

Soundbites and Backlash: Trump's Rhetoric in the Age of Social Media

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Abstract

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This study examines Donald Trump's use of provocative rhetoric during the 2024 US presidential election, focusing on how his statements circulate within TikTok's attention-driven media environment. Using discourse analysis, 78 unique contentious statements were identified from rallies, debates, and formal political addresses later categorised into viral, semi-viral, and non-viral levels based on platform engagement metrics (views, likes, comments, and reposts). Findings show that only 28 of these statements went viral, with the most successful examples being short, emotionally charged, easily decontextualised, and frequently used in parodies. The analysis shows that Trump's rhetoric is strategic because provocation functions as a tool to enhance visibility on social media platforms.

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Introduction

Donald Trump's rhetorical style has been a subject of discussion among many scholars. Various analyses are focus mostly on his ability to blend populism, emotional provocation, and media performance. Although numerous studies examine these strategies in conventional campaign settings, the 2024 US presidential election presents a unique chance to examine how this kind of rhetoric plays out in the social media era. Both Trump and his rival Kamala Harris gained significant viral attention on TikTok throughout the campaign; however, their online popularity took different paths. Harris became associated with a self-aware Gen Z-orientated branding narrative, such as "Kamala is Brat," tied to the cultural popularity of Charli XCX's album *brat*. In contrast, Trump primarily concentrated his efforts on large political rallies instead of creating content that was native to the platforms.

Even so, Trump's language spread widely on TikTok, with users creating parodies of his speech snippets and news media profiles sharing specific highlights. His remarks amassed millions of views, likes, comments, reposts, and audio repurposing, transforming campaign phrases into viral audio clips for reinterpretation through memes. These clips frequently featured provocative assertions designed to shock or intensify conflict. For instance, Trump claimed that Harris "wants to do transgender operations on illegal aliens that are in prison" (Trump, 2024, second presidential debate), a formulation that simultaneously dehumanises undocumented migrants and promotes threat-based fear appeals. He also referred to Joe Biden as "cognitively impaired" (Trump, 2024, Temple University in Philadelphia) and labelled COVID-19 "a gift from China" (Trump, 2023, Durham, New Hampshire).

It would be difficult to determine if Trump's most controversial statements are genuine reflections of his personality or intentionally designed for effect on his audience. However, recurring patterns indicate a calculated motive, as new subjects are often launched with a striking assertion that serves to capture attention, followed by more conventional messaging if the audience's engagement fades.

Theoretical Background

When it comes to political communication, it should be mentioned that the "term has proved to be notoriously difficult to define with any precision" (McNair, 2011: 3). This is likely due to the understanding that both the "political" and "communication" concepts are broad and continuously changing. However, Pimeta, & Silva (2024) point out that political communication isn't just about politics because it pulls in language, culture, and the beliefs people share (cf. Mishra et al., 2025; Gonçalves, 2018). Discourse analysts investigate how those messages move through different parts of the public sphere (cf. Pimeta & Silva, 2024; Hadma & Anggoro, 2022; Oparaugo, 2021). This aligns with Charaudeau's view that political discourse "is part of a social practice, circulates in a certain public space and has something to do with the power relations that are established there" (Charaudeau, 2018: 16).

Persuasion rarely consists solely of information. Politicians carefully construct their credibility, and they aim to create a direct bond with the public (cf. Charaudeau, 2018; Capati, 2019; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013). They mobilise "socio-discursive imaginaries to align with the values and beliefs of the citizenry instance" (Pimeta & Silva, 2024: 231), a dynamic intensified in populist communication. According to Charaudeau (2019), this creates a political "contract" where politicians seek legitimacy while citizens expect

acknowledgement and responsiveness. However, campaigning increasingly occurs in mediated environments that influence visibility (Papathanassopoulos & Giannouli, 2025).

Picture 1: Evolution of Political Campaigning



Source: Richard Gramanich Štromajer

The diagram shows an overview of how political communication has developed over time. It draws on Semetko & Twaorzecki's (2018) ideas and builds directly from the earlier works of Farrell, Webb, Schmitt-Back, and Norris (2000). It is based on mediatisation theory (cf. Scammell, 2016; Herkman, 2009; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999) and tackles the digital era highlighted by Papathanassopoulos & Giannouli (2025). It maps out the evolution of political campaigning and how strategies shift and adapt as media change. Campaigns move from party-centred mobilisation to TV-driven image politics and, nowadays, the role of digital platforms.

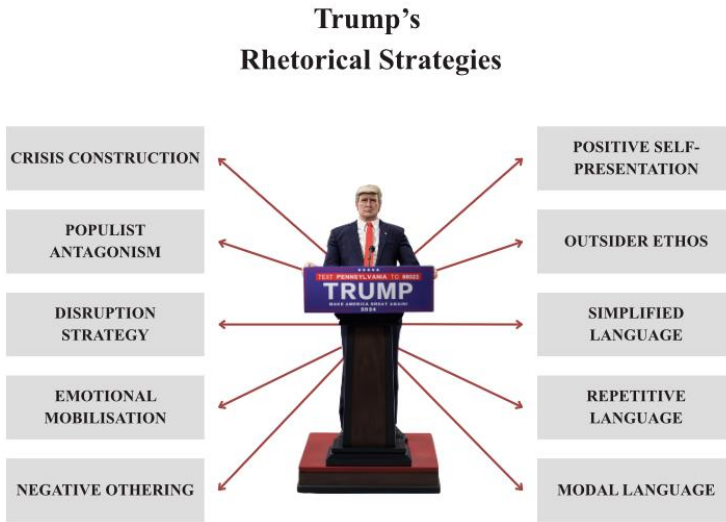
In the “fourth era”, social media have become “central to modern election campaigns, increasingly overshadowing traditional media as the primary arenas for political discourse” (Papathanassopoulos & Giannouli, 2025: 3). Their algorithmic visibility and real-time feedback reconfigure how persuasion operates; leaders cultivate an “unmediated relationship” with citizens (Capati, 2019: 2). As a result, emotional impact and performance increasingly outweigh informational quality, with “visibility, virality, and engagement over substance” (Papathanassopoulos & Giannouli, 2025: 15).

This framework reshapes political legitimacy through media influence, where persuasion, trustworthiness, and visibility are achieved through online engagement. Politicians continuously monitor and recalibrate messaging because “social media serve a strategic monitoring function” (Papathanassopoulos & Giannouli, 2025: 4), turning campaigning into a permanent and participatory process. Within this tense communicative context, outrage and backlash can be a positive thing. Trump’s approach to political communication shows that in the era of social media, gaining political prominence occurs not despite encountering criticism, but possibly because of it.

As mentioned earlier, persuasion is a crucial component of political communication. Reyes (2011) notes that most politicians often resort to creating a sense of fear in voters and utilising their own image. In the past, politicians relied on rational arguments to cite expert opinions and frame their policies as selfless to achieve credibility. These strategies primarily functioned through symbolic power because the use of language shapes perceptions while seemingly being only descriptive (cf. Martin, 2015).

This strategic communication is heightened by platform-driven performativity, suggesting that what seems spontaneous may be designed for approachability, emotional impact, and customisation (Fetzer & Weizman, 2006). Visual and multimodal messages enhance affective persuasion, allowing audiences to “fill in” the reasoning and creating a sense that logical arguments are inevitable through timely delivery (cf. Martin, 2015; Miles, 2023; Kjeldsen & Hess, 2021). These elements form the foundation of Trump’s rhetoric, which research indicates relies on a populist framing of crises (Hall, 2021), persistent hostility (Lacatus & Meibauer, 2023), and the use of confrontation as a performance (Crines & Dolowitz, 2019). Although it may seem spontaneous, studies reveal that emotional mobilisation and the reinforcement of identity are central for his approach (cf. Fountain, 2024; Derki, 2022; Derakhshani et al., 2021).

Picture 2: Trump's Rhetorical Strategies



Source: Richard Gramanich Štromajer

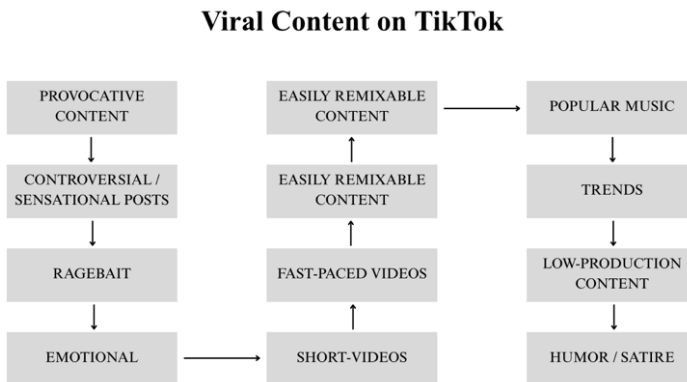
The strategies depicted in Picture 2 stem from an expanding set of researchers examining Trump's rhetoric. Research indicates that he creates a sense of crisis to increase anxiety and depict himself as the only protector of people (Hall, 2021). It seems like he also employs populist divisiveness to separate "moral people" from corrupt adversaries (cf. Fountain, 2024; Lacatus and, 2023) and utilises shock-driven disruption to take control of the agenda through controversy (Crines & Dolowitz, 2018). His ability to persuade often hinges more on stirring emotions than on logical arguments, and using negative labels tends to foster a more confrontational mindset (cf. Derki, 2022; Derakhshani et al., 2021). Trump's use of repetitive language allows him to paint himself as the outsider, which may be relatable for some of his supporters (cf. Derakhshani et al., 2021; Crines & Dolowitz, 2019).

Such strategies are effective in the current social media landscape, where sensationalism tends to gain traction. Trump's intonation and repetitiveness appeal to algorithms that reinforce strong feelings; therefore, such exposure is a political advantage. Now, it is crucial to grasp what factors contribute to some online posts becoming viral while others remain unnoticed.

Take Trump as an example. His bold messaging dominates the 2024 US presidential campaign. The platforms that pick up and amplify his words keep pulling in massive attention. TikTok has emerged as a prominent political

battleground, as young people not only watch the content but also actively interact with it. This is mostly propelled by a tailored “For You” page that promotes highly engaging content regardless of follower count (cf. Quick & Maddox, 2024; Carson, 2021). Researchers contend that persuasion in this context is quick, emotive, and interactive, more rooted in meme culture and entertainment than in rational discussion (Cervi et al., 2021).

Picture 3: Viral Content on TikTok



Source: Richard Gramanich Štromajer

Picture 3 illustrates how viral content spreads on TikTok. The blend of algorithm-based prioritisation, emotional connection, and a culture of remixing fosters visually captivating short videos that reach a wide audience (cf. Connolly, 2025; Towpek & Suriani, 2025; Quick & Maddox, 2024; Le Compte & Klug, 2021; Carson, 2021). Social media content that evokes intense emotions, particularly anger, seems to spread more rapidly. Within this dynamic, strategies such as shockbait and ragebait flourish. While shockbait is still a relatively not established notion, Moschini (2017, online) describes it as “an advertising tactic that originates with shock jocks, but has become an effective political campaign strategy.” On the other hand, ragebait, a more established notion, is characterised as “content [...] that tries to provoke anger or outrage, as a means of gaining attention or making money [...]” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, online). This strategy succeeds because ragebait “headlines were linked to higher levels of audience engagement” (Shin et al., 2025: 1) and platforms profit from provocation. Ragebait “is the practice of making users angry or anxious enough [...] to click on it” (Diaz Ruiz, 2025: 33).

Methodology

Trump once more captured attention on social media repeatedly throughout the 2024 US presidential election. Each time he addressed the public, it felt as if the platform erupted with his comments, revitalising his status as a phenomenon. These comments circulated through both news videos and user-created parodies that reused his speech audio as meme content. This study, therefore, explores how and why such rhetoric experiences viral amplification on TikTok, analysing whether emotionally charged statements serve as a strategic method for capturing attention within the platform's algorithmically tailored environment.

The dataset comprises of 115 of Trump's speeches given from January 2024 to March 2025. By conducting a discourse analysis, statements that are verbally provocative and polarising, aligning with definitions of shockbait and ragebait were identified. It must be noted that repetitive formulations were collapsed, resulting in 78 distinct statements, which were further organised into thematic groups reflecting the dominant emotional triggers.

Each statement was cross-analysed through TikTok to determine the extent of its amplification. User engagement is evaluated through visible indicators such as views, likes, comments, and reposts. Furthermore, these statements are categorised into three groups of viral, semi-viral, and non-viral baits. This also includes indirect dissemination through audience-driven re-interpretation rather than restricting the analysis to Trump's own accounts.

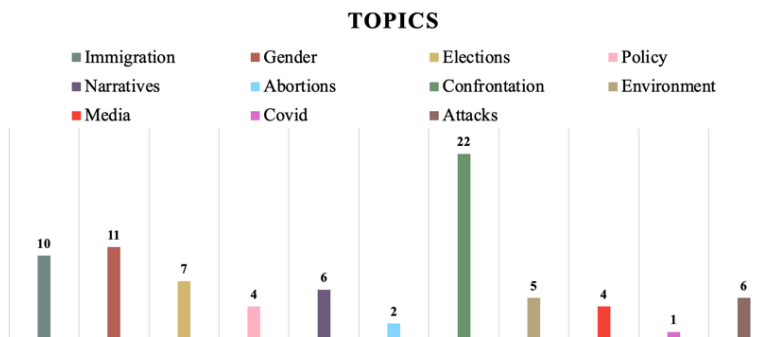
The analysis compares the thematic characteristics and public reactions associated with each category, focusing on differences in emotional resonance, participatory uptake, and comment-based sentiment. This approach enables identification of the rhetorical patterns most likely to trigger algorithmically supported engagement and clarifies how outrage-orientated communication becomes a recourse for political visibility on TikTok.

Discussion

It is crucial to analyse the key topics that Trump discussed throughout his campaign rallies, presidential debates, his Inaugural Address, and his address to Congress. He discussed various issues, but only some received the attention on TikTok. Certain topics (such as immigration, gender issues, and environmental policy) fit right within with what is expected from conventional political communication. However, a substantial portion of his rhetoric centred on confrontation, particularly through criticism of political opponents,

mostly Biden and Harris, as well as Democrats more broadly. There is a significant promotion of contentious narratives that are often difficult to verify.

Chart 1: Topics Discussed in Trump's Speeches



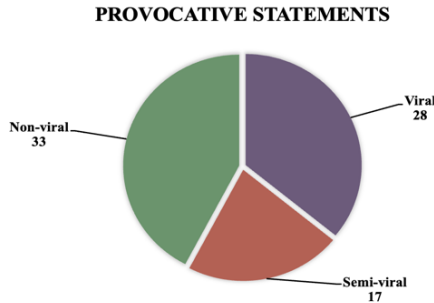
Source: Richard Gramanich Štromajer

Chart 1 presents eleven topics identified across 78 provocative statements. The most frequent theme is confrontation, with 22 mentions, primarily aimed at Biden and Harris. These statements function to delegitimise their competence and credibility. For example, Trump refers to Biden by saying “we have a guy who’s dumb son of a b*tch” (Trump, 2023, Erie, Pennsylvania) and “we have a man that can’t put two sentences together” (Trump, 2024, Indianola, Iowa). Harris is similarly targeted, as seen in remarks such as “Biden became mentally impaired [...] Kamala was born that way” (Trump, 2024, Erie, Pennsylvania) and “she is a radical left lunatic who will destroy our country if she ever gets the chance to get into office” (Trump, 2024, Charlotte, North Carolina).

Other notable themes included gender (11 mentions); for example, Trump’s statement that he wants “Congress to pass a bill permanently banning and criminalising sex changes on children and forever ending the lie that any child is trapped in the wrong body” (Trump, 2025, Address to a Joint Session of Congress). Immigration also appears frequently, with claims such as “she [Kamala] wants to do transgender operations on illegal aliens that are in prison” (Trump, 2024, Second presidential debate). Less frequent but still important themes involve elections, abortion, policy, and media, including accusations like “democrats, in many cases, will allow it, execution after birth, [abortion in] the seventh, eighth, ninth month, and after-birth execution” (Trump, 2024, Freeland, Michigan). This dataset covers a range of

topics, but confrontational communication stands out as the most common. However, not all claims gain popularity on TikTok. Importantly, creating a controversy is not sufficient if a politician wants to attract a large audience or generate genuine interaction.

Chart 2: Viral, Semi-Viral, and Non-Viral Instances



Source: Richard Gramanich Štromajer

Chart 2 shows that out of 78 unique provocative statements identified in Trump’s speeches, only 28 achieved viral status on TikTok. For research purposes, we established that if content is viral, it needs to get at least 50,000 likes. Posts that obtain fewer than 50,000 likes yet still generate discussions are classified as semi-viral. A post is regarded as non-viral if it accumulates less than 10,000 likes and exhibits minimal engagement. While there is not a universally agreed-upon criterion for these classifications, this system aligns with the patterns we used in evaluating success on TikTok.

One of the clearest examples of viral content is Trump’s claim that “in Springfield, they’re eating the dogs. The people that came in. They’re eating the cats. [...] They’re eating the pets of the people that live there” (Trump, 2024, Second presidential debate), which went viral at least twice, primarily through parody content. One parody received 46.4 million views, 5.3 million likes, 36.2 thousand comments, and 873.8 thousand reposts on @pipinofina. Another version, shared on @daddyalbano, received 3.2 million views, 173.2 thousand likes, 3747 comments and 15.4 thousand reposts.

Another example is Trump’s statement: “Can you imagine you’re a parent and your son leaves the house, and you say, ‘Jimmy, I love you so much, go have a good day in school,’ and your son comes back with a brutal operation? Can you even imagine this? What the hell is wrong with our country” (Trump, 2024, Madison, Wisconsin). This remark went viral multiple times, including

a parody on @mandybangrat (22 million views, 2.3 million likes, 36.8 thousand comments, 424.1 thousand reposts) and another on @soccernat007 (4 million views, 406.8 thousand likes, 6,293 comments, 61.5 thousand reposts). The claim connects to Trump's later reference to parents who "discovered that their school had secretly socially transitioned their 13-year-old little girl" (Trump, 2025, Address to a Joint Session of Congress). According to Abels (2025), emails show that parents of the child already informed teachers that their child identified as non-binary and could use a new name and they/them pronouns, and the family's lawsuit against the school district was dismissed. Note that emotionally charged statements can significantly contribute to misinformation and increase stigma against vulnerable groups, including the transgender community. Trump's overall rhetorical approach frequently depends on emotionally charged remarks that favour public outrage over factual correctness. All data were verified in September 2025.

Across all viral examples, the pattern is consistent. These posts operate as ragebait, circulating mostly in short forms and often in a parodic context. They often feature on prominent media platforms (such as BBC, Daily Mail, and The New Yorker), where the comments section tends to be significantly divided. Importantly, although 28 statements gained viral attention, most did not, which highlights that mere provocation does not ensure viral spread.

It is worth noting that, according to Cantalamessa (2025) Trump employs humour as a weapon. She claims that this "strategic unseriousness allowed him to deflect criticism while rallying supporters" (Cantalamessa, 2025: "Under Humour as a Weapon", para. 4). It is fair to claim that some of these viral statements were used as a strategical use of humour as a weapon. "When humor is weaponized [...] the issue isn't just about taste or offense, it's about how humor reshapes the public record and forces opponents to play on tilted ground" (Cantalamessa, 2025: "Under Conclusion", para. 13-14).

Picture 4: Comparison of Provocative Statements

VIRAL	“... nobody’s in charge. Joe Biden’s asleep and Kamala is at a dance party with Beyonce”(Trump, 2024, Traverse City, Michigan).
SEMI-VIRAL	“He worked 24 hours a day taking care of very mentally ill people. And he was sitting there, reading a newspaper, and they asked him what’s he doing. He said, I have no more work. The people have all been let into the United States” (Trump, 2023, Manchester, New Hampshire).
NON-VIRAL	“And what the hell was Biden thinking when he declared Easter Sunday to be Trans Visibility Day? Such total disrespect to Christians. And November 5 th is going to be called something else [...] Christian Visibility Day” (Trump, 2024, Green Bay, Wisconsin).

Source: Richard Gramanich Štromajer

The viral statement spread widely because it was short, easily decontextualised, and delivered in a childish tone that encouraged parody. The semi-viral example reflects one of Trump’s ongoing narratives about undocumented migrants being released from institutions. However, because this narrative lacks credible evidence and is less visually striking, it circulated mainly in news coverage rather than user-generated content. The non-viral statement is still provocative, but it did not achieve virality. Its length, reliance on context, and lower shock value made it difficult to repurpose into the short, highly consumable format typical for TikTok. It aligns with a pattern in the dataset, which is that non-viral statements tend to be too long, abstract, and lacking the novelty required for rapid spread.

It needs to be noted that the comparison demonstrates that provocation alone is not enough for viral success. Brevity, weaponised humour, emotional clarity, and remix potential strongly determine whether statements become viral, remain semi-viral, or receive online engagement. This also suggests that Trump’s rhetoric may function strategically. He appears aware that provocative and polarising statements generate substantial online attention.

Conclusion

The presented study introduces a dataset derived from 115 speeches delivered by Trump during the 2024 US presidential campaign, offering insights into how his communication style operates within the logic of social media virality. Trump has long been a subject of extensive scholarly debate and public controversy, and this election cycle further underscored how political discourse has migrated almost entirely into the digital sphere. Both Trump and his opponent, Harris, rely heavily on social media platforms to disseminate their messages, not as a source of financial support but to reach the widest possible audience.

According to the analysis, Trump's language is characterised by provocative, emotional, and often confrontational statements, which were particularly effective at attracting online attention. Among the 78 inflammatory comments noted, only a few went viral. However, those that did shared a common trait. They spread quickly, were humorous, sometimes unserious, and full of polarising emotions. Additionally, they were easily decontextualised and transformed into memes or parodies. This aligns perfectly with what social media platforms favour, which is content that captures attention and provides entertainment, rather than information that is accurate or explores policy in-depth. It seems there is no coincidence behind Trump's rhetorical methods. In a sense, he welcomes the controversies associated with him and, by doing so, draws attention, which becomes a crucial element of his strategy to stay relevant in public conversations.

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