
- g. I strongly prefer the Republicans.

14. Please select all of the following activities you participated in in the past 12 months.

(from Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012))

- a. Attended a public hearing, town hall meeting, or city council meeting (de Zúñiga et al., 2012)
- b. Called or sent a letter to an elected public official (de Zúñiga et al., 2012)
- c. Spoken to a public official in person (de Zúñiga et al., 2012)
- d. Donated to a political party or candidate
- e. Volunteered for a political organization, party, or candidate (Tang & Lee, 2013)
- f. Attended a political rally (de Zúñiga et al., 2012)
- g. Participated in any demonstrations, protests, or marches (de Zúñiga et al., 2012)
- h. Voted in the 2024 presidential election (de Zúñiga et al., 2012)

15. How much time do you spend on social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Facebook,

TikTok, etc.) in a typical week? (From Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012)).

- a. No Time at All
- b. Less than 30 Minutes
- c. 30 Minutes to 1 Hour
- d. 1 to 2 Hours
- e. 2 to 2.5 Hours
- f. 2.5 to 3 Hours
- g. More than 3 Hours

16. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: (5-point Likert-scale, *Strongly Disagree* -> *Strongly Agree*) (From Sweetser & Lee Kaid (2008)).

- a. Whether I vote or not has no influence on politics.

- b. One never knows what politicians think.
 - c. People like me don't have any say about what the government does.
 - d. Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on.
 - e. One can be confident that politicians won't always do the right thing (Reverse-Coded).
 - f. Politicians often quickly forget their election promises after a campaign is over.
 - g. One cannot always trust what politicians say.
17. Please indicate your age.
- a. A sliding scale between 18 and 29.
18. Please indicate your gender.
- a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Nonbinary/third gender
 - d. Prefer not to say

Appendix B

Figure B1. A post by Kamala HQ, Kamala Harris' campaign page on Instagram, attacking Donald Trump. (Kamala HQ, 2024).



Figure B2. A post by Donald Trump on X that attacks Kamala Harris (Trump, 2024).

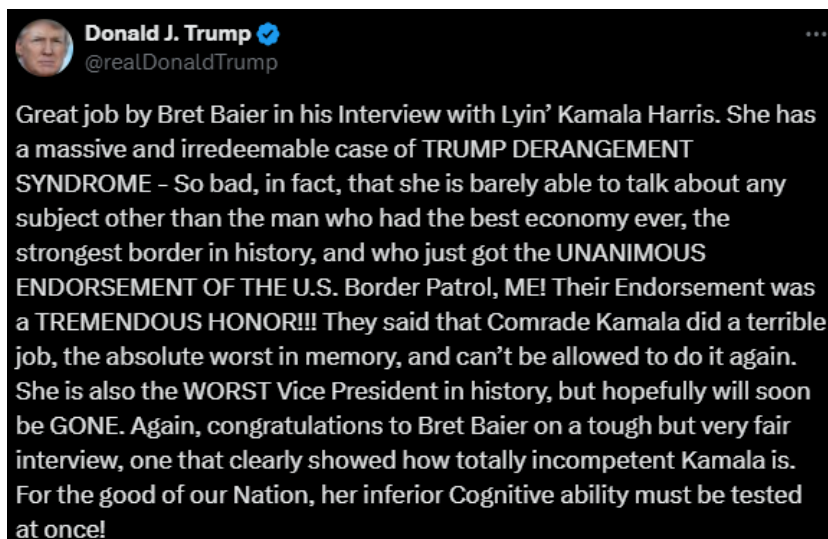


Figure B3. A post by Kamala Harris on X that includes policy information (Harris, 2024).

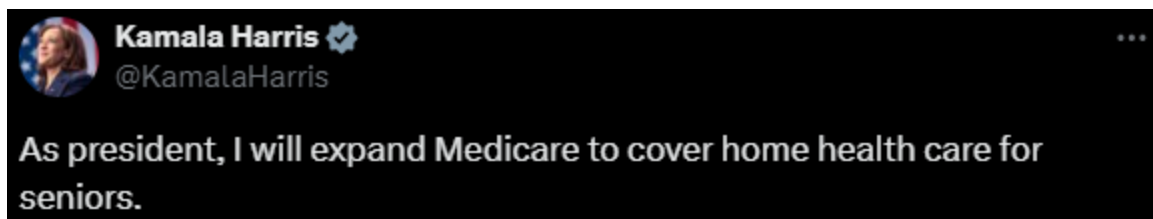


Figure B4. A [post](#) by Team Trump, Donald Trump’s campaign page on TikTok, that includes policy information (Team Trump, 2024).

Figure B5. A [meme](#) posted by Kamala HQ, Kamala Harris’ campaign page on TikTok (Kamala HQ, 2024).

Figure B6. A [meme](#) posted by Team Trump, Donald Trump’s campaign page on TikTok (Team Trump, 2024).

Figure B7. An [AI-generated video](#) posted by Donald Trump on X of himself dancing with Elon Musk (Trump, 2024).

Figure B8. A post by Donald Trump on TruthSocial that includes reposts of real and AI-generated images of Taylor Swift and fans endorsing him (Trump, 2024).

