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DOI <https://doi.org/10.36059/978-966-397-450-7-27>

THE CHANGING ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN 2024 US ELECTIONS: DECODING THE LANGUAGE OF KAMALA HARRIS MEMES

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Social media has had a significant influence on political discourse, altering how politicians and governments interact with their constituents and influence public opinion. One of the most significant examples of the changing role of social media is the current US presidential campaign. Social media have evolved to become a key component of presidential elections. Both presidential candidates former President Donald Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris are increasingly embracing social media platforms such as Twitter – now known as X, Facebook, and Instagram to reach their voters.

Social media sites are an important source of news for many Americans. A recent Pew Research study found that more than 70% of people now get news from social media that is three-quarters of Americans turn to it for a source of news. However, a separate study by the Pew Research Center found that those relying on social media as their main source of news have the lowest levels of political knowledge and engagement compared to those who access other news sources.

When social media first started to become important Democrats had an advantage. Barack Obama was actually the first presidential candidate to employ social media, and it became apparent that it could greatly aid a campaign. That fact was taken into account in 2016 when the Trump team went on to employ Twitter and various platforms very effectively to promote his campaign and attract Republican voters.

According to a May New York Times analysis, until now, former President Donald Trump has dominated TikTok, where pro-Trump posts nearly doubled the number of pro-Biden posts. The popularity of Harris' content on the platform, however, suggests a welcome change for Democrats. The memes reflect a cautious hope around the new nominee from the younger electorate after a long period of fears over Biden's candidacy, who they viewed as too old and centrist. Memes are the other form of delivering your message, and they spread in a more popular way and reach audiences that do not often turn to official media sources for news. Thus, the memification of Harris' presidential campaign is an attempt to establish not only a political movement, but also a cultural movement, particularly targeted to younger voters. This strategy can be regarded as a challenge to the gerontocracy of American politics and an attempt to fulfill the desire among Gen X and Gen Z to see someone different.

'Memeability' is essentially the ability, or the instant acceptance as a meme within a small group or cult. Memeability is having a persona that lends itself to becoming a meme that in turn acts as a mechanism in the production of prominence and is the online celebrity's equivalent of charisma in the social media age. According to Richard Dawkins, who coined the term in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, a meme is any "unit of cultural transmission". In other words, a meme can be anything which is passed from one person to another, whether it be an idea, a behaviour, a quote or so on. However, the majority of memes are simply a still picture (or sometimes .gif) with two blocks of text on the top of the bottom of the picture. The wide adoption of memes on social media manifests the intersection of identity, humor, and digital culture in shaping contemporary political discourse on social media.

Certain memes prevail as a form of political discourse online. Memes have followed American politician and Vice President Kamala Harris since her rise to national prominence. Among the large set of memes surrounding

Harris' political figure, perhaps the most viral are the "coconut tree" meme, the "unburden" meme and "Momala".

The coconut tree meme. The "coconut tree" meme originates from a May 2023 speech Harris gave at a White House event for advancing opportunities for Hispanic Americans. Harris quoted her mother as saying *"I don't know what's wrong with you young people. You think you just fell out of a coconut tree?"* The clip went viral in February 2024 when it was picked up by an X user who wrote: *"This video is literally like medicine to me. I watch it once every week or two and every time I do I get an enduring hit of light euphoria for the next 45 minutes."* The post, from user @evil_female, has had over 1 million views and inspired countless memes. Hawaii senator Brian Schatz posted a photo of himself scaling a literal coconut tree with the caption *"Madam Vice President, we are ready to help"*. Meanwhile, Colorado Governor Jared Polis tweeted out three emojis: *a coconut, a palm tree and an American flag*. Thus, the coconut tree meme has since then turned from an inside joke on X to something of a symbol for Harris' campaign.

The 'unburdened' meme. "What can be, unburdened by what has been" is a phrase that Harris has used for years. She tweeted it out in 2020, and deployed it in many speeches. While the coconut tree meme was one single casual comment from Harris, the "unburdened" meme was born out of the fact the vice president has recycled this specific line countless times.

The meme began when John Cooper (a senior advisor to the House Committee on Homeland Security) posted a compilation on X of all the times Harris has said the phrase "what can be, unburdened by what has been." The video is four minutes long and has been viewed more than 12 million times since it was posted at the end of June.

Similarly with the coconut tree meme, while the initial compilation was stitched together by the Republicans, trying to show her as unoriginal, annoying, and highly incompetent it has had the opposite effect on younger social media users. Here are some of the comments on X: *"baseball cap that just reads 'unburdened' would raise a million alone"* @sam_alberti; *"I'm feeling sooo unburdened by what has been"* @ContraPoints, *"BREAKING: we are now unburdened by what had been"* @theserfstv. It must be admitted that the phrase is obviously unusual. The semantic evaluation of the contexts where she uses the phrase indicates that she generally uses it when talking about progress. The grammar of the phrase is rather intricate, and it is unclear which is the subject: "what has been" or "what can be". It seems to express hope that the future ("what can be") can be better than the past ("what has been"). Thus, the popularization of the phrase began as a viral campaign to make fun of Harris by her political opponents, but it developed into something different, as posters embraced the phrase as evidence of Kamala's unconventional logic and intelligence.

The Momala meme. *Momala*, also spelled *Mamala*, is a nickname and a special name for Kamala Harris, which started as the way her stepchildren, Cole and Ella Emhoff referred to her. Kamala Harris and others used the nickname throughout her vice presidency in social media posts and comments, but widespread use of the name came into broad public attention following an interview on the *Drew Barrymore Show* on April 29th, 2024, in which Barrymore clasped Harris' hands and asked her to “*be Momala of the country*”. Numerous users online commented on the clip of Barrymore and memed it, for example, X user *@henryevil* posted about the clip on April 29th, earning accelerated likes and comments: “*Do you know how insane a conversation has to be to make Kamala seem like the normal one*”. Over time, “Momala” turned into an ironic and sincere way to discuss Harris and appealing to her *maternal qualities* online. The name creates her a stereotype of the mammy – the caretaker, a loving, forgiving, and tranquil individual who gives a sense of security. However, the opponents believe that on the contrary the “*mammy-fication*” of the presidential candidate can be harmful stereotyping for a political figure that there must be a boundary between her private life and professional and political obligations.

It would be difficult to argue why any particular political meme goes viral over another as the campaign's social media experimentation continues.

Social media has evolved to become a pivotal component of 2024 presidential campaigns and it continues to change the political alignment in the elections. Although memes are just two-dimensional funny pictures, they embody more powerful tools for bridging cultural and generation gaps and helping candidates form connections and shared identities with the voters. What is noteworthy in 2024 they represent a growing level of engagement from younger voters. Supposedly, the memification of Kamala Harris' campaign is going to win her the election since she is the first candidate in years if ever to treat young people as a serious and important voting demographic who turn to social media as a news source. Thus, the coconut-themed memes and the widely-memed statement “What can be, unburdened by what has been” have since gone from being an inside joke on X to becoming something of a symbol for her campaign and the sign of the allegiance to her. Obviously, the actual result will come in November, when the election shows whether the changing role social media can represent real political discourse power.

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