PERSONALITY POLITICS

How politicians construct their political brand on Instagram

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Master Thesis

June 2025

Word count: 16.766

ABSTRACT

Social media platforms have become central to modern political communication, allowing politicians to create carefully managed personal brands. Instagram enables candidates to construct visual identities that highlight leadership traits, values, and personal narratives. Despite the increasing prominence of these visual strategies, there remains limited comparative research examining how politicians with contrasting political identities use Instagram for personalization strategies.

This thesis investigates the visual branding strategies of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump during the 2024 U.S. presidential election campaign. Specifically, it explores the similarities and differences in their political branding on Instagram and identifies the factors that explain the variety. The central research question is: What are the similarities and differences in how Kamala Harris and Donald Trump construct their political brands on Instagram, and what explains this variety?

A qualitative visual content analysis was conducted on 400 Instagram posts, 200 from each case. Images were coded according to five main themes derived from the literature and inductive analysis. This thematic approach enabled a nuanced, in-depth comparison of the candidates' visual branding.

The findings reveal significant differences. Harris's visual branding emphasizes privatization, emotional warmth, and inclusive representations of supporters, youth, and minority communities. In contrast, Trump's visual branding relies on formal leadership cues, crowd scenes, patriotic symbolism, and traditional power elements. These contrasts reflect deeper ideological orientations and target audiences, suggesting that visual strategies serve to communicate distinct political identities.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that visual branding on Instagram is highly personalized and shaped by political context, ideology, and voter expectations. It underscores the strategic role of visual communication in campaigns and contributes to a deeper understanding of personalized political branding in the digital age.

KEYWORDS: *Political branding, political communication, visual content analysis, personalization, social media campaigning*

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The use of social media in political communication has drawn significant attention, especially after the 2008 Obama presidential campaign, which transformed traditional campaign methods by introducing innovative strategies (Uluçay & Melek, 2021, p. 142). Specifically, it was one of the first to effectively harness the power of digital media. The marketing strategy based on targeting young voters, and the digital-focused approach of the campaign, which was based on social media, proved to be successful since Obama got the vote of two thirds of the young generation (Vladimir, 2018, p. 327).

Building on this shift, social media platforms have amplified the importance of personalized politics, with politicians using them not only to share their political agendas but also to construct relatable personas that resonate emotionally with their audiences (Miller, 2013, p. 328). In this context, the perceived personality traits of political leaders have become more influential in shaping voter opinions (Gorbaniuk et al., 2014, p. 36). Therefore, image- and video-driven platforms like Instagram and TikTok now play a central role in shaping how we visually perceive and understand politics (Haßler et al., 2024, p. 3). However, as Metz et al. (2020, p. 1483) argue, to fully understand changes in how politics are presented, it is crucial to examine not just the act of self-personalization by politicians, but also the specific content and context in which this self-personalization occurs.

This trend is clearly illustrated in the lead-up to the 2024 U.S. presidential elections, when Kamala Harris's social media strategy embraced humor and viral trends to connect with younger voters, reinforcing her political brand (Lee, 2024, para. 12). Posts featuring videos of Harris participating in viral trends or sharing childhood photos and showing her personality on social media, became part of her broader effort to energize young voters who often disengaged from traditional political messaging (Lee, 2024, para. 9). Branding, authenticity, and emotional perspectives are becoming increasingly important in strategy in an era of personalized digital politics (Serazio, 2015, p. 228).

Political branding refers to the process of creating a distinct identity that reflects a set of values and communicates them consistently to engage new voters while strengthening loyalty among supporters. It involves character traits, physical appearance, and nonverbal cues, all of which shape a politician's public image and appeal (Omojola, 2008, p. 129; Bast, 2021, p. 3). Branding helps create distinct mental images of political parties and candidates, making it easier for voters to process information since branding simplifies complex political ideas into

recognizable symbols, messages or traits. Moreover, it reduces the chances of poor decision-making and fosters emotional connections through a sense of identity and group belonging (Lilleker, 2014, p. 112). Platforms like Instagram, which prioritizes visuals and storytelling, are very well-suited to branding (Ayankoya et al., 2015, p. 3).

1.1 Research question

This study investigates how the U.S. presidential candidates of 2024, Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, two prominent leaders with contrasting political identities, construct their political brands on Instagram. By analyzing their Instagram political branding strategies, this research identifies similarities and differences in how they connect with voters. The central research question guiding this study is: What are the similarities and differences in how Kamala Harris and Donald Trump construct their political brand on Instagram, and what explains this variety? To address this, the following sub-questions will be explored:

1.   How do Kamala Harris and Donald Trump construct their political brand on Instagram?

2.   What explains the variety in the way in which these leaders construct their political brand?

By investigating these questions, this study seeks to shed light on how political leaders navigate the challenges of building a political brand in the digital age, balancing personal and political narratives to build trust and connection with their voters.

1.2 Societal Relevance

The societal relevance of this research stems from the growing significance of social media as a critical tool in political communication and branding (Williams, 2017, p. 210). According to Jcoleman (2025, para. 1), 20% of the U.S. adults rely on social media for their election news, making how politicians' brand themselves on these platforms essential for shaping public perception. Additionally, Williams (2017, p. 207) states that in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, 44% of U.S. adults obtained information about the election through social media, surpassing the number who relied on local or national print newspapers, as well as candidate websites and emails combined. Moreover, 24% reported receiving news and updates directly from social media posts made by Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, who were the presidential candidates in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections. Specifically, looking at members of Generation Z, they mostly rely on platforms like Instagram for political news, often turning into short, visually engaging content rather than traditional sources (Taylor,

2019, p. 9). More recent data showed that in the 2024 elections, nearly half of U.S. adults under 30 (46%) now rely primarily on social media for political and election news, making it the most common source of information for his age (Jcoleman, 2025, para. 5). Political branding on platforms like Instagram plays a vital role in shaping perceptions, particularly among younger voters. Political branding, then, becomes crucial in building voter trust and loyalty through politicians created public personas (Speed et al., 2015, p. 135).
Given this shift toward visual and fast-paced content, Instagram has become a key platform for political communication, especially among younger audiences. Instagram is one of the most widely used and visually driven social media platforms, with a global user base exceeding two billion, including approximately 171.1 million users in the U.S. (Choi et al., 2024, p. 295). Instagram operates as a social media platform for image-sharing, which makes it a key tool for communicating political narratives and constructing strategic online identities through visuals (Highfield & Leaver, 2016, p. 49). Given its massive reach and visual nature, Instagram stands out as a powerful platform for political figures to craft and project their public persona and engage directly with target audiences. Leaders' self-presentation tactics on Instagram, therefore, play a significant role in influencing voter perceptions and is central to understanding the evolving dynamics of political communication and branding in the digital age (Uluçay & Melek, 2021, p. 143).

Instagram is especially relevant because unlike X, which focuses more on text, or TikTok, which emphasizes short-form videos and trends, Instagram offers a balanced mix of visuals, captions, and storytelling features like stories and reels (Hammer, 2024, p. 9). This type of content constructs a consistent and emotionally relatable brand identity, and it is especially common on Instagram, particularly presidents and presidential candidates, to emphasize individualized branding and maintain a high level of personal visibility (Haßler et al., 2024, p. 11).

1.3 Academic Relevance

Platforms like Instagram have transformed campaigns by enabling direct audience engagement through targeted messaging, visual branding, and interactive content (Safiullah et al., 2017, p. 10). Politicians no longer depend solely on traditional media, instead, they can shape their political personas and communicate their values directly to voters (Ayankoya et al., 2015, p. 8). Social media campaigns are constantly evolving, with amateur content challenging traditional professionalized strategies in political communication (Enli, 2017, p. 59). As audiences grow accustomed to more informal and unfiltered content, politicians face

new pressure to appear both relatable and credible, combining authenticity with carefully managed messaging. Yet, there is still limited research on how political figures navigate this on Instagram when shaping their personal brand.

Despite growing interest in political brand personality, a key gap in literature persists, specifically in how it's intentionally constructed by a politician or political party. While campaign materials are essential in conveying brand personality to voters, research in political marketing has not sufficiently examined how brand personality is built through visual content (e.g., images) on platforms like Instagram. In contrast, these elements have been more thoroughly analyzed in commercial branding research, where the relationship between media content and brand personality is more clearly defined and studied (Rutter et al., 2018, p. 3).

Moreover, while political branding is a well-researched topic, there is a lack of comparative content studies on leaders with opposing ideologies. No studies have been conducted comparing Harris and Trump on Instagram in the 2024 elections. This election, being highly intense and dramatic and one of the most fiercely contested in the digital sphere, presents a compelling case for analysis (Smith, 2024, para. 1). Additionally, while existing literature has examined political branding on social media, much of it focuses on platforms like Twitter and Facebook and often analyzes politicians individually. By conducting a side-by-side comparison of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump on Instagram, this study fills a gap in understanding how politicians from opposing parties and differing demographics utilize a visual-centric platform for political branding. This is relevant because Harris and Trump differ in political ideology, gender, and race, making them interesting case studies for exploring if and how these factors shape visual branding. Analyzing their use of Instagram may help reveal how political figures adapt their image to connect with voters and build trust in an increasingly visual and digital political landscape.

Moreover, the 2024 U.S. presidential election was notably one of the most digitally driven elections, with social media platforms playing a central role in campaign strategies. By analyzing content from recent elections this study can research the shifts in political communication, highlighting how candidates adapt their branding strategies in response to the evolving digital landscape.

1.4 Thesis Structure

This study is structured into several chapters. The following chapter presents the theoretical framework, offering a discussion of the core concepts and theories that guide the

research. These include political branding, political communication, self-presentation theory, and the evolving role of social media, particularly Instagram, in political marketing.

The methodology chapters then outline the qualitative research design employed in this study. It details the data collection methods, including sampling strategies and criteria for case selection, as well as the analysis used to interpret the data, which is primarily based on inductive thematic analysis.

The results chapter presents the main findings, categorized into five main thematic areas that emerged from the data. The findings show that the construction of a political brand is influenced by ideology, gender, and the intended target audience.

Finally, the conclusion chapter summarizes the key findings, evaluates their broader implications for political communication and branding, and suggests avenues for future research. It also reflects on the study's limitations and the potential for further comparative analysis in different political contexts.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework

This chapter explores how politics is becoming more focused on individual politicians rather than parties, with an emphasis on their personalities and how they present themselves. It looks at what existing literature tells us about how politicians use images, body language, and social media to present themselves. Moreover, the chapter explains the ideas of political branding and personalization and examines how politicians put these concepts into practice in the real world.

2.1 Political marketing and branding

Political marketing involves the strategic application of marketing principles to political campaigns, with the aim of influencing public beliefs and securing electoral support. Moreover, it focuses on building and sustaining long-term relationships with voters (Rutter et al., 2018, p. 1). A central element of political marketing is political branding, which includes presenting the political "product," a combination of the candidate's image, policy positions, campaign promises, and past performances, in a way that resonates with the electorate (O'Shaughnessy, 2001, p. 1048). Political branding views parties and leaders as brands, focusing on performing specific roles to shape public perception and build trust. It is fundamentally about creating a clear identity that offers voters a consistent 'product' aligned with their values and emotional needs (Needham & Smith, 2015, p. 1).

Branding is connected to brand personality, which refers to the human traits linked to a brand. In politics, this means the personal qualities or characteristics that voters associate with a party or politician (Milewicz & Milewicz, 2014, p. 242). Politicians can be seen as sincere, competent, exciting, or rugged, which are traits that are commonly used in marketing to define the personality of commercial brands (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). Voters often gravitate toward candidates whose perceived personality matches their own values or desired leadership traits (Milewicz & Milewicz, 2014, p. 243). This trend is particularly evident in the rise of image voters who base their choices more on the perceived personality of candidates than on their policy positions or party affiliations (Miller et al., 1986, p. 522).

Seeing political branding as something dynamic, that can adapt over time and respond to changing public attitudes and media environments, can help campaigns connect better with voters and adapt to their expectations (Williams, 2017, p. 211). It involves specific features of the political world, such as the "product" being the candidate, the structure of the campaign

team, the target audience, and the strategies used to promote and communicate the candidate's personality (Butler & Collins, 1994, p. 22).

This marketplace logic frames citizens as political consumers, people who take part in civic life much like shoppers, evaluating parties and candidates not just on their political ideas, but also on how they feel about them and how well they seem to match their personal values or identity (Scammell, 2014, p. 178). In this context, building a political brand's identity means making it stand out and be easily recognized. Specifically, building a political brand means shaping a public image that voters can easily recognize and trust, for example as a defender of national security or a supporter of working-class families. When voters clearly understand what a politician stands for, they're more likely to trust that the politician represents their values and will address their concerns (Cwalina & Falkowski, 2014, p. 157).

Lees-Marshment (2001, p. 1080) offers a framework to understand how different parties respond to this marketplace logic by outlining three core models that show how parties and politicians utilize political branding. For example, product-oriented parties focus on selling their ideological beliefs without changing them for electoral appeal. Sales-oriented parties concentrate on communication techniques to persuade voters to support their existing policies, even if they are not widely popular. In contrast, market-oriented parties conduct research to understand public needs and then shape both their policies and communication strategies to meet those expectations.

2.2 Social media influences political communication

Central to all these models is effective communication which plays a crucial role in establishing and developing a strong political brand. Political communication refers to the exchange of messages related to political topics or figures across various communication platforms, where they can be shared with broad audiences. It involves interactions among key actors, such as citizens, political leaders, government institutions, the media, and social movements, whose use of language and symbols plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and influencing societal outcomes (Elsihar-Malka et al., 2020, p. 1; Alkadrie, 2025, p. 381). While the field initially centered on elections and voter behavior, it has expanded to include broader aspects of political attitudes, behavior, and influence (Elsihar-Malka et al., 2020, p. 1). Political communication is not just spreading across more platforms, it is also becoming more varied, harder to control, and more complicated. At the same time, there is a shift in power: audiences now have more influence and interaction while traditional message-makers no longer hold full control over the narrative. As a result, the way political

communication is constructed and communicated is changing (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 209).

With the rise of digital platforms, political communication has shifted significantly from traditional offline media to a predominantly online environment. Early digital campaigns relied heavily on static websites and email, but contemporary strategies center on social media platforms that allow real-time, interactive, and multimedia engagement (Elsihar-Malka et al., 2020, p. 2). The on-demand nature of social media, along with its different formats, gives users a wide range of communication options. These include engaging with both traditional and alternative media content (Hanson et al., 2010, p. 589). Additionally, these platforms reshape political discourse by shifting the focus from lengthy texts to more visual and emotionally driven communication. Their visual-centric nature encourages politicians to rely on images and videos to quickly convey their messages and algorithmic personalization in combination with micro-targeting results in tailored content that reinforces existing beliefs. Therefore, media convergence has blurred the lines between news, entertainment, and political communication, creating a hybrid space where branding and campaigning are almost identical (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, p. 25).

The blending of media forms has been intensified by social media, which not only merges political communication with entertainment but also changes how political organizations operate. Specifically, political parties are evolving into "online parties," focusing more on digital engagement than traditional offline activities. Moreover, interaction on social media also shifts the dynamic between politicians and their parties, often promoting individual-centered branding over the party's collective image (Lilleker, 2014, p. 124). Since parties typically limit direct, person-to-person communication to within their own platforms and do not actively engage with wider audiences elsewhere, individual candidates are gaining more influence and visibility within the online communication environment (Lilleker, 2014, p. 125).

2.3 From party to person: Human branding in politics

The rise of candidate-centered communication has led to the increasing use of human branding strategies in political marketing, which is a concept drawn from commercial marketing where individuals are promoted as a brand that is emotionally appealing, trustworthy, and relatable, through strategic marketing efforts (Speed et al., 2015, p. 129). While branding has traditionally been linked to companies, products, or services, scholars now widely recognize that individuals can also function as brands (Levesque & Pons, 2020,

p. 2). Human brands are influential because they convey a sense of authenticity and connect with audiences through shared cultural values and social identities, which are forms of cultural resonance that traditional, non-human brands often lack. The concept of human branding extends beyond celebrities, since research increasingly explores how other influential also develop and manage personal brands (Levesque & Pons, 2020, p. 3).

This growing interest in human branding has naturally extended to politics, where the lines between political leadership and celebrity culture are becoming more blurred. As politics increasingly intertwine with entertainment and popular culture, politicians do not rely solely on policy positions or party loyalty but now adopt celebrity-style branding strategies such as emphasizing personal image and relatability to create emotional connections (Street, 2004, p. 436). As a result, we see politicians trying to craft a "cool" brand image, where being "cool" reflects authenticity and suggests they are both confident leaders as well as in touch with the public (Scammell, 2015, p. 6). Obama for example projected during his campaign a calm, confident, and composed image, avoiding dramatic stunts and reacting to crises with measured responses. His steady demeanor and online presentation earned him the nickname "No drama Obama," reinforcing a cool, modern masculinity that contrasted with a traditional tough-guy political persona (Kellner, 2012, p. 729). The process of human branding is amplified by social media, where visibility and reliability are central to the public engagement (Van Zoonen, 2005, p. 70).

This increasing focus on human branding also contributes to what some scholars call the celebrification of politics, where political figures are evaluated in ways similar to celebrities, based on charisma, image, and emotional appeal rather than for their policies. This shift risks turning political engagement into a matter of style over substance, encouraging voters to prioritize image and emotional connection over informed deliberation (Street, 2004, p. 439). Recent findings by Brands et al. (2023, p. 39) support this by showing that social media users are often more engaged by politicians' visual self-presentation than by the political content itself. This celebrification process is further reinforced by politicians' strategic use of emotional branding tools, such as storytelling, symbolic gestures, and curated personal disclosures, which are designed to evoke trust, familiarity and a shared sense of identity (Lunt & Livingstone, 2016, p. 463). Emotional branding focuses on creating deep, lasting connections by telling a personal, story-driven narrative (Thompson et al., 2006, p. 50). Politicians rely on personal narratives and incorporate their personal traits and experiences into their brand, personifying the emotional aspects of their political identity.

These strategies not only soften their image but also work to create a more relatable and trustworthy political brand (Dean et al., 2014, p. 23).

Additionally, these emotional strategies create para-social relationships, meaning that audiences form one-sided emotional bonds with political figures (Horton & Wohl, 2006, p. 2). In a political context, such relationships help explain how individuals come to support candidates who appear relatable or morally aligned with their values, even in the absence of direct interaction. These emotionally driven connections, while often superficial, can enhance voter loyalty and reduce attention to complex policy details (Uribe, 2013, p. 183).

2.4 Brand personality and traits

In the context of political human branding, a candidate's personality becomes a central element in their overall brand identity. As mentioned before, Aaker (1997, p. 347-356) originally developed the brand personality theory which identifies five core personality dimensions used to describe commercial brands: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. In political branding, for example, a politician who emphasizes sincerity might highlight compassionate elements in their imagery, while one who emphasizes competence would focus on visually projecting leadership skills. Similarly, a "rugged" political brand would lean into visual elements of strength, often appealing to voters who value toughness in leadership (Milewicz & Milewicz, 2014, p. 239). In the context of political marketing, traits reflect a politician's consistent patterns of behavior and personality, while values represent the core principles and goals they prioritize. Traits convey what a politician is like, such as being confident or empathetic, whereas values reveal what they stand for, like justice or equality (Caprara et al., 2006, p. 3). Voters often form instant impressions of politicians based on perceived traits, which can be more influential than values. When a candidate's personality aligns with a voter's own traits, it can strengthen emotional connection and support. Political messages that resonate with specific traits, like dominance or empathy, further enhance appeal (Caprara et al., 2006, p. 5).

This is also relevant for traits often associated with femininity, such as honesty, cooperation, and empathy, which are traits often viewed positively in political context as voters tend to appreciate these qualities in leaders (Meeks, 2016, p. 295). However, when these traits are embodied by women in politics, they may face challenges due to existing gender stereotypes where being perceived as too 'soft' can undermine perceptions of authority or leadership. While warmth and empathy enhance women's relatability, they must simultaneously project competence and decisiveness to be perceived as viable leaders

(Dittmar, 2015, p. 762). This balancing act shapes how female politicians brand themselves on social media, often encouraging these female politicians to adopt a more emotionally expressive, narrative-driven communication style that leverages both authenticity and reliability (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018, p. 5).

While personality traits define the content of a political identity, the expression of this identity is fundamentally performative. Politicians do not simply possess sincerity or empathy, but they must actively display these traits through a strategic process of self-presentation. From this perspective, a politician's influence in politics does not depend on a leader's actual traits, instead, it is shaped by how leaders and followers perceive each other and what they expect. So, what truly matters is not whether a political leader genuinely possesses certain traits or qualities, but whether they can convince their followers that they do (Grazia, 2011, p. 2). Self-presentation involves the ways in which individuals try to shape and project a specific image of themselves during social interactions (Steffan, 2020, p. 3097).

This dimension of political branding is best understood through Erving Goffman's (1959, p. 8) dramaturgical theory, which conceptualizes social interaction as a staged performance, where individuals manage impressions by tailoring their behavior to specific audiences. Specifically, it conceptualizes social interaction as a theatrical performance. According to Goffman (1959, p. 8), individuals manage impressions by performing roles tailored to specific audiences, adjusting their actions, appearance, and speech to shape how they are perceived. Techniques such as adjusting tone, clothing, gestures, or other symbols are managed in accordance with desired impressions (Goffman, 1959, p. 14). Moreover, Goffman states that individuals perform roles using staging elements, such as 'costumes' and 'scripts', in what he claims to be the frontstage which is the public-facing area of interaction. At the same time, they manage a backstage identity which is hidden from the audience where less curated behavior may occur (Aspling, 2011, p. 5).

Similarly, social media platforms, particularly Instagram, serve as a highly visual and interactive frontstage. Specifically, Instagram serves as a 'stage' where politicians perform their political identities. They create their public image and carefully manage how they will be perceived by their audience (Goffman, 2006, p. 49). While social media appears to offer glimpses into politicians' personal lives, these "backstage" moments are often part of a calculated front stage performance. Therefore, backstage behavior can enhance front stage authenticity (Persson, 2010, p. 3).

Politicians, the media, and the public refer to the concept of authenticity when evaluating if politicians are true to themselves, a trait widely associated with trustworthiness

and moral integrity (Luebke, 2020, p. 636). In political marketing, politicians and their parties function as brands or products, serving as tools to achieve specific objectives, whether cognitive, emotional, commercial, or political. However, they need to appear authentic to mask these intentions and attract voters (Serazio, 2015, p. 239). Authenticity in this sense builds trust and emotional connections with voters since politicians strengthen their brand identity by appearing genuine and true to their values. Additionally, it reinforces the image of a political brand, aligning it with voter expectations and needs (Luebke, 2020, p. 638).

Authenticity, however, is not always an inherent quality but often a constructed and performative attribute carefully curated through deliberate acts of self-presentation. Digital media allow politicians to construct authenticity by selectively sharing aspects of their personal lives, values, and emotions (Enli, 2015, p. 121). This performance of authenticity serves strategic objectives which enables politicians to align themselves with public expectations (Luebke, 2020, p. 633).

A growing body of research has shown that voters place increasing value on perceived authenticity in digital political engagement (Enli, 2015, p. 123). In this context politicians' performative choices, such as sharing personal stories, using informal language, or appearing in casual settings, become critical at a time when trust in political institutions is declining and voters seek emotional connection over party loyalty (Street, 2004, p. 436). By shifting away from political debates and instead emphasizing emotional content, politicians can shape public perception more effectively and engage citizens on a deeper and more personal level (Bronstein et al., 2018, p. 554).

2.5 Personalization

Personalization in politics refers to a shift in focus from parties to individual politicians, especially leaders, who are increasingly prominent in media coverage. This process is known as individualization (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014, p. 156). Beyond visibility, there is also a growing emphasis on politicians' personalities, including both professional traits and private lives. This shift, sometimes called privatization, reflects how political communication is moving from policy-focused to more of a personal narrative (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014, p. 156). Several factors have contributed to the rise or personalized politics, including the declining appeal of parties, two-party electoral systems that highlight individual rivals, and the media focus on politicians' personal traits (Caprara et al., 2008, p. 2). Moreover, the rise of social media has further amplified this personalized politics, as politicians use personal accounts to share behind-the-scenes content and communicate directly with followers,

making their public image feel even more personal and accessible (Davies & Mian, 2010, p. 330).

This increased focus on individual politicians and their personal traits also plays out visually, as political figures strategically manage their public image through recognizable visual cues. Visual elements, such as facial expressions, body language, color schemes, and clothing, play a vital role in personalization (Highfield & Leaver, 2016, p. 47). Therefore, it is important to understand the meaning behind body language and power poses on visually driven platforms like Instagram. The way candidates use their body language plays a key role in shaping how voters perceive them and can influence voting choices. A politician's self-presentation and communication style go beyond just the words in their speeches, debates, or interviews, nonverbal cues also matter significantly (Sigelman, 2001, p. 3). Visuals are not merely decorative in political communication, but often strategic. Visuals convey ideas, emotions, and symbols in powerful ways and are often processed more quickly than text-based messages (Messaris & Abraham, 2001, p. 217). Thus, people's evaluations of a presidential candidate can be influenced just as much by nonverbal behavior as by what is said. In today's media-saturated political landscape, where viewers frequently see close-up images of leaders and their opponents, emotional cues like a smile can sometimes have a greater impact than actual policies or decisions (Döveling et al., 2018, p. 196). This influence stems partly from the universal recognition of basic emotional expressions and from the way people rely on visual and emotional cues to help them form quick judgments (Ekman, 1989, p. 145).

Because voters often rely on visual and emotional cues to make quick judgments about politicians, candidates strategically construct their public image to convey leadership qualities. Grabe and Bucy (2009, p. 102-105) introduce three dominant visual representations by political candidates: the ideal candidate, the populist campaigner, and the sure loser. The ideal candidate image emphasizes traits that are deemed essential for presidential leadership, specifically highlighting statesmanship and compassion (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 102). Statesmanship is visually communicated through imagery that suggests power, leadership, and authority. Moreover, politicians often create a statesmanlike image by incorporating national symbols, appearing with media professionals or staff, and posing alongside other politicians (Muñoz & Towner, 2017, p. 312). The use of patriotic imagery helps create associations between national pride and the politician pictured next to it, adding to a certain brand image of the politician as a statesperson (Bast, 2021, p. 4). In contrast, compassion is shown through images involving families and children (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 104).

Additionally, visuals portraying politicians in interactions with children, family-oriented imagery, admiration from supporters, and gestures like thumbs up or embraces, reinforce the brand image of the 'ideal candidate' (Muñoz & Towner, 2017, p. 297).

The populist campaigner image centers on the candidate's connection with the ordinary people, presenting them as relatable and grounded in contrast to elite political figures (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 105). This image uses visuals that communicate broad public appeal such as celebrity endorsements, large supportive crowds, and ordinariness shown through casual dress, engaging with everyday citizens, or participating in manual activities (Steffan, 2020, p. 3100).

Lastly, the sure loser image casts candidates in a negative light, often portraying campaign blunders, sparse crowds, or awkward body language. This image aims to undermine a candidate's credibility or popularity. Grabe and Bucy (2009, p. 102-105) findings suggest that Republican candidates were more frequently portrayed as ideal leaders in newspapers, while Democrats were more commonly framed as populists in newspapers.

2.6 Personalized politics in social media

As visual portrayals shape public perception, the rise of social media has given politicians greater control over their image. Social media platforms now serve as the primary channel for political branding, replacing campaign websites as the main way to connect with voters (Enli, 2017, p. 51). Davies and Mian (2010, p. 332) effectively link the media to political brand image, pointing out that media coverage plays a key role in shaping how voters perceive and remember a politician or party. Politicians use social media for broadcasting, self-promotion, and advocacy (Abid et al., 2023, p. 756). Through carefully selected images, they capture voters' attention, simplify complex messages, and evoke emotions, which are all key elements to mobilizing civic engagement (De-Lima-Santos et al., 2023, p. 18). Personalization is central to this strategy, with politicians sharing images of themselves, which tend to be popular among their followers. Specifically, it involves politicians sharing parts of their personal life or identity or drawing connections between their own experiences and their campaigns messages to create a more relatable public image (Fordjour, 2023, p. 377). As a result, personalization is a common feature of social media visuals (Farkas & Bene, 2020, p. 137).

A good example is former Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who frequently posts with his wife and children at formal events like state receptions. Although these events occur in a professional setting, they often blur the line between the politician's public duties

and personal life (Steffan, 2020, p. 3099). Additionally, Trudeau crafted an image of a dependable, dedicated, and trustworthy leader by sharing highly personalized content. These included posts of family celebrations like Halloween, holding a child while discussing child-related policies, visiting the Toronto Zoo to name baby pandas, and engaging with celebrities and international figures (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019, p. 21). This demonstrates how political figures use personal moments to reinforce their professional image across both public and private contexts. Another example of personalized politics can be seen in the study by Darwin and Haryanto (2021, p. 3) who identified different forms of personalization during Indonesia's 2019 local parliamentary elections. Female candidates displayed their religious devotion by sharing quotes from the Quran, attending religious festivals, and portraying themselves in submissive and respectful relationships with their husbands. These forms of self-presentation helped construct public images of the candidates as faithful and morally upright spouses.

This last example can be considered a form of gendered self-presentation which aligns with broader trends in political communication in which female candidates are more likely to use a personalized and emotionally expressive style to build trust, connect with voters, and strengthen their political presence (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018, p. 991). A feminine communication style, marked by personal tone, the use of personal stories and examples, an inductive structure, and a focus on audience engagement and connection can be beneficial in politics (Meeks, 2016, p. 296). A more traditionally masculine communication style is often seen as impersonal, direct, and analytical. Studies have found that men and women tend to use these gendered styles differently, women for instance are more inclined to share personal content and tend to view such self-disclosure to build closer, more intimate connections (Meeks, 2016, p. 296). Additionally, the way individuals present themselves on Instagram can be understood as gendered performances. This means that gender is not just shown through appearance, like clothing, makeup, or body language, but is also actively constructed during the act of taking and sharing photos. Choices about what to photograph, how to pose, and which expressions to display all contribute to how gender is performed and communicated (Caldeira et al., 2018, p. 27). These gendered visual self-presentation forms are especially complex for women seeking high executive office: they must emphasize traits traditionally associated with femininity, such as compassion and warmth, while also projecting leadership qualities like strength and decisiveness. At the same time, male candidates may strategically share personal or family-oriented content to soften stereotypical perceptions of emotional detachment or aggression (McGregor et al., 2016, p. 5). Similarly,

Atia and Balmas (2023, p. 6155) state that communal traits, like empathy and kindness, are typically linked to women while agentic traits, such as ambition and independence, are associated with men. According to them, society expects women to behave communally and men to act more independently. Because personalized communication highlights individual expression, which is often seen as a masculine trait, female politicians might use less personalized and more communal communication styles compared to their male counterparts (Atia & Balmas, 2023, p. 6155).

Additionally, political ideology may also influence how politicians represent themselves on social media. Conservative politicians for example, often share visuals that uphold traditional institutions and feature dominant social groups, such as white males in business or members in the military. In contrast, liberal politicians highlight underrepresented minorities, low-wage workers, and protesters (Xi et al., 2020, p. 3). Right-wing populists, like Trump, portray themselves as close to "the people," distancing from the elite and blaming minorities (Bast, 2021, p. 4). Their rhetoric often draws on nostalgia and national myths to shape collective memory, visually reinforced by images that reference historical events or national symbols (Bucy et al., 2020, p. 636). Gimenez et al. (2016, p. 226) support this idea by stating that populists often present themselves as "being with the people, addressing the people, and representing the people", this is visually reinforced by images of politicians engaging with audiences and carrying out mundane tasks, positioning themselves as the true voice of the people. Additionally, right-wing populists use Christian identity strategically to emphasize perceived external threats, such as Islam (Bast, 2021, p. 3).

In comparison, left-wing populists, like Bernie Sanders for example, use social media to emphasize diversity, inclusivity, and empowerment. Their imagery features a balanced mix of racial groups, genders, and a stronger presence of young people alongside older generations, reinforcing their alignment with progressive and feminist politics (Moffitt, 2022, p. 86). Unlike right-wing populists, they present their movement as transformative and inclusive, advocating for marginalized communities and systemic change (Moffitt, 2022, p. 91).

2.7 Summary

This chapter has explored the concepts of political branding and personalization, showing how politicians craft their public image through visuals, personal elements, and strategic communication, especially on Instagram. In relation to the research question: What are the similarities and differences in how Kamala Harris and Donald Trump construct their

political brand on Instagram, and what explains this variety? The theory highlights several important factors. These include the role of gendered communication styles, ideological influences, and the use of visual and emotional cues to connect with audiences. This theoretical foundation sets the stage for exploring how these concepts play out in practice, which will be detailed in the following methodology chapter.

This study aims to research the similarities and differences in how Kamala Harris and Donald Trump construct their political brands on Instagram and how this variety can be explained. It examines this through a qualitative content analysis of Instagram posts by the official accounts from Harris and Trump.

3.1 Case Studies

This study employed a case study approach to examine how Kamala Harris and Donald Trump construct their political brand on Instagram, highlighting their contrasting communication styles and ideological appeals. Kamala Harris, who made history as the first woman and the first person of both Black and South Asian heritage to hold office of Vice President of the United States, has consistently positioned herself as an advocate for inclusivity, civil rights, and progressive values. From her time as a U.S. Senator to her vice presidency, Harris emphasized the importance of broadening access to protecting voter rights, reforming the criminal justice system, and supporting immigrant communities (Lerer & Ember, 2020, para. 3). To support these policy priorities and connect with a broader audience, Harris has created an empathetic 'mom-like' image who emphasizes the narratives of inclusion and progress on her profile (Fordjour, 2023, p. 382). This carefully curated personal brand is significant considering earlier criticism she faced prior to her presidential candidacy for appearing overly rigid, lacking authenticity, and for aspects of her performance and decisions as California's Attorney General. Much of this criticism is tied to her identity, which makes the way she presents herself on social media platforms especially important. As a result, personalizing her image through visual and emotional storytelling has become a key strategy for shaping public perception and reinforcing values (Fordjour, 2023, p. 377).

Donald Trump is a former real estate mogul and television personality, twice-elected president, who built a political identity grounded in nationalism, anti-establishment rhetoric, and direct communication strategies (Nai et al., 2019, p. 610). Trump's persona and narrative is known for popularizing 'political incorrectness' and focused populism and brash directness, often emphasizing emotional appeals like patriotism and outrage. Specifically, his rhetoric frequently centers on emotionally charged appeals such as patriotic pride, economic protectionism, fear of the "other," and a sense of national decline that only he could reverse (Shafer, 2017, p. 2). Literature has shown that Trump's visual storytelling is relevant to

analyze since the Trump administration uses visual branding on social media to project authority, legitimacy, and public approval (Strand & Strand, 2019, p. 13-14).

It is helpful to first consider the audience demographic for both Harris and Trump on Instagram, as these influence how each constructs their political brand. The two candidates attract notably different followings: Trump's audience is predominantly White, male, younger, and includes a larger share of Hispanic/Latino followers. In contrast, Harris's followers are mostly female, young, but also a slightly older demographic compared to Trump, and considerably more diverse, with a significantly higher proportion of Black/African American supporters (Chen, 2024, para. 10-13). These demographic distinctions highlight the different target groups each candidate appeals to, which shapes their visual messaging and self-presentation strategies on the platform to meet audience expectations.

Comparing Harris and Trump is relevant because they represent two distinct political ideologies, one being republican, the other being democratic. Moreover, given their differing race, gender, and backgrounds, it is interesting to explore whether their political branding reveals more similarities or differences, and to what extent these identity factors shape how they present themselves.

3.2 Sampling and data collection

This study focused on analyzing posts from the official Instagram accounts of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump during a key period in the 2024 U.S. presidential election process. The data includes posts shared between July 27, 2024, the date when Harris officially filed the paperwork to declare her candidacy for President of the United States, and November 5th, 2024, election day. While Trump began his campaign earlier, this time frame was chosen because it still captures the most active and strategically curated phase of both candidates' campaigns, during which visual branding and public messaging intensified in the lead-up to the election.

Instagram plays a central role in this phase due to its emphasis on visuals (Ekman & Widholm, 2017, p. 18). There are several reasons as to why Instagram is a preferred social media platform for research. Firstly, it is gaining significance among political candidates as voters increasingly consume content from the platform in their daily routines (Bossetta, 2018, p. 472). Secondly, its visually rich environment makes it well-suited for self-promotion and image management, such as sharing photos from campaign events or personal moments (Bossetta, 2018, p. 472). Lastly, Instagram is known for its aesthetic appeal, where users

typically post visually pleasing and carefully edited images (Pereira Caldeira, 2021, p. 9). This is of relevance to this study because political branding relies heavily on visual cues to shape perception, therefore, the aesthetic expectations of Instagram may push politicians to strategically design their posts. Instagram, specifically, is known for being a platform where it is common to see politicians 'profiles emphasizing individualization, with presidential candidates and presidents often receiving heightened visibility (Haßler et al., 2024, p. 11).

During the selected analysis period (July 27 – November 5, 2024), Kamala Harris posted a total of 966 items on her Instagram. Of these, 384 were videos and therefore excluded from the final sample since the research only focused on still imagery. The remaining 582 were photos, from which 200 were selected based on relevance, the sampling criteria outlined below and in the data analysis section. In comparison, Trump posted 991 items in the same timeframe. After excluding 229 videos, 762 photo posts remained, of which 200 were also selected according to the same criteria as for Harris's posts. It is important to note that each image within a slide (multi-photo post) was manually counted individually, meaning that a single post could contribute to multiple items in the overall dataset. So, in total, 400 Instagram posts were analyzed: 200 posts from Kamala Harris's official account (@kamalaharris) and 200 from Donald Trump's account (@realdonaldtrump).

The sample size followed the qualitative methodological guidelines. Again, posts were selected based on relevance, focusing on content that visually communicates elements of political branding, such as persona, leadership style, relatability, or symbolic references (visual elements that convey deeper meanings, e.g., patriotic color or religious symbols). Each image was coded for visual elements such as setting, attire, emotional tone, and symbolic cues. This helped identify recurring patterns related to privatization, or the depiction of a politicians' personal life. Examples include childhood photos, wedding pictures, or images portraying them engaging in hobbies (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017, p. 20).

While sampling, I focused on specific types of posts that reveal how Harris and Trump shape their political brand: candid photos from personal moments, posts that show vulnerability or emotions, posts that communicate something to followers directly, or posts that contain slogans or a political message. The analysis focused on images of where the politician is visible, as well as those that showcase their personal background without them being directly visible. Additionally, highly repetitive photos, such as large crowds of supporters, were not all included in the final sample. While it is significant that, for example, Trump frequently shared images of these crowds, some degree of reduction was necessary to narrow the 762 photos down to 200. Furthermore, many posts from both candidates featured

text-based graphics, such as reminders to vote or announcements about upcoming rallies. Since these lacked meaningful visual elements for analysis, most were excluded from the final sample. Similarly, textual content in and next to the selected images were excluded from the analysis, as this study focused solely on visual cues and imagery to understand how politicians construct their political brand, without allowing emotional language or persuasive text to influence the interpretation of the politicians' visual presentation. An exception was made for the slogan "MAGA," as it was treated as part of a visual element of nostalgia in Trump's visual communication style when, for example, featured on Trump's hat or supporters' banners. In these cases, it was analyzed as a visual component in its entirety.

Relevant posts were manually screenshotted and stored on a personal laptop to maintain accessibility throughout the analysis process. Each screenshot was then uploaded into Atlas.ti, where they were systematically organized, labeled, and coded. Moreover, purposive (or relevance) sampling was used to select posts that are most pertinent to the research topic. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method where the researcher selects data based on specific criteria, such as their availability and relevance to the research topic (Rai & Thapa, 2015, p. 4). The sample overview can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Sample overview

	Kamala Harris (@kamalaharris)	Donald Trump (@realdonaldtrump)
Total number of posts published between July 27 – November 5, 2024 (N)	N = 966	N = 991
Final sample size for each of the cases (n)	n = 200	n = 200
Total sample size of the study (N)	N = 400	

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore political branding on Instagram through visual content. Qualitative design was especially suitable for this research because it allows for a deeper understanding of interpretations and meanings that cannot easily be measured captured with numbers (Kyngas, 2020, p. 1). Moreover, it allowed for in-depth interpretation of meaning in visual data which was essential when exploring symbolic communication and identity construction (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 7). Qualitative content analysis systematically examined visual data, identifying recurring themes and patterns (Forman et al., 2007, p. 43; Krippendorff, 2019, p. 21). With themes is meant recurring meanings that emerge from the data such as patriotism or leadership, whereas patterns are more about how these themes appear in the content such as Harris often shown engaging with young people. So, patterns can contribute to a theme (Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p. 400).

Rather than simply measuring frequency or testing predefined variables, this study seeks to understand the ways politicians represent themselves visually and construct their political brand (Silverman, 2013, p. 31). By focusing on meaning-making, this approach acknowledges that images are not neutral but are culturally embedded and ideologically loaded, meaning they are interpreted through shared cultural norms, values, symbols, and practices that shape how political figures are perceived and present themselves (Griffin, 2013, p. 10). For example, when Harris is shown wearing sneakers or cooking with her family, these images do more than show her personal life because they symbolically align her with ordinariness and relatability, reinforcing a certain visual presentation. Similarly, as to when Trump posts an image where he is surrounded by American flags. These may not just be aesthetic choices, but they project a certain brand. These culturally loaded symbols required an interpretive analysis that went beyond quantifying data. Therefore, qualitative methods were essential to analyze the data for this study.

Atlas.ti, which is a qualitative processing program, was used to analyze and code the data. The data was analyzed through the three main stages of coding: initial coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Initial coding involved manually coding 400 posts, one by one using Atlas.ti. This resulted in 110 codes (see Figure 1 in appendix A). After the initial coding phase, overlapping codes were merged to streamline the analysis and transition into the axial coding stage. Codes that were not dominant or relevant to the research focus, specifically those that did not meaningfully contribute to understanding the politicians' political brand, were removed to produce a more refined and focused dataset. These codes

collapsed and grouped based on thematic overlaps and theoretical relevance resulting in 53 axial codes (see Figure 2 in appendix A) and were then used for axial coding. The axial coding phase focused on refining and reorganizing the initial codes into categories that highlight themes within the dataset. These codes were then used to develop categories that aligned with theoretical concepts such as compassion, statesmanship, populist appeal, and ideological representation, resulting in a structured coding scheme. This scheme formed the basis for the final stage, known as selective coding (see Figure 3 in appendix A) in which the whole dataset was coded according to the coding scheme created. A coding frame based on existing theory was used to identify main themes, mostly looking at how Harris and Trump present themselves on social media, and how they use personality politics to resonate and connect with the audiences, ultimately to analyze the differences and similarities between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump in constructing their political brand on Instagram (see Table 2 underneath for the coding frame).

Table 2

Coding frame: overview of categories and corresponding codes

The populist leader	**Emotional connection**	**Inclusivity & Diversity**	**Statesmanship & Authority**	**Nationalism & Symbolic power**
Casual attire	Hugging	Black person featured	Formal attire	American flag
Family/Husband/Child featured	Physical compassion	White person featured	Large crowds of supporters	U.S. National color schemes (red/white/blue)
Taking photos with people	Smiling	People of color featured	Power poses (first/pointing)	Military-related imagery
Visiting (local) businesses	Nostalgic self-image	LGBTQ+ featured	Posing with celebrities	Religious symbols
		Older/young people featured		Slogan/Campaign martials
		Blue collar workers featured		

As seen in Table 2 this study uses five dominant categories to analyze how Harris and Trump construct their political brand on Instagram: *the populist leader, emotional connection, inclusivity & diversity, statesmanship & authority, nationalism & symbolic power*. These categories and codes were developed to systematically capture the range of visual strategies Harris and Trump use to construct their political brand. This framework is grounded both in theory and in practical observations that emerged during coding in Atlas.ti. Two overarching branding themes guided my selection and grouping: the "populist campaigner" and the "ideal candidate" as outlined by Muñoz and Towner (2017, p. 297) and Grabe and Bucy (2009, p. 102-105). These themes highlight different but complementary ways that politicians construct credibility and appeal to voters. My categories reflect these themes, as well as my observations of dominant visual codes that were evident across the materials. So, most decisions were driven by patterns that clearly emerged during coding, specifically, certain codes were simply dominant across the materials (e.g., hugging, the American flags, large crowds), in combination with the knowledge of existing theory.

The first category, *the populist leader*, refers to the way politicians construct a relatable and genuine persona by sharing aspects of their private lives and trying to come across as "one of the people." Codes in this category include *casual attire, family/husband/child featured, taking photos with people, and visiting (local) businesses.* These codes visually signal that politicians are approachable, relatable, and grounded in everyday life. I chose these codes because they were commonly used to humanize candidates and presented them as "real people" or "one of the people" and fostering trust and reliability with voters.

The second category, *emotional connection*, includes visual cues that align with the emphasis on compassion that Muñoz and Towner (2017, p. 297) describe as part of the ideal candidate. They help evoke trust and warmth, making politicians appear caring and promoting intimacy by voters. Codes in this category include *hugging, physical compassion, nostalgic self-images, and smiling.* These codes help politicians create a brand image that is both emotionally and compassionately compelling, which was a recurring and highly visible theme in my data.

The third category, *inclusivity & diversity*, arose from progressive campaign strategies that visually show representation and inclusion. Codes in this category include the visual presence of *people of color, Black people, White people, members of the LGBTQ+ community, the young and elderly, and blue-collar workers*. Politicians highlight these identities as part of an intersectional and inclusive brand, which is especially relevant when crafting a message of broad social appeal.

The fourth category, *statesmanship and authority,* corresponds to the 'ideal candidate' focus on statesmanship and authority (Muñoz & Towner, 2017, p. 297). It includes creating a powerful professional image and is emphasized by codes like *formal attire, large crowds of supporters, power poses (fist/pointing), and posing with celebrities.* These codes evoke strength, skill, and credibility and make the politician look like someone who is capable of leadership and electable.

The fifth and last category, *nationalism & symbolic power*, focuses on the use of patriotic and ideological symbols to reinforce traditional values and sense of shared national identity. Codes in this category include *the American flag, U.S national color schemes (red/white/blue), military imagery, slogan/campaign materials, and religious symbols.* These visual elements support traditional notions of leadership by reinforcing the politician's connection to history, collective values, and pride in the country.

By using these categories and corresponding codes, this study examined how gender, ideology, and communication style influenced Harris's and Trump's visual political branding efforts on Instagram.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze Harris's and Trump's political branding on Instagram, identifying recurring themes and patterns within the data (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016, p. 33). This study followed a theory-informed inductive approach, in which existing literature guided, but not determined the identification and interpretation of visual patterns. Specifically, an inductive "bottom-up" approach where themes emerge organically (Terry et al., 2017, p. 11) was applied with both semantic and latent coding. Semantic capturing explicit meanings, specifically, what is directly visible in the image. Latent coding uncovers deeper underlying concepts, meaning that it looks at underlying themes, messages, or assumptions (Serafini & Reid, 2019, p. 624). Additionally, the visual image types proposed by Grabe and Bucy (2009, p. 102-105): the ideal candidate and populist campaigner provided interpretative guidance during the analysis. These image types were not treated as strict coding categories but as guiding ideas that helped shape the analysis without limiting it. The themes of statesmanship and compassion (associated with the ideal candidate) and mass appeal and ordinariness (central to the populist campaigner image) were particularly relevant to this study. These concepts, elaborated on by Muñoz and Towner (2017, p. 297) and Bast (2021, p. 4), helped frame the visual analysis of Instagram content without predetermining the findings.

The four key methods for analyzing visual presentation by Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011, p. 52) were used as the foundation for visual content analysis. The denotative methods focus on what is literally shown in the image, the stylistic-semiotic approach examines visual elements like color and lighting, the connotative approach considers symbolic meanings, and the ideological approach explores deeper political or cultural values embedded in the imagery. These approaches were used to interpret how visual elements contribute to constructing Harris's and Trump's political brands.

To apply these approaches, each Instagram post was individually coded through three main coding stages as explained in section 3.3. For each image, I coded observable elements (people featured, setting, clothing, symbols), stylistic choices (e.g., colors), emotional tone, and symbolic or ideological meanings. Recurring themes and dominant codes were identified through inductive coding. For example, images were coded with labels such as "casual attire," "large crowd," "patriotic symbols," based on visual clues and context. These codes were then grouped into broader themes and categories,

Additionally, while analyzing, two broader branding themes drawn from Grabe and Bucy (2009, p. 102) and Muñoz and Towner (2017, p. 297) were used: the 'populist campaigner' and the 'ideal candidate'. The 'populist campaigner' builds upon the idea of 'one of the people and against the elite' and is visually conveyed through elements of mass appeal and relatability (Muñoz & Towner, 2017, p. 297; Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 102). Mass appeal emphasizes a candidate's widespread approval, often visually shown through images featuring celebrities, large crowds, supportive audiences, and public interactions. Reliability is visually portrayed through portraying politicians in casual or athletic attire (e.g., jeans or sneakers), engaging with everyday people, and participating in physical activities, reinforcing an image of authenticity and approachability (Muñoz & Towner, 2017, p. 297; Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 102). The 'ideal candidate' theme consists of elements of statesmanship and compassion. Statesmanship is conveyed through symbols of power, leadership, and authority such as images of officials, patriotic elements, campaign materials, and formal attire. Compassion is represented through warm, relatable imagery such as family, children, religious symbols, supportive gestures like thumbs up, and physical interactions like embraces (Muñoz & Towner, 2017, p. 297; Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 102).

In the category *inclusivity & diversity* some images featured multiple individuals from different ethnicities which were identified and coded separately. However, when people were

photographed in large crowds, individual ethnicities were not coded simply because they were unclear. But if a photo showed, for example, three white men, it was simply coded as "White people featured," and similarly, a group of Black individuals was coded as "Black people featured." For LGBTQ+ representation, visuals incorporating rainbows or pink elements, common symbols associated with the LGBTQ+ community, were coded accordingly. Age groups were initially coded separately as younger and older individuals, but since these codes were not a significant enough amount on their own, they were combined for the analysis since they still provided meaningful insight about a politician's political brand. Older individuals were typically identified by features such as wrinkles or grey hair, often representing seniors, while younger individuals included young adults and teenagers, looking roughly around the ages 12 to 25.

3.5 Research ethics and reliability

When it comes to research ethics, this study followed standard guidelines for working with publicly available content. Both Harris and Trump use public Instagram accounts that are meant for open viewing, which means their posts are intended to be seen and shared with a wide audience. Because of this, it is ethically sound to include their content in academic research. Although the screenshots used in this study were publicly accessible and included solely for research purposes without any alteration, it is important to acknowledge that the use of such images should only be used when necessary. In this research, screenshots were included because they provide essential visual evidence to support the analysis of political strategies on social media. To minimize ethical concerns, no private or personal information of the case studies were used, and all images were treated with respect and presented in their original public context.

In terms of reliability, steps were taken to ensure that the analysis remained consistent. Since the coding process was inductive, no fixed categories were used from the start. Instead, themes were developed by engaging with the data and refining codes and patterns emerged. Although this means that another researcher might not identify the exact same themes, the use of existing theory (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011, p. 52; Muñoz & Towner, 2017, p. 297) on political branding and visual communication helped strengthen the analysis. This balance between allowing the data to speak for itself and relating it to existing theory improves credibility and makes it more likely that another researcher would come to similar conclusions, even if not identical.

Personalization in politics means that the spotlight shifts away from political parties and instead focus more on individual politicians, especially leaders, who take center stage in media coverage and visuals, often becoming the main face of their party's message (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014, p. 156).

As mentioned before, categories were developed to capture how personalization operates in the visual content of political campaigns, revealing how Harris and Trump craft their public image and communicate their brand.

The categories *the populist leader* and *emotional connection* show how candidates try to appear approachable and human. The *inclusivity & diversity* category captures how open and representative Harris and Trump are politicians are. Meanwhile, the *statesmanship & authority* category focuses on how competent and legitimate Harris and Trump present themselves. Lastly, the category *nationalism & symbolic power* emphasizes how both candidates try to connect with shared traditions and values. Together, these elements reveal how Harris and Trump presented their political brand during the 2024 U.S. elections.

4.1 The populist leader

The populist leader emerged as a dominant feature in both politician's Instagram accounts. More so in Harris's Instagram presence than in comparison with Trump (see Table 3). Codes under this category include *casual attire, featuring family/husband/children, taking pictures with people, and visiting local businesses*.

Both politicians were highly visible across their Instagram accounts. Harris appeared in 82% of her sample (N = 200), while Trump appeared in 85.5% of his (N = 200). Interestingly, Trump was more often shown alone, either posing solo or speaking to a large crowd, whereas Harris tended to appear alongside other people. In fact, it was rare for Harris to post a photo by herself, while Trump did so most of the time.

This emphasis on social interaction is especially evident in posts that highlight personal connections and family, which align with the populist leader image. Of Harris's 200 posts, 7.5% featured her husband, 6.5% included a child, and 4.5% showed (broader) family members (N = 200) (see Figure 4). Trump's posts, in comparison, included only 1% featuring his wife, 1% featuring children, and none featuring extended family (see Figure 5). This reveals a significant divide in how personal relationships are used for branding purposes. In

line with theory (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 104), these findings suggest that Harris emphasizes compassion more prominently on her Instagram account compared to Trump. Additionally, visuals portraying politicians in interactions with children and family-oriented imagery reinforce the brand image of the 'ideal candidate' (Muñoz & Towner, 2017, p. 297).

Figure 4

Kamala Harris posting a photo with her husband (@kamalaharris, Instagram, 2024, October 13)

Figure 5

Donald Trump posting a photo with his wife (@realdonaldtrump, Instagram, 2024, October 29)

Taking photos with others is another key indicator of the populist leader, and this behavior was noticeably more frequent on Harris's Instagram feed. Harris was seen posing

with people in 12.5% of her posts (N = 200), compared to only 2% of Trump's posts (N = 200). These images often showed them engaging with supporters and portrayed them as candidates who actively engage with everyday people in their campaign imagery (see figure 6 & 7). These findings align with Gimenez et al. (2016, p. 226), who argue that populist politicians often present themselves as "being with the people, addressing the people, and representing the people". However, when comparing the two candidate's use of this populist visual strategy, Trump appears to engage with supporters and ordinary people far less often than Harris, appearing to be more reserved.

Figure 6

Donald Trump taking a selfie with people (@realdonaldtrump, Instagram, 2024, October 14)

Figure 7

Kamala Harris taking a photo with people (@kamalaharris, Instagram, 2024, October 31)

Visiting (local) businesses was another populist gesture that showed a clear difference between the two politicians. Harris was seen visiting (local) businesses in 9% of her posts (N = 200), while Trump did so in 3% of his posts (N = 200). These visits to (local) businesses were often accompanied by interactions with shopkeepers and small business owners, visually signaling that the politician understands everyday economic concerns. By posting themselves in these environments, talking to shopkeepers, the images project a sense of economic awareness and connection to the practical realities faced by ordinary U.S. citizens.

Lastly, casual attire was coded 5.3% of the overall data (N = 400). However, this indicator of the populist leader was much more common for Harris, since she appeared in casual clothing in 10.5% of her posts (N = 200), while Trump did not appear in casual attire in any of the analyzed posts. The absence of casual clothing in Trump's posts reinforces a more formal and traditional image of leadership, whereas Harris's choice to present herself in jeans and sneakers can be interpreted as a strategic move to appear relatable to her audience like "one of them" (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

Kamala Harris seen in casual attire (@kamalaharris, Instagram, 2024, August 29)

Table 3

Category 1. The populist leader

	Kamala Harris	**Donald Trump**	**Total**
Family/Husband/Child featured	18.5% N = 37	2% N = 4	10.3% N = 41
Taking photos with others	12.5% N = 25	4.5% N = 9	7.3% N = 29
Visiting (local) businesses	9% N = 18	3% N = 6	6% N = 24
Casual attire	10.5% N = 21	0% N= 0	5.3% N = 21
Total	N = 200	N = 200	N = 400

4.2 Emotional connection

The category *emotional connection* captures the way in which Harris and Trump seek to build relatability and warmth through visual expression of affection, familiarity, or closeness. This includes the codes: *hugging, physical compassion, nostalgic self-images and smiling.*

The most noticeable element of creating an emotional connection is the frequency with which the politicians are seen smiling in a picture. This is especially noticeable for Harris who, out of 200 images analyzed, is seen smiling in 67.5% of her posts (N = 200), which is more than two-thirds of her posts. In contrast, Trump is seen smiling in 15% of his posts (N = 200). This significant difference highlights Harris's consistent use of emotional warmth and approachability as part of her political brand, while Trump places far less emphasis on projecting warmth and approachability in his visual communication.

Another significant element of emotional connection employed by politicians, specifically Harris, is the use of nostalgic imagery. She posted images of her younger self in 9.5% of her posts (N = 200), compared to only 0.5% for Trump (N = 200). These nostalgic

self-images serve to deepen the emotional connection with followers by showing them her personal history and inspiring journey. They can also invoke empathy and shared values especially when linked to themes of struggle, growth or identity (See Figure 9). These findings partly reinforce existing theory which states that female candidates typically adopt a more personal and emotionally engaging communication style to establish trust and foster a connection with voters (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018, p. 991). It also reinforces the idea that women are inclined to post more personal content, like Harris does by posting nostalgic self-images, compared to their male counterparts since this creates a more authentic bond with their audience (Meeks, 2016, p. 296). However, these findings also partly contradict existing theory suggesting that, because personalized communication emphasizes self-expression, which is seen as a masculine quality, female politicians may instead rely on less personalized communication styles than their male counterparts (Atia & Balmas, 2023, p. 6155). This is not the case between Harris and Trump because comparing Harris to Trump, he seems to have more of a focus less on the nostalgic personal past but more on present dominance or success. These findings can confirm that Trump uses more of a masculine communication style which is often more direct, impersonal and analytical (Meeks, 2016, p. 296).

Figure 9

Kamala Harris posting a nostalgic self-image (@kamalaharris, Instagram, 2024, September 8)

Harris clearly emphasized emotional connection more frequently in her posts compared to Trump (see Table 4). Harris was the only one coded for hugging, which appeared in 6% of her posts (N = 200), while Trump did not feature any visual display of hugging in the analyzed sample. Similarly, physical compassion, which includes gestures such as touching someone on the shoulder, placing a hand on someone's back, holding someone's hand, or other physical cues of empathy, was coded 7.5% of Harris's posts (N = 200) and 0.5% of Trump's. This difference suggests a visual narrative in which Harris presents herself as emotionally available and physically expressive while Trump maintains a more reserved or distant presentation style. These findings support Atia and Balmas's (2023, p. 6155) argument that communal traits, like empathy and kindness, which can be visual displayed by hugging or physical compassion, are typically associated with women. The difference in emotional warmth between Harris and Trump is consistent with this gendered pattern, suggesting that both politicians lean into these traditional expectations as part of their personal brands.

Table 4

Category 2. Emotional connection

	Kamala Harris	**Donald Trump**	**Total**
Smiling	67.5%	15%	41.3%
	N= 135	N = 30	N= 165
Nostalgic self-image	9.5%	0.5%	10%
	N= 19	N= 1	N = 20
Physical compassion	7.5%	0.5%	3.8%
	N = 15	N = 0	N = 15
Hugging	6%	0%	0%
	N= 12	N = 0	N = 0
Total	N = 200	N = 200	N = 400

The category *inclusivity & diversity* analyze the visual representation of social groups and different demographic groups in society on the Instagram of Harris and Trump. This includes people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, the LGTBQ+ community, various age groups, and working-class individuals. Representation of these groups can serve as a strategic tool in shaping how inclusive, relatable, or progressive a candidate presents themselves.

Harris featured significantly more visual elements of diversity and inclusivity than Trump (see Table 5). Black people appeared in 15.8% of all images (N = 400), with 29% of Harris's posts (N = 200) and just 2.5% of Trump's (N = 200). Similarly, people of color more broadly (a separate but relatable code) were also featured disproportionately more by Harris, namely 15% in Harris's posts (N = 200), compared to the 1% on Trump's Instagram (N = 200). This difference suggests that Harris's social media campaign actively integrated racial diversity as a central visual component of her messaging, aligning with her political liberal ideology. Moreover, Harris not only appeared alongside supporters more often but also frequently shared images that highlighted individual support up close, even when she herself was not present in the image (see Figure 10 & 11). In contrast, Trump's posts featured either himself surrounded by large crowds or images of the crowds alone (see Figure 12).

These findings are consistent with Moffitt (2022, p. 86) argument that left-wing populists often use social media to emphasize diversity, inclusivity, and empowerment. Most of Harris's posts also feature a range of racial and ethnic groups, different genders, and multiple generations, which reinforces a progressive brand. Interestingly, Moffit (2022, p. 91) also notes that right-wing populists tend to portray their movements as transformative and welcoming to marginalized communities, promising systemic change. However, Trump's Instagram branding appears to diverge from this expectation. Instead of visually emphasizing inclusiveness, his images seem to focus more on personal prominence and spectacle, suggesting a less inclusive approach than the one often associated with right-wing populist branding.

Figure 10

Kamala Harris posting an image of supporters without it featuring herself (@kamalaharris, Instagram, 2024, November 1)

Figure 11

Kamala Harris posting an image of supporters without it featuring herself (@kamalaharris, Instagram, 2024, July 26)
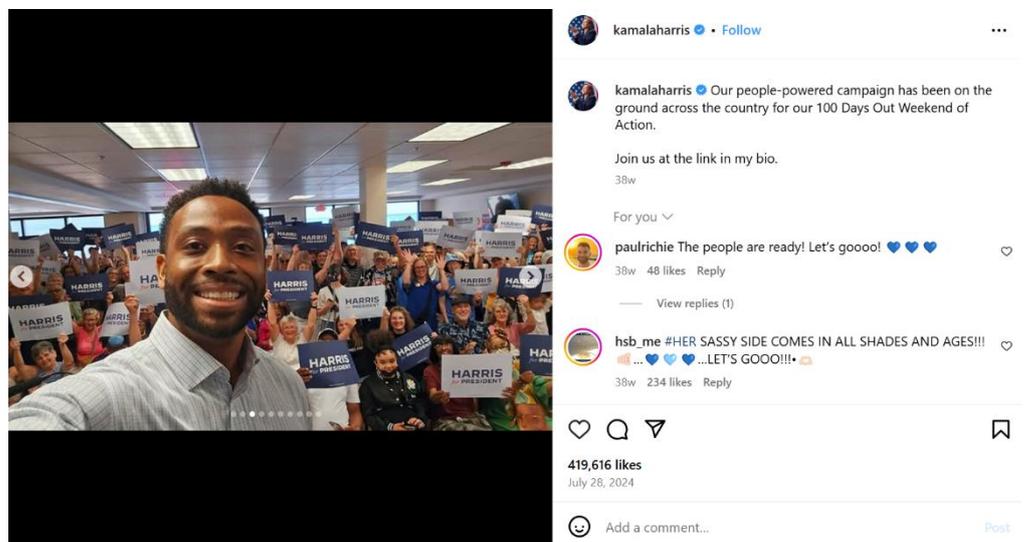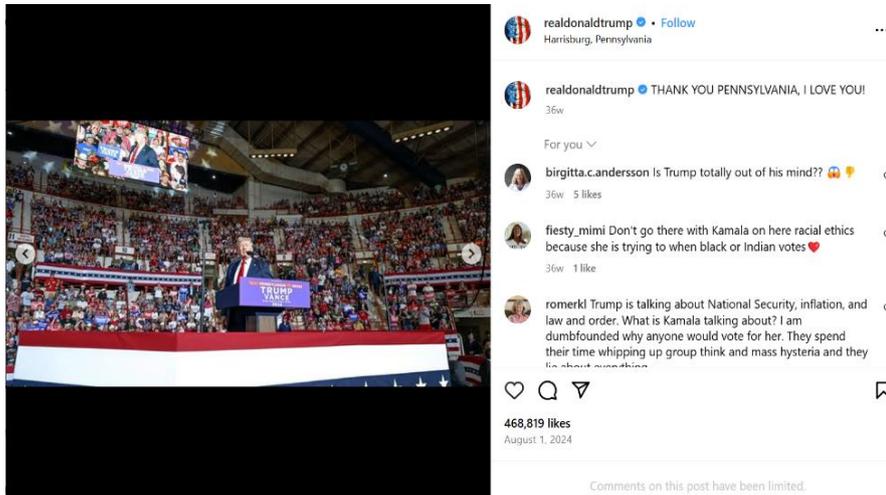
Figure 12

Donald Trump posting a picture of himself at a rally (@realdonaldtrump, Instagram, 2024, August 1)

Interestingly, the representation of white individuals was more evenly distributed: 21% of Harris's posts (N = 200) and 13% of Trump's (N = 200) totaling in 17% of the whole sample (N = 400) 68 out of 400. These findings align with Xi et al. (2020, p. 3) suggesting that conservative politicians like Trump tend to highlight dominant social groups, such as white men in business or the military. These visual themes are evident in Trump's posts. Indeed, among all ethnicities coded in his Instagram feed, white individuals appeared most frequently. However, Harris featured White people more prominently than Trump, as well as other ethnicities, likely because she aims to create a broadly inclusive political brand that appeals to a diverse range of voters.

The previous pattern continues in the representation of age diversity. Specifically, young and older individuals were featured in 24% of Harris's posts (N = 200) (see Figure 13 & 14), compared to just 1.5% of Trump's posts (N = 200), further reinforcing the contrast in how each candidate visually construct inclusivity.

Figure 13

Kamala Harris posting an image of supporters with different age ranges (@kamalaharris, Instagram, 2024, October 30)

Figure 14

Kamala Harris posting an image of supporters with different age ranges (@kamalaharris, Instagram, 2024, October 30)

Regarding LGBTQ+ representation, Harris was again the only candidate with such imagery in her Instagram campaign, with this being coded in 1.5% of her posts (N = 200). While it being a small number overall, it is still telling for the candidate's political communication since Trump featured no visual reference to LGTBQ+ individuals or symbols in the analyzed sample. It can be argued that even a limited presence may signal an attempt by Harris to acknowledge queer identities on her Instagram, reinforcing her liberal self-presentation. Additionally, it adds on to her political narrative in support of equal civil rights.

Finally, blue collar workers were featured in only 2.5% of the posts (N = 400). Out of this 2.5%, 3.5% came from Harris's content (N = 200) (see Figure 15) and 1.5% of Trump's

(N = 200). Although these figures are quite low compared to other frequencies, the use of these photos by both candidates may suggest an effort to connect with working-class Americans. Harris's greater use of this imagery falls in line with her more frequent posting visits to (local) businesses and supports the idea that liberal politicians highlight underrepresented minorities and low-wage workers (Xi et al., 2020, p. 3)

Figure 15

Kamala Harris posting an image with blue-collar workers featured (@kamalaharris, Instagram, 2024, September 2)

Table 5

Category 3. Inclusivity and diversity

	Kamala Harris	Donald Trump	Total
White people featured	21%	13%	17%
	N = 42	N = 26	N = 68
Black people featured	29%	2.5%	15.8%
	N = 58	N = 5	N = 63
Younger/older people featured	24%	1.5%	12.8%
	N = 48	N = 3	N = 51
People of color featured	15%	1%	8%
	N = 30	N = 2	N = 32
Blue-collar workers featured	3.5%	1.5%	2.5%
	N = 7	N = 3	N = 10
LGTBQ+ featured	1.5%	0%	0.8%
	N = 3	N = 0	N = 3
Total	N = 200	N = 200	N = 400

4.4 Statesmanship & Authority

The category 'statesmanship & authority' highlights how Harris and Trump visually present authority, professionalism, and statesmanship. The codes included in this category are *formal attire, the presence of large crowds (of supporters), power poses (such as fist or*

pointing poses), and posing with celebrities. These visuals help construct a candidate's political brand as powerful.

Formal attire was overwhelmingly a dominant code in the dataset and this category, coded in 72.8% of the images (N = 400) (see Table 6). This included 86% of Trump's posts (N = 200) and 59.5% of Harris's posts (N = 200). The frequency with which both presidential candidates appeared in formal attire suggests that presenting a polished, neat, and official appearance is a central element in political branding. However, Trump posted himself in formal attire significantly more often than Harris, reinforcing his stance with conservative ideologies, power, and authority. In comparison, Harris balanced this formal image a bit more with wearing more casual attire in her content (as seen in 4.1), suggesting a dual strategy of professionalism and relatability.

The presence of large crowds, which is an element of mass appeal, popular support and power, was coded in 7.8% of the total data set (N = 400), 11% of Trump's posts (N = 200) and 4.5% of Harris's posts (N = 200). Trump's consistent use of crowd imagery supports a populist political brand (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 105). Additionally, it reinforces widespread public appeal (Steffan, 2020, p. 3100). These visuals may serve to validate his political influence, while Harris more often posted images with a smaller group of supporters, making her seem more approachable (see Figure 16 and 17).

Figure 16

Donald Trump posting an image with a large crowd of supporters (@realdonaldtrump, Instagram, 2024, October 6)
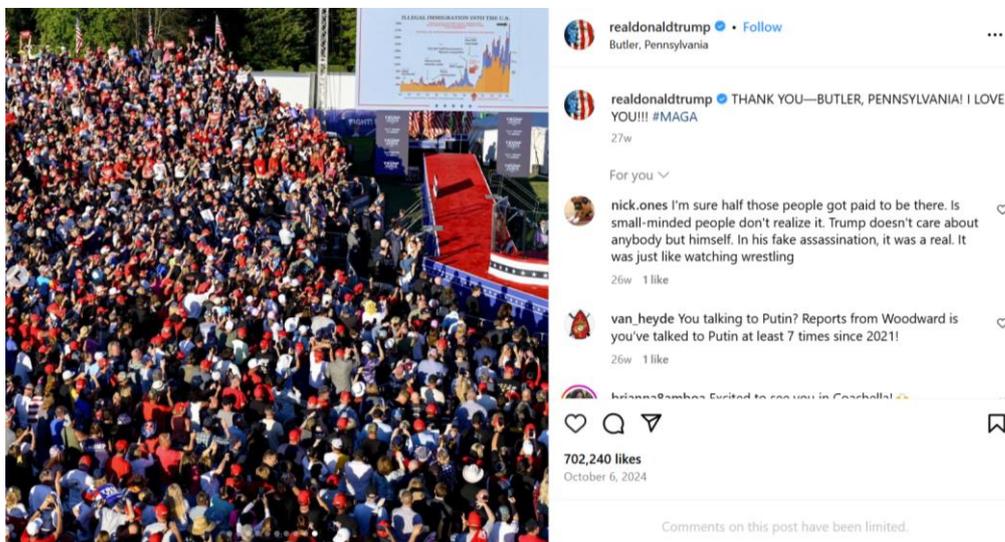
Figure 17

Kamala Harris posting an image with supporters (@kamalaharris, Instagram, 2024, October 27)

Power poses, including a fist gesture and pointing gesture, were also telling in the analysis. Trump used these gestures much more often compared to Harris, with a combined total of 9.3% of the total data set (N = 400) (23 fist poses, 14 pointing poses). Harris did not use these gestures in any of the analyzed images. This could suggest that Harris uses a different approach to authority than Trump, one that avoids overly dominant body language. Trump's frequent use of these gestures, in 18.5% of his posts (N = 200), reinforces an assertive and dominant leadership persona, adding on to the political brand he tries to communicate (see Figure 18 and 19). This appeals to voters who value (physical) strength and directness.

Figure 18

Donald Trump using a power gesture (@realdonaldtrump, Instagram, 2024, July 31)

Figure 19

Donald Trump using a power gesture (@realdonaldtrump, Instagram, 2024, 26th of September)

Images in which Harris and Trump posed with celebrities strategically leverage the star power of others to reinforce the politician's own authority and status as credible and powerful leader. Harris was shown alongside celebrities in 11.5% of her posts (N = 200), while Trump was seen alongside celebrities in 3% of his posts (N = 200). This image reinforces mass appeal and emphasizes the connection with prominent figures who may appeal to certain audiences, providing a favorable impression of the candidate. Interestingly, part of these findings contrasts with existing literature (Bast, 2021, p. 4), which suggests that right-wing populists like Trump typically present themselves as "close to the people" and distance themselves from elite figures. These findings, however, show that Trump occasionally features high-profile celebrities, such as Elon Musk, indicating that his visual strategy is not entirely consistent with this populist image (see Figure 20).

Figure 20

Donald Trump with Elon Musk (@realdonaldtrump, Instagram, 2024, October 6)

Table 6

Category 4. Statesmanship & Authority

	Kamala Harris	Donald Trump	Total
Formal attire	59.5%	86%	72.8%
	N = 119	N = 172	N = 291
Power poses (fist and pointing gesture)	0%	18.5%	9.3%
	N = 0	N = 37	N = 37
Presence of large crowds	4.5%	11%	7.8%
	N = 9	N = 22	N = 31
Posing with celebrities	11.5%	3%	7.3%
	N = 23	N = 6	N = 29
Total	N = 200	N = 200	N = 400

4.5 Nationalism & symbolic Power

The category 'nationalism and symbolic power' includes visual elements that invoke collective identity, patriotism, and ideological alignment through nationally recognized imagery. This category fits the most with the populist presentation style and includes the following codes: *American flag, national color schemes (red, white, and blue), military imagery, religious references*, *and campaign slogans or materials.* These codes function not only as aesthetic elements but also as signals of moral values and cultural unity.

The American flag was the most dominant code in this category, appearing in 33.5% of all the data (N = 400) (see Table 7). While both presidential candidates employed the flag in their visual communication, it was overwhelmingly associated with Trump, in 46% of his posts (N = 200), who used it consistently to present himself as part of the national identity (see Figure 21). Harris, in comparison, used the flag less frequently and more subtly or contextually, in 21% of her posts (N = 200). Trump's strategy of appealing to nationalism and a symbolic link to traditional American ideals is shown by the frequent use of flag images in his postings. This is in line with Bucy et al. (2020, p. 636) who argues that right-

wing populists shape collective memory by visually reinforcing images that reference historical events or national symbols.

Figure 21

Donald Trump surrounded by American flags (@realdonaldtrump, Instagram, 2024, September 30)

Similarly, national color schemes, the red, white, and blue palette of the U.S. flag, appeared in 32.3% of the total dataset (N = 400). There was a significant imbalance: 51.5% of Trump's posts (N = 200), and 13% of Harris's posts (N = 200). This difference suggests that Trump intentionally filled his visuals with patriotic colors and thereby creating a strong symbolic look that aligns with more traditional or conservative ideas of American identity. It is also interesting to mention that in most of the analyzed images, Trump also incorporated the national color schemes into his attire. He was most often wearing a blue suit, white shirt, and red tie. In contrast, Harris's more limited use of national colors may reflect a broader and more inclusive vision of patriotism. Her wardrobe, for example, frequently featured a wider range of colors, signaling a distance from the conventional visual cues of national identity.

Military-related imagery was notably scarce. Out of 400 coded images, only 1.5% depicted military- related elements, and all were associated with Trump. While the amount of coded military-related images is small, its exclusivity to Trump further supports his self-presentation related to a traditional and national identity. This may resonate with voters that link military related content with strength and authority.

Religious symbols were coded in 3% of the total dataset (N = 400). Again, showing a noticeable imbalance: in 4% of Trump's posts (N = 200) and in 2% of Harris's posts (N =

200). Trump's use of posting religious elements on Instagram (e.g. angles and sacred figures) seems aimed at reinforcing his appeal to religious communities, especially those who closely link faith with national identity, which reinforces existing literature (Bast, 2021, p. 3) that argues that right-wing populist use Christian identity strategically (see Figure 22). In contrast, Harris's more limited use of religious elements suggests a more progressive approach.

Figure 22

Donald Trump posting religious content (@realdonaldtrump, Instagram, 2024, September 8)

Lastly, slogan and campaign visuals appeared in 23% of the total dataset (N = 400). Specifically, in 31% of Trump's posts (N = 200) and in 15% of Harris's posts (N = 200). Beyond serving as branding strategies, these elements also contribute to an image of authority and statesmanship. Trump's repeated use of his slogan "MAGA" reinforces a shared national identity that evokes collective pride and unity. Additionally, it reinforces patriotic and symbolic resonance. Based on the analysis it could be argued that Harris lacked a consistent slogan. The word 'freedom' was used most often but she did not communicate unity through a slogan.

Table 7

Category 5. Nationalism and symbolic power

	Kamala Harris	Donald Trump	Total
The American flag	21%	46%	33.5%
	N = 42	N = 92	N = 134
National color schemes (red, white, blue)	13%	51.5%	32.3%
	N = 26	N = 103	N = 129
Slogan and campaign visuals	15%	31%	23%
	N = 30	N = 62	N = 92
Military imagery	0%	3%	1.5%
	N = 0	N = 6	N = 6
Religious symbols	2%	4%	3%
	N = 4	N = 8	N = 12
Total	N = 200	N = 200	N = 400

<u>*4.6 Summary of key findings*</u>

The findings reveal contrasting political branding strategies. While both candidates adopt populist elements, Harris emphasizes approachability and emotional warmness, often wearing casual attire, including her family in posts, highlighting diverse supporters, and engaging directly with supporters. Trump leans into a more formal and patriotic style, favoring formal attire, national symbols, and images of large crowds. He tries to communicate traditional and conservative values through his brand. These differences reflect their contrasting ideologies and diverse audiences. Overall, Harris's brand was more dominant in the categories of *the populist leader, emotional connection*, and *inclusivity & diversity*, while Trump's brand was more prominent in the categories of *statesmanship & authority* and *nationalism & symbolic power*.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This study aimed at researching the visual construction of political branding by Kamala Harris and Donald Trump on Instagram, guided by the central research question: *What are the similarities and differences in how Kamala Harris and Donald Trump construct their political brand on Instagram, and what explains this variety?* To address this, two sub-questions were posed: (1) How do Kamala Harris and Donald Trump construct their political brand on Instagram? And (2) What explains the variety in the way these leaders construct their political brand?

Drawing on the visual content analysis of 400 Instagram posts, 200 from each presidential candidate, this study examined five main branding categories: *the populist leader, emotional connection, inclusivity & diversity, statesmanship & authority, and nationalism & symbolic power*. These categories were based on earlier research on political branding (Muñoz & Towner, 2017, p. 297; Bast, 2021, p. 4; Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p.102-105) along with a self-conducted content analysis of Instagram posts that were used as visual data. The results reveal certain similarities, but clearer differences between Harris and Trump's branding strategies, which reflect their ideological orientations, target demographics, and broader political communications styles.

5.1 Main findings

To address sub-question one: How do Kamala Harris and Donald Trump construct their political brand on Instagram? This study identified dominant themes:

The populist leader and emotional connection

One of the most noticeable findings is that Harris's Instagram content is heavily characterized by populist elements and emotional connection. She frequently smiles, wears casual clothing, and shares nostalgic photos, as well as photos with family members, children, and supporters. This strategy aligns with what Enli (2015, p. 123) identifies as authenticity in digital politics, where relatability and emotional warmth are used to build trust and humanize political personas. Trump also uses elements of the populist leader and emotional connection, but far less often. He almost never smiles in his photographs, never wears casual attire in the dataset, and includes family members or children only sporadically. Instead, his visual presence is more consistently formal and assertive, like he is trying to

reinforce a brand of strength and leadership that avoids vulnerability, which is more of a masculine communication style (Meeks, 2016, p. 296).

Additionally, Harris is seen hugging, touching, or engaging in other forms of physical compassion quite often compared to Trump, which are seen as communal traits and are often connected to women (Atia and Balmas, 2023, p. 6155). Trump almost never engages in such behavior visually, which creates a more reserved communication style. Harris also appears more frequently with other people such as supporters, business owners, or celebrities whereas Trump's posts are more centered on himself or large anonymous crowds. Trump therefore does employ populist elements in his political brand, like sharing images of himself working at McDonald's to evoke a sense of ordinariness and working-class relatability. However, this brand of accessibility is offset by a lack of interactions with small business owners and everyday people, and by his appearance alongside elite figures. This contrast suggests that while Trump integrates some populist elements into his branding, he also continues to communicate a sense of eliteness and reverse.

Harris incorporates more populist elements into her political brand, frequently sharing images with ordinary people, supporters, and small business owners. However, she rarely posts images of large crowds like Trump, instead placing greater emphasis on personal warmth and connection. This can be seen in visuals where she is hugging people or smiling. These elements contribute to a political brand that feels approachable and compassionate. These findings align with earlier research showing that female politicians often emphasize personal connection and building a sense of community as key strengths in their political strategy (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018, p. 5).

Inclusivity & Diversity

Another difference between both presidential candidates is found in the representation of inclusivity and diversity. The findings in this category reveal that both leaders incorporate inclusive elements, aiming to present themselves as "of the people." However, Harris's left-wing populism embraces a broader more inclusive definition of "the people," allowing for the political integration of diverse social groups. In comparison, Trump's right-wing populism tends to define "the people" more narrowly, often implicitly or explicitly centering on a specific ethnic and gendered group (Moffitt, 2024, p. 91).

Specifically, Harris's Instagram is far more diverse in terms of the racial and demographic groups featured. She posts significantly more images of Black individuals, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. While it must be mentioned that

the number of LGBTQ+ coded posts is low overall, Harris's inclusion of this groups, even symbolically, adds to her liberal and inclusive political brand.

Trump's visual strategy, in comparison to Harris, is consistent and similar. His posts focus on himself or rallies with predominantly White attendees. These findings are in line with existing research showing that conservative populist branding often emphasizes traditional values and tends to portray less diversity in its messaging (Moffitt, 2016, p. 91).

Authority & Statesmanship and Nationalism & symbolic power

Both presidential candidates posted visuals that project leadership, but in fundamentally different ways. Trump is dominantly seen in formal attire, using power gestures, large crowds, and nationalist symbolism such as American flags and red, white, and blue color schemes. These visuals reflect a populist communication style (Steffan, 2020, p. 3100). Therefore, Trump brands himself as a strong, confident leader who represents the American identity.

Harris also uses formal attire and campaign visuals, but with much less intensity. Her posts show fewer large crowds and contain no power gestures at all, which aligns with existing literature suggesting that female leaders often face a tough balance since they risk being seen negatively if they come across as too bossy or forceful (Dittmar, 2015, p. 762). Instead, Harris blends professionalism with approachability, suggesting a dual branding strategy: she presents herself as a qualified presidential candidate, but also emotionally accessible and community oriented.

5.2 Explaining the variety

To address sub-question two: What explains the variety in how these leaders construct their political brand? This study identified three overlapping explanatory factors:

Political ideology

The first factor shaping the political branding of Harris and Trump is their political ideology. Harris's visual communication reflects progressive, liberal worldviews that emphasize diversity, empathy, and inclusion. This comes through in her visuals which often show her engaging with underrepresented communities, such as racial minorities and low-wage workers, which are groups that liberal politicians often highlight (Xi et al., 2020, p. 3). Left-wing populists like Harris also tend to leverage social media to promote messages of empowerment and solidarity. Her visual stye is diverse and multigenerational, often showing

people of different racial backgrounds and gender to signal her commitment to progressive and feminist values (Moffit, 2022, p. 86). Thus, Harris's political ideology is clearly reflected in the way she constructs her political brand.

In comparison, Trump's visual strategy is shaped by a conservative, nationalist perspective focused on strength, tradition, and patriotic symbolism. His photos often feature him in formal attire surrounded by American flags and large crowds of supporters, reinforcing an image of strong leadership and unity. Trump adopts a right-wing approach, creating a persona as someone close to "the people" (Bast, 2021, p. 4). Nostalgic rhetoric, such as his emphasis on 'MAGA,' plays an important role in his visual branding, which frequent references to historical moments and national myths (Bucy et al., 2020, p. 636). In this way, Trump's conservative ideology shapes the visual elements of his political brand.

Gender norms and expectations

The second factor shaping the political branding of Harris and Trump is their gender. Harris is a female politician and woman of color who therefore operates under different expectations and limitations than Trump. Prior studies (Atia and Balmas, 2023, p. 6155) have shown that women in politics are often criticized for appearing too cold or too ambitious. Harris branding strategy seems carefully designed to navigate approachability with professionalism which differ from Trumps authoritative communication style.

Trump as a male candidate with a forceful personality seems to have more freedom to show authority, aggression, and self-confidence without facing the kind of gendered criticism female politicians do (Atia & Balmas, 2023, p. 6155). His branding uses bold body language and strong symbols to project power without the same risk of backlash.

Strategic audience targeting

The last factor is audience segmentation. Harris followers on Instagram tend to be more diverse, predominantly female, with a significant proportion of Black/African American supporters (Chen, 2024, para. 10-13) and this corresponds to her inclusive and pluralistic political brand. Her Instagram feed regularly features people of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and everyday citizens from different generations. This allows her to highlight a multiethnic definition of "the people" that resonates with her progressive brand.

Trump's audience on Instagram is predominantly male, White, and younger, with a notable share of Hispanic/Latino followers (Chen, 2024, para. 10-13). This demographic profile is reflected in his visual presentation which leans toward traditional, conservative,

patriotic imagery. Trump's strategic use of religious symbolism and nationalistic themes appeals to this conservative base, reinforcing a strong brand of strength and dominance (Muñoz & Towner, 2017, p. 312).

Both candidates clearly understand their audiences and tailor their visual communication to match these expectations, reinforcing a political brand that resonates with audiences.

5.3 Limitations

As with any research project, this study comes with its own set of limitations. One of them is that this study only looks at the social media platform Instagram. While Instagram is an important platform for political branding since it has a focus on visual storytelling, there are multiple platforms on social media which are used for political branding. Politicians like Harris and Trump also use platforms like X and TikTok for their political communication, each platform with their own format, target audience and behavior. Focusing solely on Instagram gives us an in-depth analysis, but it does not capture how they present themselves across other platforms.

Another limitation is the fact that this study only analyzes two political figures, both from the US. While this makes sense for an in-depth and focused comparison, it also means that the findings are rooted in a specific political and cultural context, namely, a Western, democratic, highly mediatized system. As a result, the conclusions speak more to how branding is constructed in U.S. politics than to political branding globally. Because this study focuses on Western political contexts, the findings might not fully apply to countries with different political ideologies, ways of communicating, or election systems. For example, it would be interesting to compare the U.S. context to that of a country like China, where the political structure, role of elections, and media landscape are noticeably different. Analyzing political branding in different types of political systems, like authoritarian regimes versus liberal democracies, could reveal whether certain branding elements are culturally specific or more universal in nature.

Additionally, the size and scope of the sample is another limitation. The analysis draws from a limited dataset, specifically, posts that are posted around a relatively short-term window which is tied to the 2024 U.S. election. While this timeframe offers insights into branding during a politically charged moment, a broader timeline could help identify long-term trends in how candidates navigate permanent stages of modern campaigning (Ruth, 2025, para. 1) and shifts in strategies. Moreover, the sample size itself could be larger. A

bigger dataset would have allowed for a broader analysis with possible different dominant themes.

Finally, there is also the issue of subjectivity in visual content analysis. Even though the coding process followed a structured framework and consistent categories, interpreting images like reading body language or symbolic references is always somewhat subjective. While the analysis tried to stay as objective and transparent as possible, it is important to recognize that interpretations are shaped by the researcher's own background and perspective. Meaning that my personal experiences, beliefs, and assumptions may have shaped how I selected my sources, which aspects of the visual materials I considered most significant, and how I interpreted certain contents. It is important to acknowledge that my findings represent one interpretation of the data rather than a completely neutral one. Acknowledging this limitation strengthens the study's credibility by showing that my conclusions are partly shaped by my own position and background as a researcher.

5.4 Suggestions for future research

Future research could benefit from looking outside the Western perspective and exploring how political branding is constructed across diverse cultural and contexts by analyzing countries that differ in political structures, election processes, and media freedom. Examining political branding over longer periods, not just during elections, could also offer deeper insights into how these strategies evolve over time. Moreover, investigating how audiences engage with political branding by liking, sharing, and commenting on posts would help reveal the impact of political branding by politicians on its audience. Additionally, comparing different social media platforms with each other could also help us understand how politicians adapt their branding strategies to different formats and audiences.

Theoretically, this would deepen our understanding of political branding as a continuous process shaped by political ideology and social media affordances and would contribute to literature on the permanent campaign and visual self-presentation strategies.

5.5 Final reflections and theoretical contributions

This study explored how Kamala Harris and Donald Trump visually construct their political brands on Instagram and what explains their strategies and use. The findings have shown that both presidential candidates intentionally use Instagram as a branding tool, however while there may be small similarities, overall, there were significant differences in how they communicate their brand.

What stands out the most is how visual communication reflects and reinforces broader ideological and identity-based differences. Harris leans more into warmth, diversity, and emotional connection. Her Instagram brand presents empathy and inclusiveness which aligns with her progressive values and identity as the first vice president of the U.S and woman of color. Trump, meanwhile, builds a brand that is rooted in authority, nationalism, and strength. His brand emphasizes control, tradition, and a unifying but exclusive sense of patriotism. These differences are not just stylistic, they reveal how deeply intertwined political branding is with ideology, social identity, and audience strategy. Thus, their personal identities and traits are not separate from their political communication but are carefully crafted and communicated as parts of their political brands.

Importantly, this study moves beyond what has typically been explored in political communication. It adds a new dimension to existing theories of political branding, which have often focused more on language, speeches, or media strategy. By analyzing Instagram, it shows how images not just function as illustrations but as tools for shaping emotional resonance, ideological messaging, and public perception.

Another contribution lies in the nuanced understanding of personalization. While previous research has pointed to a growing trend of human branding in politics, this study reveals that personalization takes different forms depending on who is communicating and why. Harris uses it to humanize and connect while Trump uses it to communicate authority over emotional accessibility. This shows that the concept of personalization is not only about being 'relatable' but about being strategically consistent with the broader ideology that the politician as a brand represents.

Lastly, it is important to notice that the study contributes to ongoing conversations about gender and representation in politics. It shows how different expectations and norms, especially around gender, can shape how leaders present themselves visually. Harris must balance professionalism with approachability while Trump is less careful in projecting dominance. These insights help explain not only what political figures show on social media but also why they choose to show it.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that political branding on Instagram by politicians is not only intentional but shaped by a broader context such as their ideology, identity, the expectations of their audience, and platform logic. These findings open the door to further research into how visual media is used in political branding and what that means for how we perceive good leadership in the digital age.

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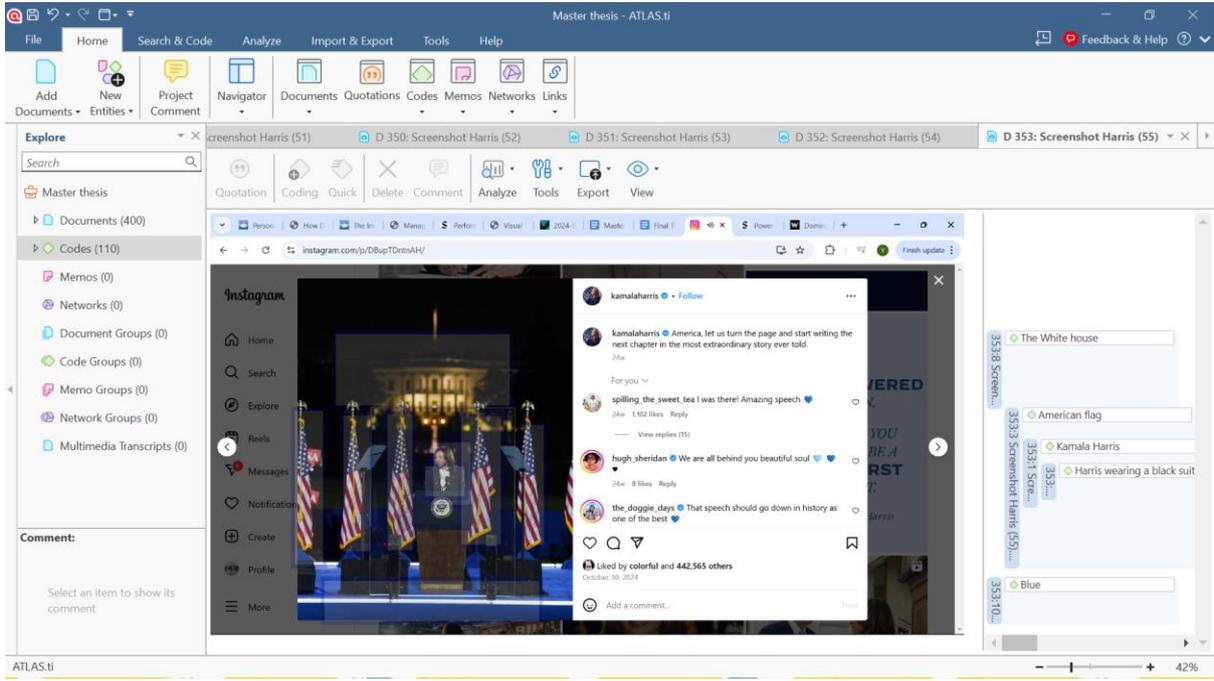
Figure 1. *Initial coding results*

Figure 2. *Axial coding results*

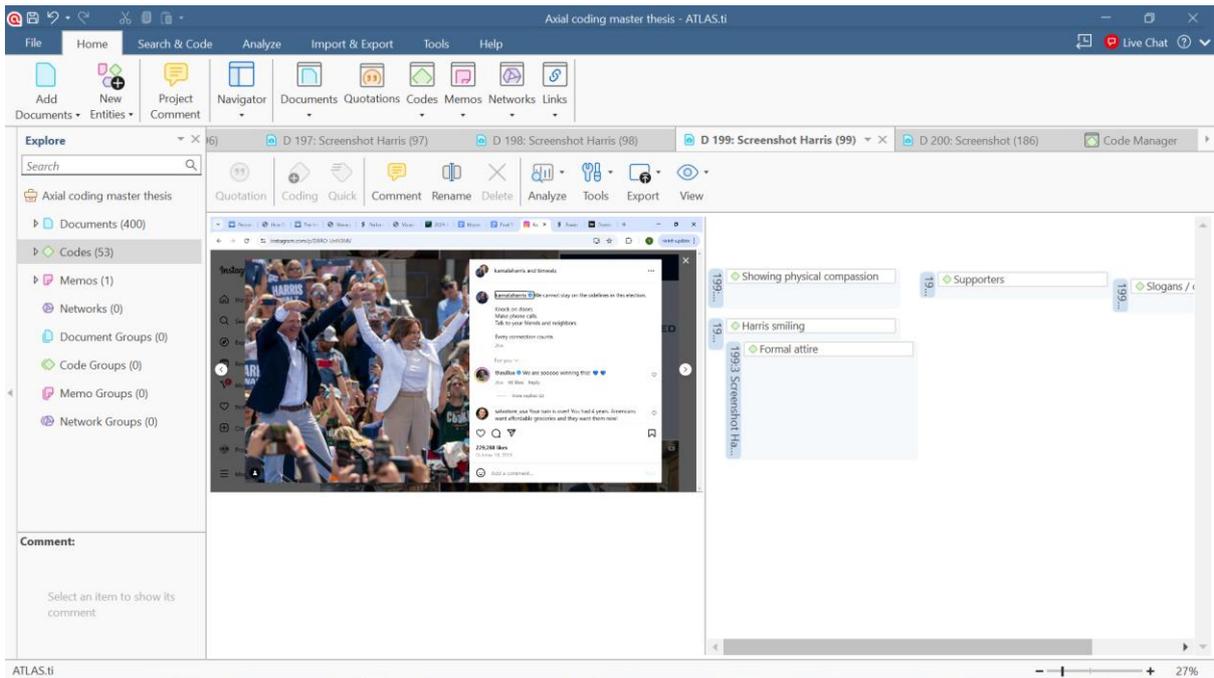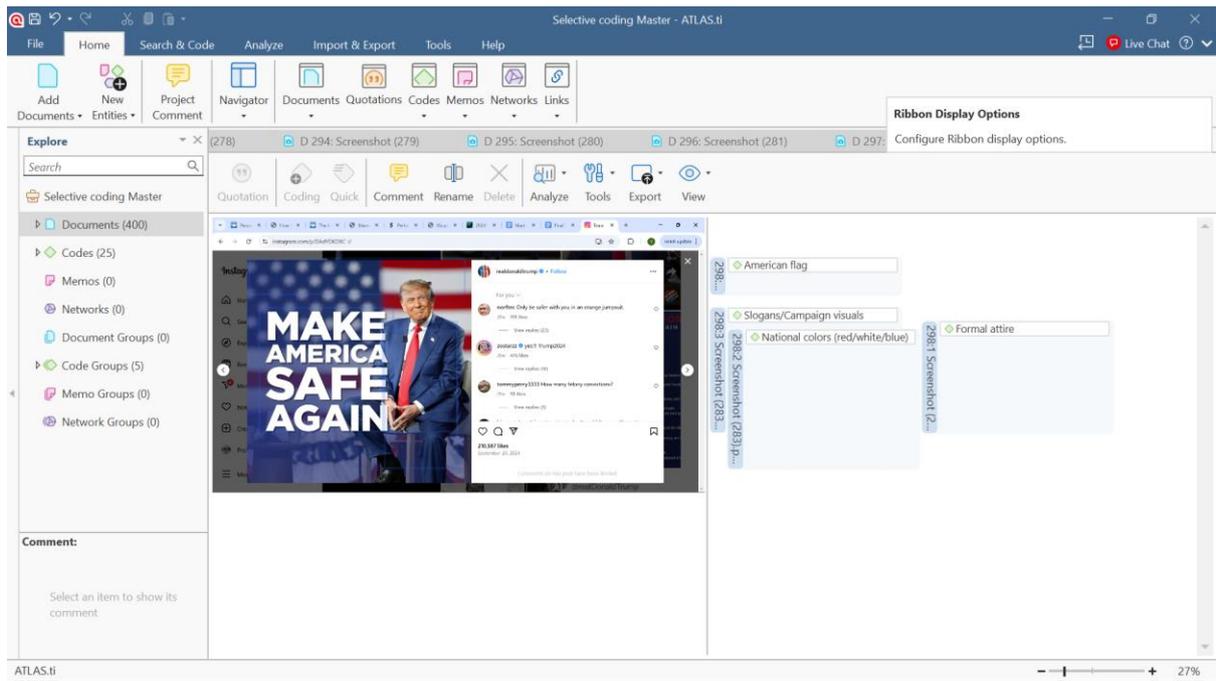**Figure 3.** *Selective coding results*

Confirmation of AI tool usage under the 2024–2025 Academic Policy

I confirm that AI tools were used exclusively for activities permitted under the 2024–2025 academic policy. Their role was strictly supplementary and non-substantive; at no point were they used for analyzing private or sensitive data.

Thesis and codebook title refinement

I used OpenAI's ChatGPT to help improve the phrasing of my thesis title and codebook categories, ensuring greater clarity and adherence to academic conventions.

- *Prompt used:* "Please help me rephrase this research question into a clear, formal academic thesis title: 'How do Kamala Harris and Donald Trump construct their political brand on Instagram?'

Idea generation

In the early stages of the research process, I also used ChatGPT to brainstorm potential thematic keywords related to political branding for the coding process. These suggestions supported my own independent research and were not used for any private or sensitive data.

- *Prompt used:* "What are some potential thematic keywords associated with political branding on social media?"

Grammar, clarity, and synonyms

Additionally, I used QuillBot to improve the grammar, clarity, and flow of several non-analytical sections of the thesis (e.g. the introduction, discussion, and abstract). QuillBot was also used to help identify synonyms to reduce repetition. No original content or research ideas were generated by AI tools.