

MULTIMODAL MESSAGING IN THE LATEST US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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Abstract

Political campaigns, as dynamic forms of public discourse, are designed to persuade and influence. Candidates seek not only to gain support for their policies but also to shape how voters perceive their vision for the nation's future. In today's digital age, multimodality and multimediality play a central role in this process, with online platforms amplifying the reach and impact of campaign messages. This study examines the 2024 U.S. presidential election, focusing on the contest between Democratic candidate Kamala Harris and Republican candidate Donald Trump. Key issues at the forefront of the campaign include healthcare, the economy, climate change, and migration. By analyzing the candidates' official Instagram pages alongside their public speeches through case study and compare-contrast methodology, the research explores the strategies they employed, the agendas they promoted, and the changes they emphasized. Special attention is given to the interplay of visual, textual, and rhetorical elements in shaping persuasive appeals. Ultimately, the article seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how multimodal communication contributes to political persuasion and how both candidates used these tools to advance their policies and connect with voters.

Keywords: *Direct communication, target audience, a to-do/must-do list, electoral campaign, multimodality, multimediality.*

Introduction

With the rise of advanced technology politicians are engaged in direct communication with the voters by using the opportunity to campaign online. There is no time restriction to share their current achievements, potential progress, further plans and opinions on any issue as social media platforms allow everyone to share this information in real time [Andrew & Chiadika, 3]. It is this direct communication that creates stronger bonds between the candidate and the voter making the process more interactive and personalized. As a result, everyone feels more engaged and ready to take the necessary measures to achieve the goals [Council of Europe, 3].

Most of the voters are digital natives using different social sites and platforms to different extent and for different purposes. Online news and campaigning in general might be considered the main source of information for political news, so the internet might be viewed as the main pathway connecting the candidates to the electorate. On the other hand, it is also challenging for politicians to keep up with so many new platforms and to provide relevant information suitable for a particular platform [Daniel & Obholzer, 294-295].

Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X (Twitter) have changed the way politicians and parties organize their campaigns due to the availability of image-based content. The persuasive power of social media is realized through excessive use of visuals [Dimitrova & Matthes, 336].

Each platform is intended for a particular purpose. Instagram can be used to share pictures and viewpoints, Twitter or X allows personal conversations related to the topic under debate or discussion, Facebook focuses on billboard creation. [Stier et al., 456].

Many social media sites enable live streaming which helps politicians to go round the possible distortion of information by news media.

Another advantage that politicians are granted with when using online platforms during the campaign process is the possibility to direct the information to the targeted audience by taking into account the demographic data, interests and behavioral peculiarities of each user. This is a huge step forward as previous media forms such as TV and print newspapers didn't allow such opportunities [Erfort]. However, politicians should bear in mind that some online activities can add more engagement than others. Actions that inspire people to like and share the political advert should take the lion's share [Dimmitrova & Bystrom, 14]. Social media affect the election

According to Anna Sophie Kümpel [LMU] the Chair Professor of Communication at LMU's Department of Media and Communication, the direct appeal to users requires a good feel and the right communication style chosen for the very platform. Social media can influence people and shape their opinion in the desired way. However, she also claims that media platforms, being of overwhelming importance are not the only decisive factor in the outcome of elections. Authenticity has its paramount role in any form of campaign, and content is usually more important than the way of presentation.

The 2024 US presidential elections came to their end with Donald Trump's victory. The competition was tough, and the candidates were doing their best to persuade people into voting for them. Both Donald Trump and Kamala Harris had their public speeches and social media posts in which they spoke about their priorities, must-do lists and the opponent's inability to be the next president.

The aim of the study is to reveal what tools, modes of communication and media were used throughout the last presidential election campaign to influence the choice of the voters. Case study

and compare-contrast have been chosen as the main methods of research. The choice of methods has been coordinated with strategies used by the candidates to enjoy the sense of victory.

It is impossible to imagine any campaign in our era which does not make use of the Internet and social media platforms. Both candidates' social media pages abound multimodal tools used in the campaign.

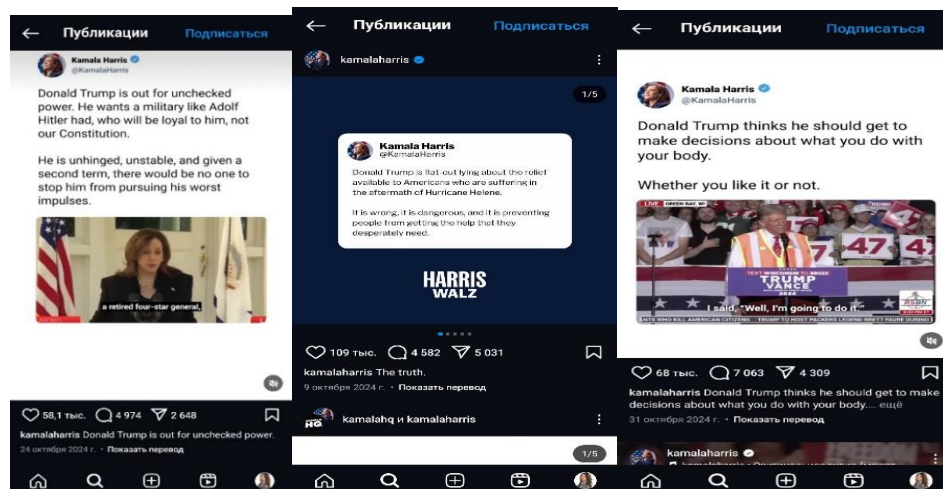
To achieve our goal, we have taken election campaign posters and videos to analyze the interplay between the elements of multimodal ensemble. Verbal and non-verbal aspects of the campaign enhancing the influence of the messages have been thoroughly studied.

Kamala Harris's election campaign: vision, agenda, values, campaign strategies

Harris's Instagram page is a depository of a multimodal electoral campaign. The page is very detailed and informative with daily publications to inform the voters about her plans, actions and further steps. Kamala Harris's main focus is on influence. She wants to touch the nation's soul and arouse values of dignity, pride, equality and justice. Her campaign strategy is based on compare and contrast: future versus past, Trump's ideology versus her own, democracy as opposed to dictatorship. Harris tries to show her authenticity through story-telling about personal childhood experiences and family backgrounds, inspirational posters, interviews and discussions.

As part of her campaign strategy the ex-vice-president chose to post not only her actions but also Trump's dangerous, threatening and illogical actions with portraits and videos to convey the message that Trump is a dictator, a person who is not able to govern the nation.

Figures 1, 2, 3

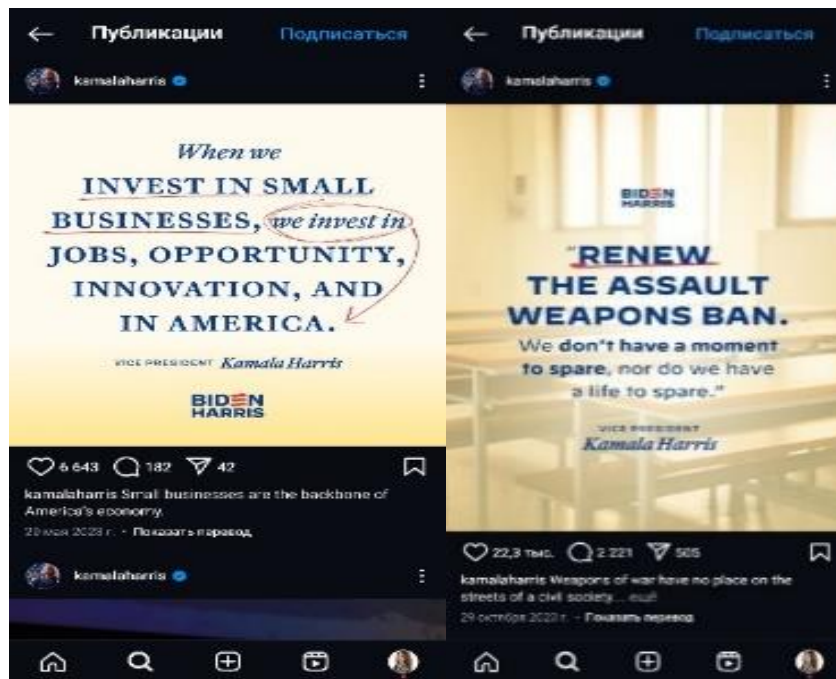


Harris accuses Trump of dictatorship

Harris's campaign revolves around the following key concepts: *women's right to make decisions about their bodies (i.e., abortion), freedom, social equality, ban to use dangerous weapons*. She acts

as a social rights warrior. Her to-do list is represented through posters and mainly consists of one-two sentences where key-words are always underlined in red [Kamala].

Figures 4, 5

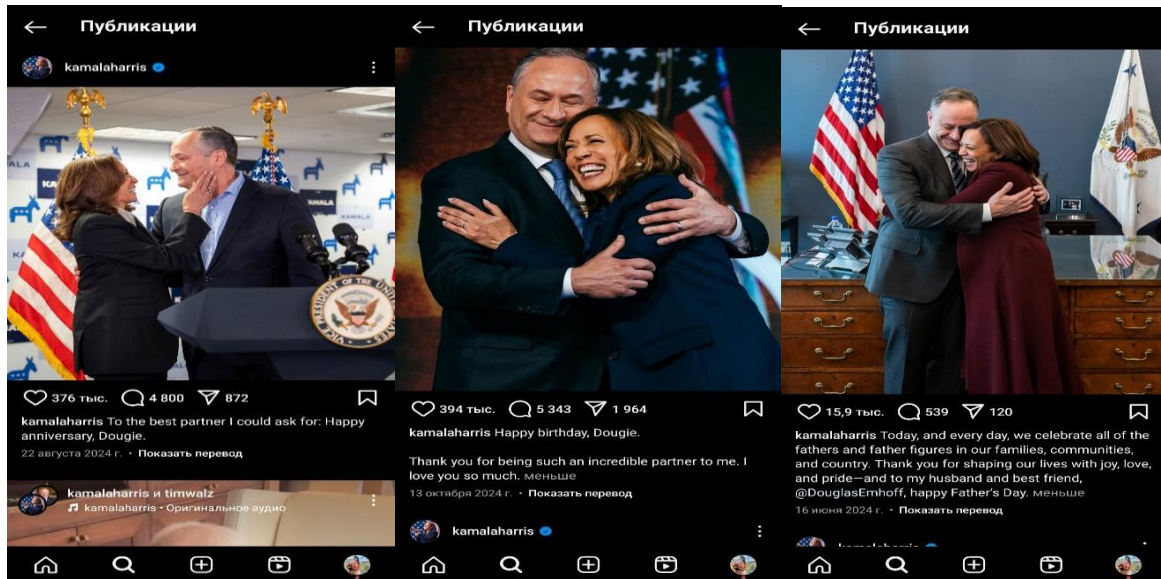


Kamala Harris' priorities

Through her Instagram account Harris wants to highlight her core values:

1. Family: We can find a number of family photos where Harris congratulates her husband on Valentine's Day or calls him the best partner she could ask for, or confesses that the time spent with him is the greatest gift. All the pictures express apparent happiness, joy and gratitude. It would be reasonable to imply that this is done to emphasize the importance of stable and firm relationships. Conspicuously, she is trying to set an example of a loving and harmonious family that spend the holiday season in a cozy atmosphere of home, go voting together as responsible citizens, fight for equality and, as an ordinary couple, have date nights from time to time. Strong and united families are the basis of a united society. The family ideology can be projected on social life. **Promoting family life is an important technique to win the trust of potential voters.** It is not a secret that people are very sensitive when it comes to their families, and a leader with the same perspectives and views is more likely to get the trust and respect of the population. Family is the smallest but at the same time the most crucial cell of the society.

Figures 6, 7, 8



Family as the most important unit of a healthy society

It is impossible not to admire Harris as a grateful daughter who credits her mother for her stamina, determination, courage and willpower to fight for equality, to grapple with social issues, to bring up questions which can ease the life of middle-class citizens. Through posts devoted to her mother, Harris raises two essential topics: social equality and medical care. In many posts she wants to remind the followers of her origins and family backgrounds to assure everyone that she is one of them, an ordinary citizen who will never forget about the problems and hardships her family had to grapple with and to express her commitment to fight for opportunities that middle-class families need to provide their children with education and support. Also, she represents her mother as a cancer warrior to inspire thousands of people struggling against the same problem. Speaking about her mother, Harris mentions that she has had two goals in life: to provide her daughters with decent education and to end breast cancer. Thus, one of her presidential promises is to establish affordable health care which is about dignity, independence and peace of mind. It can be inferred that she sees herself as the continuation of her mother who tirelessly fought for civil rights taking her two young daughters with her in a stroller. According to Harris's own words, this experience has taught her that if people unite and fight for their common rights shoulder to shoulder, it is possible to make a difference. With this, she is trying to motivate people to join her and stand behind her ideas.

As her political predecessor J. Biden, Harris emphasizes the importance of healthcare accessibility for everyone.

Figure 9



Harris's mother as an advocate for social equality and a cancer warrior

2. Women's rights, immigrant justice and LGBT rights: Harris and her husband advocate for women's rights, immigrant justice and LGBT rights. They highlight the importance of equal pay, reproductive freedom, and access to healthcare as key pillars of women's rights. On immigration, they support fair pathways to citizenship and the protection of immigrant families from separation or exploitation. With their participation in the Pride parade, they want to emphasize their respect for the Marriage Code. In some posts we can see Harris wearing colorful shirts or vests which present her support for the LGBTQ community.

3. Economic Security: A key priority for Harris is economic security. In her public speaking, she consistently demonstrates a motivating and persuasive style, delivering speeches that rally people behind her vision. Examples of her rhetoric include:

When we fight, we win. (motivation)

We are the heirs to the greatest democracy in the world. (motivation, pride)

For the people, always. (persuasion, reassurance)

I will never forget where I come from. (persuasion, authenticity)

America, we are not going back. (motivation, resilience)

I believe the promise of America because I have loved it. (belief, commitment)

I trust women to make decisions about their own body and health. (persuasion, support)

Through carefully chosen words, Harris seeks to inspire, persuade, and build trust, while evoking feelings of pride, resilience, and belief in America's future among potential voters.

The ex-vice-president is actively engaged in the election campaign trying to persuade the electoral with her visions and policies. She is trying to make people understand that their participation is crucial in determining who the next leader of the country would be. Her page abounds pictures with the message: *When we vote, we win*.

Let us analyze one of the many emotional videos we can encounter on her page [Kamala]. In her November 5th post one can see people of various age groups, sexes and races speaking enthusiastically, hopefully and excitedly about their votes. The video contains episodes where Harris calls and visits citizens to make them think about their responsibility to vote and to get their support. The video starts with her motivating rhetorical questions:

Are we ready to vote?

Are we ready to win?

Then her speech is interrupted by a son and a father who call people to join them by these words:

Let's win this vote. (father)

We have doors to knock. (son)

In another episode an old lady holding Harris's hands cries emotionally: *We are all in this together*. Another man says that he is filling in his ballot with tears in his eyes.

As for the methods to construct her speech, Harris constantly uses compare and contrast by installing short videos from Trump's campaign trips taken from Instagram of November 3, 2024. For example, when speaking about healthcare Kamala always emphasizes that women have a right to decide whether they want to have a baby or not while Trump is determined to punish women who choose not to have their babies: *There has to be some sort of punishment for women, right? I am going to do it whether women like it not*. Commenting on his speech Kamala says that as opposed to Trump, she trusts women as many other Americans.

Donald Trump: ex-president with new ideas to make drastic changes globally

At this stage of our survey, we would like to have a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the 45th president's election campaign strategies, promises and multimodal means used to make him the 47th president. Trump's speech is extremely radical and his vision of America differs greatly from that of Kamala Harris.

Let us examine Trump's speech from various campaign visits throughout America taken from Instagram of December 10, 2024 [Donald]. His agenda revolves around several key points.

1. Migration: Migration is among the most discussed issues in Trump's campaign speeches. One of his main priorities is strengthening borders to diminish crime rates across the country. When visiting Pennsylvania, Trump announced that migrants and criminals are destroying the nation and declared they *need to go to hell*. He framed his promise in bold, militaristic terms:

I will Liberate Pennsylvania and our entire nation from this mass Migration invasion.

We're gonna deport the criminals and other murderers, gang members and drug dealers.

The intensity of his language transforms migration into not just a policy concern but a battlefield for national survival. Trump positions himself as the defender of American citizens, vowing to remove the supposed threats of immigrants who, in his framing, undermine the safety and prosperity of the nation. His speech resonates with audiences largely because of the emotional weight he attaches to it – raising his tone, pausing dramatically, and appearing visibly angered by the subject. This fury makes his rhetoric appear more authentic, more personal, and therefore, in the eyes of many supporters, more credible.

Trump also reinforces his stance with simple yet powerful catchphrases, much like Harris does. In his August 19, 2024 Instagram post, he reintroduced several key slogans that continue to shape his campaign identity:

We are one people, one movement, one family and one glorious nation under God. (pride, unity, motivation)

Promises made, promises kept. (trust, accountability)

Make America safe again. (security, guarantee)

These phrases do more than repeat familiar themes; they function as rallying cries, condensing complex issues into memorable and emotionally loaded soundbites. By repeating them at different stops, Trump seeks to weave consistency and reliability into his brand, assuring his base that his views are unwavering.

2. Business and Tax: Business and tax management is another pillar of Trump's agenda. He stresses that his policies will prioritize American-made products, giving incentives to local business owners while imposing barriers on foreign competitors. He promises to lower corporate tax rates from 21% to 15% for domestic producers but vows stiff tariffs against those *trying to outwin our cherished companies, stealing our treasure, wealth, and jobs* [Potus, Donald]. The contrast between reward and punishment is central here: loyal, domestic manufacturers are framed as patriotic contributors deserving protection, while foreign producers are cast as invaders who drain the nation's resources. This framing appeals strongly to local entrepreneurs who feel overlooked in global trade deals. Trump couples his arguments with numbers, statistics, and direct comparisons to Kamala Harris's economic record. On September 24–25 and October 2, 2024, he presented detailed data showing what he described as Harris's failures in addressing inflation, job growth, and trade deficits. The reliance on concrete figures, whether fully accurate or not, gives his speech a veneer of technical precision, while his passionate delivery infuses those numbers with urgency. This combination of data-driven argumentation and emotional tone strengthens his credibility among business owners and working-class audiences alike.

3. Change of World: On the global stage, Trump casts himself as the only leader capable of altering the course of history. He portrays his leadership as not just domestic but civilizational, promising *to change the world in our era*. In his October 1, 2024 Instagram post, he reminded followers of the period when he was president, claiming that under his leadership international conflicts were minimized and America projected unmatched strength. Trump's global rhetoric emphasizes grand, sweeping visions rather than incremental policy measures. On September 9, 2024, he declared:

No dream is too big, no challenge is too great.

Nothing we want for our future is beyond our reach.

America will no longer settle for anything less than the best.

These aspirational statements shift the conversation from immediate problems such as inflation or migration, to broader questions of destiny, power, and national greatness. His audience is invited to see him not just as a politician, but as a transformative figure with the will to prevent World War III, avoid a depression reminiscent of 1995, and restore global respect for the United States.

Summarizing the key points of his campaign, Trump emphasizes economic revival, inflation control, strict border enforcement, national pride, global leadership, and the defense of religion. He consistently frames Kamala Harris as a threat to national security, particularly through what he calls her *open borders* policy. To intensify the emotional impact, he uses stark visual imagery on social media. For instance, an Instagram post depicting a man with a knife following a girl in the darkness, symbolizing the danger he associates with unchecked migration. Such images tap into fear and protection instincts, reinforcing his claim that without his leadership, Americans, especially the vulnerable, are at risk.

Figure 10



Open borders are a threat to the society

Through this blend of anger, pride, statistics, and powerful imagery, Trump's campaign speeches are designed to be both alarming and reassuring. They paint a dire picture of America's present but offer his leadership as the singular solution to restore safety, prosperity, and global dominance.

A closer analysis of both candidates' (Trump and Harris) social media platforms reveals a consistent tendency to highlight their opponent's flaws rather than primarily promoting their own agendas. Much of the content is dedicated to calling out perceived mistakes, exposing weaknesses in the rival's policy proposals, and framing campaign promises as either unrealistic or deceptive. Their official websites and pages are heavily populated with multimodal statistics, charts, and video clips designed to undermine trust in the opposing party's credibility. Instead of fostering constructive debate or outlining detailed solutions, these platforms often function as arenas of attack, where the central objective is to erode public confidence in the competitor.

Conclusion

The rapid evolution of digital technology and online tools has reshaped the very nature of political campaigning, placing a stronger emphasis on the visual and emotional power of communication. In the most recent U.S. presidential elections, candidates relied heavily on multimodal strategies: blending images, videos, and persuasive language to highlight the legitimacy of their own platforms while casting doubt on the promises and capabilities of their opponents.

Today, success in politics depends not only on a candidate's ideas but also on how effectively they use technology to amplify their message and connect with voters. Social media platforms, in particular, have become essential arenas for shaping public opinion, allowing candidates to present their visions in more dynamic and accessible ways. At the same time, these platforms give citizens an active role in the process, enabling them to engage directly with campaign narratives and evaluate which candidate most closely reflects their values and priorities. Looking ahead, further research could provide valuable insights into how digital campaign strategies resonate differently across regions and demographics, offering a deeper understanding of the evolving relationship between multimodal expressions of technological tools, politics, and the electorate.

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