

Social Media Influencers and the 2024 United States Presidential Election

**How have Right-Wing Social Media Influencers in the United States' 2024
Presidential Election Interacted with Audiences to Shape Public Opinion?**

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I declare that this research was approved by the SPAIS Ethics Working Group.



Dedications

A huge thank you to Mircea Popa for being such a great supervisor!

Abstract

The 2024 United States presidential election marked a turning point in political communication with the unprecedented involvement of social media influencers (SMIs), particularly those aligned with the right-wing manosphere. This thesis explores how this specific group of influencers mobilised young male voters in favour of Donald Trump, a demographic that ultimately proved decisive in shaping the election outcome. While the political involvement of SMIs has been observed in various global contexts, existing literature struggles to explain the mechanisms through which these actors generate influence. Moreover, this scholarship is predominantly quantitative, which overlooks important rhetorical and relational strategies. This study aims to address these shortcomings by analysing how right-wing SMIs interacted with their audiences to shape public political opinion in the context of the 2024 US Presidential Election. It applies a multi-theoretical framework that draws on two-step flow theory, framing theory, and social influence theory to guide a qualitative content analysis of video transcripts from a sample of Trump-endorsing influencers active during the 2024 election cycle. The findings identify three dominant strategies employed by these influencers: the construction of compelling political narratives, the adaptation of content to align with audience identity and concerns, and the leveraging of collective influence to normalise beliefs and mainstream Trump support. Together, these strategies cultivate trust, generate emotionally resonant messaging, and build perceived political consensus, reinforcing the study's theoretical framework. Among these, narrative construction was the most foundational. More significantly, this study finds that influencers interacted with audiences to shape public opinion by reframing foundational elements of American national identity, drawing on manospheric discourse. Specifically, they reinterpreted American exceptionalism to emphasise a narrative of national decline and used civil religion to moralise allegiance to Trump. These reframed concepts served as tools of political mobilisation and were embedded in a digitally native, mass-oriented discourse. This thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving role of non-traditional

actors in electoral politics, highlighting how SMIs operate not only as message carriers but as ideologically active agents shaping political realities. By providing an original analysis of digital political communication, it offers critical insight into how right-wing SMI influencers are transforming voter engagement and the broader terrain of democratic participation.

Word Count: 10,000

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List of Abbreviations

EoI Element of Influence

MAGA Make America Great Again

QCA Qualitative Content Analysis

RFK Jr. Robert F. Kennedy Junior

SM Social Media

SMI Social Media Influencer

UFC Ultimate Fighting Championship

US United States

Tables and Diagrams

Table 1

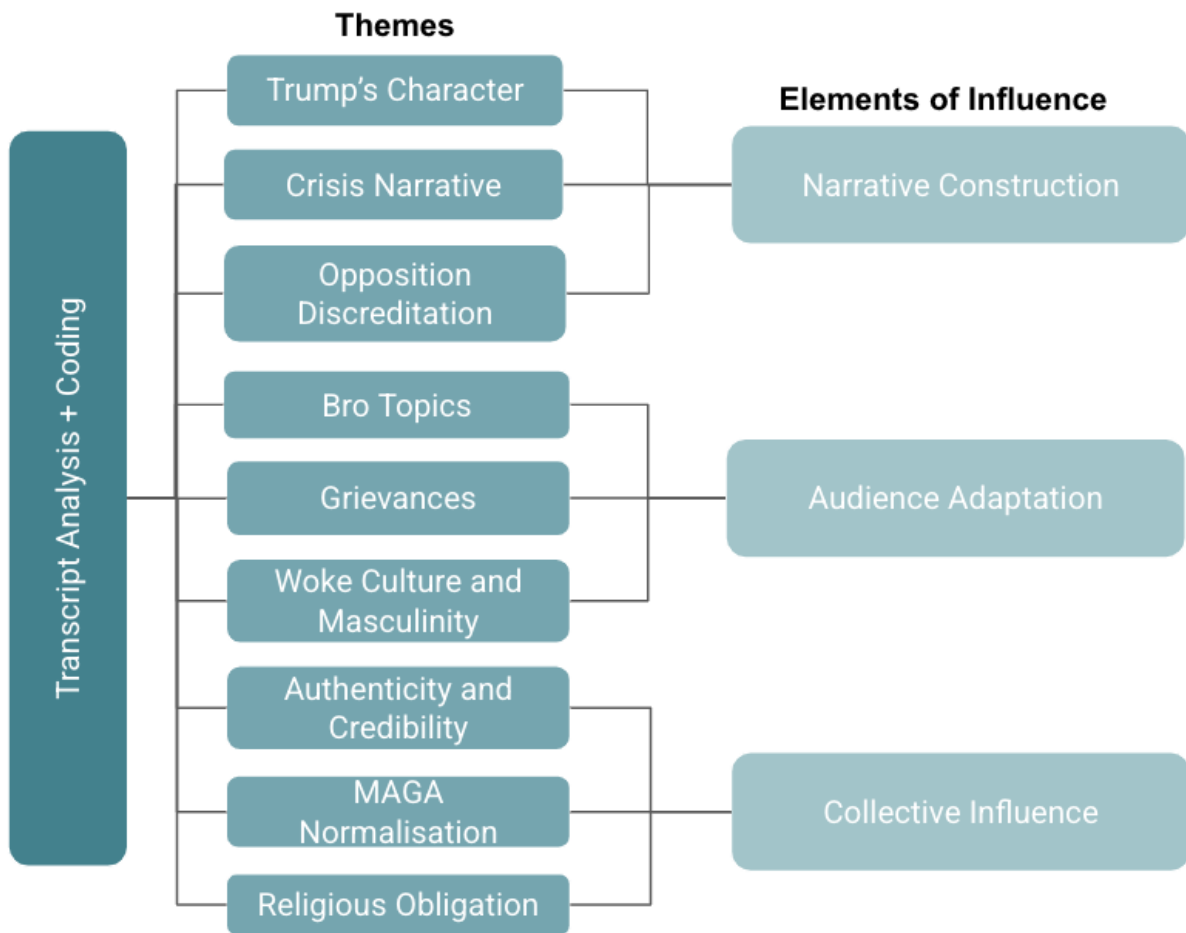
Influencer:	Key Information and Followers on Main Platforms:
Adin Ross	American online streamer. 7.2 million Twitch followers, mostly young men (Washinton, 2024). Output described as misogynistic, transphobic, homophobic and racist (Hall, 2025).
Ben Shapiro	Conservative political commentator, media proprietor, and attorney. 7.23 million YouTube subscribers. Engages with masculinity and anti-woke themes (Méndez, 2023). Podcast audience skews 18-44 with 86% male (Krakow, 2022).
Bryce Hall	Internet Personality. 23.6 million Tik Tok followers. Posts masculinity content (Chandonnet, 2024).
Bussin' with the Boys	Podcast hosted by former NFL players. 607,000 YouTube subscribers. Politically incorrect and culturally conservative content (Marcus, 2024). Over 70% male audience aged 21-34 (Anheuser-Busch, 2025).
Charlie Kirk	Conservative activist and media personality. 3.22 million YouTube subscribers.

	<p>72% male viewership (UncommonAd Space, no date).</p> <p>Founded Turning Point USA, which promotes themes of masculinity and the importance of gender roles in society (Davis, 2021).</p>
Dana White	<p>President of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), which has a mostly young-male audience (Statista, 2024).</p> <p>10.3 million Instagram Followers.</p> <p>Orchestrated Trump's engagement with manospheric-linked influencers and engages with themes of masculinity (Timms, 2024; Gregory, 2024)</p>
Elon Musk	<p>Businessman known for his leadership of Tesla, SpaceX, and X.</p> <p>219.5 million X followers.</p> <p>Posts far-right content, including transphobic content and platforms racist and sexist provocateurs like the white nationalist Nick Fuentes (Haskins, 2024).</p> <p>Popular amongst young men (Solomon, 2024).</p>
Andrew Schulz	<p>Runs a comedy podcast called Flagrant known for its unfiltered, unapologetic, and unruly hot takes engaging with themes of masculinity and feminism (Fox, 2024).</p> <p>1.89 million YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>Attracts a demographic of young to middle-aged men (Fox, 2024).</p>
Jake Paul	<p>Actor and Professional Boxer.</p> <p>20.9 million YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>Post masculinity content (Chandonnet, 2024).</p> <p>Significant young male following (Weekman, 2024).</p>

Joe Rogan	<p>19.7 million YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>Estimated 81% male Audience (Haskins, 2024).</p> <p>Engages with masculine themes on his podcast (Smith, 2025).</p>
Jordan Peterson	<p>Psychologist.</p> <p>8.68 million YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>Promotes sexist and anti-feminist ideas (Hall, 2025).</p> <p>Large young male following (Bryant, 2018).</p>
Lex Fridman	<p>Computer scientist and podcaster.</p> <p>4.69 million YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>Known for extremely ponderous interviews with controversial masculine figures (Chafkin, 2024).</p> <p>76% male audience (Similarweb, 2025).</p>
Logan Paul	<p>Influencer and wrestler.</p> <p>23.6 million YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>Post masculinity content (Chandonnet, 2024).</p> <p>Audience predominantly between 18-24, with 60% male (Semeraro, 2023).</p>
Nelk Boys	<p>YouTube Personalities.</p> <p>8.43 million YouTube subscribers, 88.7% male, target audience 16-25 (StarNgage, no date).</p> <p>Built their audience harnessing frenzied masculine energy (Clarke, 2023).</p>

Robert F. Kennedy Jr (RFK Jr.)	<p>Politician, Lawyer and Conspiracy Theorist.</p> <p>5 million Instagram followers.</p> <p>Strongly engages with anti-transgenderism (Rissman, 2025; Novelo, 2024).</p> <p>Popular among young, male voters (Tierney, 2025; Smith, 2024).</p>
Theo Von	<p>Stand-up comedian and podcaster.</p> <p>3.83 million YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>Has engaged with masculinity and anti-transgender themes (Salt, 2024).</p> <p>Podcast popular amongst young men (Wolfson, 2024).</p>
Tucker Carlson	<p>Conservative political commentator who hosted the nightly political talk show <i>Tucker Carlson Tonight</i> on Fox News.</p> <p>3.95 YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>Engages with misogynist and anti-transgender themes (BBC, 2019; Ramirez, 2023a).</p> <p>Aims to attract a younger male audience (Ramirez, 2023b)</p>
Vivek Ramaswamy	<p>Entrepreneur and Politician.</p> <p>3.6 million X followers.</p> <p>Engages with anti-woke and anti-transgender themes (TOI, 2024; Pidd, 2023).</p> <p>Recognised as important in Trump's bid to attract young male voters (The Juggernaut, 2024).</p>

Diagram 1



Chapter 1: Introduction

In recent years, social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as influential actors in political communication, capable of shaping discourse, endorsing candidates, and mobilising audiences. Their ability to reach large audiences, build personal rapport, and sway opinion renders them significant, if unconventional, players in political communication (Muth and Peter, 2023; Makse and Zava, 2025).

While definitions vary (Freberg *et al*, 2011; Gupta and Mahajan, 2019; Aw and Labrecque, 2020; Raun, 2018), I adopt a broad and non-exclusive definition of SMIs as individuals who leverage social media platforms to influence opinion and behaviour, regardless of their primary profession, provided they demonstrate the reach, intimacy, and impact typical of traditional influencers.

SMI's political relevance has grown across global contexts, from the 2019 European Parliament and Indonesian elections to the 2024 United Kingdom general election (Kluver, 2024; Monica *et al*, 2023; Oldroyd, 2024). Nowhere, however, has their impact been more pronounced than in the 2024 United States (US) presidential election. In a departure from conventional campaign strategies, Donald Trump's campaign actively courted figures aligned with the manosphere, a loosely connected online network characterised by hypermasculine, anti-feminist, and often right-wing ideologies (Ging, 2019; Laughren, 2024), signalling their perceived political utility. Influencers such as Elon Musk, Joe Rogan, and Jake Paul were central in shaping political narratives and mobilising younger male voters, a demographic previously critical to Democratic victories (Brown, 2024; Pew Research Centre, 2024). The significance of these influencers as political actors was further underscored by their invitation to Trump's inauguration and his administration's diplomatic pressure on Romania to support Andrew Tate, a manosphere figure under legal scrutiny. Tate's own claims of converting millions to right-wing views illustrate the persuasive potential of influencer-driven politics (Ahmed, 2025).

Despite rising scholarly interest, little qualitative research has examined how SMIs construct persuasive political messages and influence audiences. This dissertation addresses this shortcoming by exploring how US-based right-wing influencers interacted with their audiences to shape public political opinion through content and engagement strategies. Through a qualitative content analysis of influencer discourse, I found three core influence strategies of narrative construction, audience adaptation and collective influence, reinforcing the communication theories outlined in my theoretical framework. Among these, narrative construction was the most foundational. More significantly, I found that influencers strategically reframed foundational elements of American national identity. Notably, they reworked American exceptionalism and civil religion using manospheric discourse to frame national decline while positioning Trump as a divinely ordained restorer of lost greatness. In doing so, they sacralised, gendered and moralised political allegiance to Trump.

My dissertation unfolds as follows: Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature and asserts my research question; Chapter 3 defines key concepts; Chapter 4 presents this study's theoretical framework; Chapter 5 outlines the methodology; Chapter 6 presents my findings; Chapter 7 discusses the results; Chapter 8 reflects on possible limitations; and Chapter 9 concludes.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews literature at the intersection of social media (SM) and politics to contextualise my dissertation's aims. While existing studies highlight SM's political influence and recognise SMIs' political roles in mobilisation and elections (Arackal, 2015; Shirky, 2011; Safiullah *et al*, 2017), few examine the specific communicative strategies SMIs use to shape political attitudes. Moreover, a dominance of quantitative research (Zimmerman *et al*, 2020; Lou and Yuan, 2019) has left qualitative dimensions, particularly regarding right-wing influencers in the 2024 US election, underexplored. This review explores three core themes in the literature: the SM-politics nexus, SMIs' evolving political role, and the growing impact of right-wing SMIs in the US, framing this study's qualitative focus on their engagement strategies.

Social Media and Political Engagement

Literature on SM's rise highlights it has transformed political engagement. For example, Boulianne (2020) evidences a consistent link between SM use and political participation across countries, positioning platforms as key facilitators of civic involvement. However, some scholars question whether digital engagement translates into sustained political action, especially among youth, arguing traditional civic engagement and political events may be more effective (Ohme *et al*, 2020). Despite such scepticism, the literature broadly affirms SM's capacity to disseminate political content, foster interaction, and mobilise users (Pérez-Curiel, 2020; Lilleker and Jackson, 2017). Scholars further emphasise its function as a political communication channel (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2013; Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Daşlı, 2019), its ability to cultivate protest (Boulianne, 2020), and its facilitation of 'networked individualism', wherein digital networks increasingly shape political views over traditional social ties (Loader *et al*, 2014, p.143).

SM's strategic use in political campaigns is also well-documented. Trump's prolific online presence, particularly on Twitter, attracted significant scholarly attention for its media amplification and agenda-setting during the 2016 US election (Francia, 2017; Groshek and Koc-Michalska, 2017; Oh and Kumar, 2017; Stolee and Caton, 2018; Chadwick, 2017). Furthermore, SM platforms increasingly bypass legacy media, with Enli (2017) and Pew Research Center (2016) noting their role as primary news sources in the 2016 election, a trend crucial to understanding the evolution of political communication.

The Political Role of SMIs

Literature on voter engagement increasingly focuses on SMIs. Typically defined as an independent third-party endorser shaping audience attitudes through SM (Freberg *et al*, 2011, p.90), SMIs were initially studied in marketing contexts which framed them as bridges between media and passive audiences, connecting brands with consumers (Shamim and Azam, 2024; Wang and Scheinbaum, 2017; Katz and Lazarsfeld's, 1955). More recent work tracks their shift into political spaces, noting that influencers formerly focused on entertainment now share political content (Zilinsky *et al*, 2020; Harff and Schmuck, 2024a). Consequently, they have become political intermediaries, especially for audiences disengaged from traditional news (Bode and Dalrymple, 2016; Turcotte *et al*, 2015), highlighting SMIs' emerging role in shaping public opinion (Ding *et al*, 2023).

Debate remains surrounding SMI capacity to catalyse real-world participation. While some scholars endorse the Gateway Hypothesis, suggesting online engagement with influencers may spark offline participation (see: Dekoninck and Schmuck, 2022; Cheng *et al*, 2024), others question the depth of such influence (see: Jackson and Darrow, 2005; Wood and Herbst, 2007; Frizzell, 2011; Morin *et al*, 2012).

Atkinson and DeWitt (2016) compellingly challenge the latter view, however, showing stronger SMI influence among less politically engaged audiences compared to the more well-informed students these studies focus on. Harff and Schmuck (2024b) similarly find that parasocial bonds and low political knowledge increases reliance on SMIs for political cues, driving participation. These findings indicate SMIs' potential to activate disengaged publics (Austin et al, 2008).

Research on how influencers mobilise audiences is emerging but limited. Schmuck *et al* (2022) find that SMIs' simplified messaging appeals to youth, while Naderer (2023) notes that shared interests can encourage engagement among politically apathetic users. However, these insights remain limited by a reliance on quantitative methods, such as surveys and engagement metrics, which overlook the rhetorical and relational strategies in play. This study responds to this shortcoming with a qualitative analysis of how SMIs construct political influence discursively.

Right-Wing Influencers in the US Political Landscape

The US has become a key site for examining political influencer engagement. While both major parties use SMIs, recent research highlights the growing prominence of right-wing figures. For example, celebrity endorsements, such as Oprah Winfrey's support for Barack Obama in 2008, have long shown the persuasive power of public figures (Garthwaite and Moore, 2008). Right-wing influencers, however, have expanded this dynamic by cultivating dedicated online communities that engage with alternative political narratives beyond mainstream media. Alexandre *et al* (2022), for instance, analyse actor James Woods' endorsement of Trump, positioning him as an opinion leader within personal networks (Katz, 1957). Meanwhile, Maly (2020) and Hachten (2017) highlight how figures like Brittany Pettibone and evangelical leaders leveraged digital platforms to shape the ideological climate behind Trump's rise.

Trump's 2024 campaign marked an unprecedented surge in right-wing SMI activity. Influential figures such as businessman Elon Musk, UFC president Dana White, and professional boxer and actor Jake Paul actively promoted Trump to their younger male audiences, a key voting demographic Trump was targeting. Streamers like Zach Hoyt and Adin Ross amplified this reach, broadcasting Trump-related content to millions (Bowens and Withrow, 2025). In contrast, Kamala Harris' refusal to appear on Joe Rogan's podcast, where Trump was prominently featured, emphasised influencers' strategic role in shaping political discourse (Hassenger, 2024). A study by Stocking *et al* (2025) study confirmed that conservative influencers outperformed liberal counterparts in both reach and engagement during the 2024 election, reinforcing the political clout of right-wing SMIs. These developments underscore the contemporary relevance of right-wing influencers in US politics and motivate my dissertation's contribution, to qualitatively analyse the strategies these influencers use to engage audiences and shape political attitudes.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the literature underscores SMI's growing role in shaping political attitudes and influencing electoral behaviour. However, it remains methodologically skewed toward quantitative approaches, often neglecting how influencers engage audiences and construct persuasive political narratives. The unprecedented visibility of right-wing influencers during Trump's 2024 campaign reveals an area for contribution, prompting the question: How have right-wing SMIs in the US interacted with audiences to shape public opinion?

Chapter 3: Key Definitions

This chapter defines SMIs and the manosphere and underscores their combined relevance in the 2024 US presidential election.

3.1 Defining SMIs

My dissertation adopts Hudders, Jans and Veriman's (2020) framework, defining SMIs through three key characteristics of reach, impact, and intimacy, core traits enabling their political influence. These also inform my study's influencer inclusion criteria.

Reach refers to an SMI's ability to influence a wide audience, directly through a substantial follower base or indirectly via strategic network ties (p.8). However, my study focuses specifically on direct reach, as follower count offers a more quantifiable and consistent metric for determining inclusion in the sample.

Impact captures an influencer's ability to shape audience decisions, often through perceived expertise in specific niches such as fashion, fitness or gaming (Hudders, Jans and Veriman, 2020; Lin *et al*, 2018; Schouten *et al*, 2021). This is enhanced by cultivating a distinctive, authentic personal brand that resonates with followers (Khamis *et al*, 2017).

Intimacy refers to the perceived closeness between influencers and their audiences, developed through sharing of personal content and direct interaction (Jans and Veriman, 2020; Enke and Borchers, 2021). These parasocial relationships foster feelings of familiarity and relatability, enhancing influencers' persuasive power (Supriyanto, 2023; Schouten *et al*, 2021; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020).

Moreover, given that influencers display these characteristics, my definition remains deliberately broad and non-exclusive, encompassing individuals for whom influencing is not a primary occupation but who use SM to shape discourse. For example, figures like Vivek Ramaswamy, both politician and active SM presence, embody this dual role, using digital platforms to influence public opinion. Such flexibility enables a more nuanced exploration of how varied actors mobilise influence and shape political narratives online.

3.2 SMIs in the 2024 US Election and the Manosphere

The 2024 US presidential election offers a timely case study of SMI influence on electoral outcomes, with many analysts citing SMIs as key to Donald Trump's return to office. Exit polls highlight young men, especially those aged 18-29, as pivotal voters, with increased turnout linked to targeted engagement by influencers engaging with manosphere-adjacent themes (Yerushalmy, 2024; Marcus, 2024; Haskins, 2024).

Originating in 2009, the manosphere refers to loosely connected online communities focused on men's rights, often marked by anti-feminist and misogynistic rhetoric, especially within the US context (Hoebanx, 2024, p.543; Laughren, 2024, p.2; Ging, 2019). It gained wider attention through Ian Ironwood's *The Manosphere: A New Hope for Masculinity* (2013) and has been linked to offline violence and harassment campaigns like Gamergate (Garkey, 2014; Dewey, 2014; Williams, 2015; Chemaly, 2015; Ging, 2019). At its ideological core is the 'Red Pill' metaphor, symbolising a perceived awakening to feminist domination and societal manipulation, uniting followers around a shared sense of masculine decline (Ging, 2019; Ribeiro *et al*, 2021).

Trump's 2024 campaign strategically aligned with SMIs who circulated manospheric themes, particularly around gender, masculinity, and anti-feminism, to mobilise young, right-leaning men. Notably, 56% of young men voted for Trump, more support from this group than any republican candidate has received in over two decades (Wheeler, 2024; Cox, 2024). To clarify, influencers examined in this dissertation do not necessarily self-identify as part of the manosphere, nor should they be automatically classified within it. However, they have engaged with related discourses, such as critiques of feminism or advocacy for traditional masculinity, situating them within a broader, loosely connected network of manosphere-adjacent content creators. Figures like Joe Rogan, whose audience is over 80% male and often engages with themes of masculinity (YouGov, 2023; Smith, 2025), illustrate the mainstreaming of manosphere-adjacent narratives.

The manosphere's influence reached new levels of mainstream political relevance during the period of the 2024 election. Long-standing frustrations among young men, such as economic stagnation, job dissatisfaction, and perceived erosion of traditional gender roles, surfaced with renewed intensity (Greenstone and Looney, 2011; Haskins, 2024). Research further shows that many young white American men view the empowerment of marginalised groups as occurring at their expense, fostering a sense of victimhood (Hanson *et al*, 2022). Moreover, Vescio and Schermerhorn (2021) show how beliefs about masculinity can shape political outcomes. Together, this underscores the strategic value of Trump targeting this demographic through influencers who engage with manospheric themes. Accordingly, my dissertation's focus on the mechanisms through which manosphere-adjacent SMIs shaped audience opinion in the 2024 presidential election is both timely and pertinent.

Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework

This study employs an integrated framework combining framing theory, two-step flow theory, and social influence theory to analyse how right-wing manospheric-adjacent SMIs, shaped public opinion during the 2024 US presidential election. These theories capture three interrelated stages of influence being message construction, dissemination, and audience impact. Applied collectively, they provide a comprehensive lens for understanding SMIs as political actors rather than mere content creators.

Though predominantly applied in marketing (Cheung *et al*, 2022; Glucksman, 2017; Fakhreddin and Foroudi, 2022; Fitriati *et al*, 2022), these theories are relevant to political communication. Influence, persuasion, and behaviour change, central to consumer decision-making, are similarly critical to voter mobilisation and opinion shaping. This application bridges a theoretical gap in the political communication literature, revealing how SMIs act as content framers and behavioural mobilisers (Goodwin *et al*, 2023).

Framing theory explains how SMIs construct emotionally resonant and ideologically coherent narratives that simplify complex political issues for disengaged audiences (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999). Unlike traditional journalists, SMIs employ informal, affect-driven content optimised for digital engagement (Gonzalez *et al*, 2024; Newman *et al*, 2021). These frames shape how followers interpret complex issues and assign meaning (de Vreese, 2005; Gonzalez *et al*, 2024; Chong and Druckman, 2007; Odmark, 2021). Despite criticisms of conceptual vagueness (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; Matthes, 2009), the theory remains foundational for this study, establishing the first phase of the influence process: the creation of compelling, ideologically driven narratives that guide how followers interpret and react to political

developments. In the 2024 election, such framing may have helped redefine Trump's candidacy and challenge mainstream discourse.

Two-step flow theory situates SMIs as mediators who selectively filter and amplify political content to align with their brand and audience values (Lazarsfeld *et al*, 1968; Ahmed *et al*, 2017; Dubois and Gaffney, 2014; Bause, 2021). This gatekeeping role allows them to elevate certain narratives while marginalising others, shaping the information landscape more dynamically than traditional media (Shmalenko *et al*, 2021; Schmuck *et al*, 2022). Their perceived capability of disseminating information amongst young people, extensive social capital, and centrality within online communities (Enke and Borchers, 2021; Muth and Peter, 2023; Bause, 2021) enhance this curatorial power. This narrative control likely allowed SMIs in the 2024 election to elevate certain grievances and ideological positions, shaping the political conversation more effectively than many legacy media outlets.

Social influence theory highlights the relational mechanisms underpinning SMI persuasion.

Through parasocial bonds, perceived authenticity, and peer-like relatability, influencers foster trust and ideological conformity (Kelman, 1958; Hudders *et al*, 2021). Their followers often interpret alignment with the influencer as a form of social belonging, reinforcing ideological loyalty and political conformity (Kelman, 1958; Li, 2013; Khaeriyah and Natsir, 2024). This emotional proximity not only strengthens belief adoption but also drives behavioural mobilisation, especially among marginalised or disillusioned groups (Cheung *et al*, 2022; Hu *et al*, 2020; Aw and Chuah, 2021). In the 2024 US election, these dynamics likely helped to cultivate political alignment with Trump.

Collectively, these theories trace a full cycle of digital political influence, how narratives are framed, disseminated, and internalised. This integrated framework positions SMIs as strategic actors within

networked, emotionally resonant, and ideologically motivated systems of political communication.

Applied to Trump's 2024 campaign, it reveals how influencer-led discourse may have translated into shifts in public sentiment and electoral impact.

Chapter 5: Methodology

Research Design

I use a qualitative research design to explore how SMIs interact with audiences and use persuasive strategies to shape political narratives, engage audiences, and influence public opinion. Qualitative methods enable a nuanced, context-sensitive analysis of language, symbolism, and meaning-making practices, crucial for unpacking the complex dynamics of digital influence (Ochieng, 2009; Choy, 2014). Unlike quantitative approaches, it prioritises depth over generalisability, offering deeper insight into ideological messaging and audience interactions. Its interpretive flexibility makes it well-suited to examining the layered, discursive nature of social influence in online spaces.

Methodological Approach

I use Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) to systematically interpret textual and visual data, uncovering patterns and themes relevant to how right-wing SMIs influence audiences (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009). Defined as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2018, p.24), QCA provides a robust framework for contextual analysis. Among the various approaches to QCA (Mayring, 2014; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Elo and Kyngäs, 2008), I adopt Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) following Braun and Clarke’s (2012; 2013; 2014; 2019; 2020) six-phase framework, as applied in Byrne’s (2022) worked example, to ensure rigour and transparency.

The analytical process includes:

1. **Familiarisation:** Transcripts of social media content are generated and reviewed for initial impressions.
2. **Generating codes:** I import the transcripts into NVivo software so that I can use its organisational tools, such as code filing, enabling me personally to identify and categorise themes and codes systematically.
3. **Constructing themes:** Related codes are clustered into themes and sub-themes based on shared meaning.
4. **Reviewing themes:** Themes are refined using Braun and Clarke's (2012, p.65) evaluative questions to ensure coherence with the data and research aims.
5. **Defining and naming themes:** Themes are defined in line with Patton's (1990) dual criteria. Each theme must offer a clear and internally consistent interpretation of the data, distinct from other themes. Definitions are at the start of each theme throughout Chapter 6. Simultaneously, all themes should collectively form a coherent narrative that aligns with the dataset's content and provides insight into the research question (Byrne, 2022, p.1405).
6. **Producing the report:** Themes are woven into a coherent narrative addressing the research question (see Chapter 7).

A code is a label or a short phrase that captures a key idea in a segment of data, helping to tag content with similar meaning or context (Saldana, 2013, p.3). These are not presented in my findings but were part of my theme construction process. Examples of codes included sports talk, liberal propaganda, and anti-woke.

A theme is a meaningful pattern that emerges across coded data relevant to the research question (Boyatzis, 1998, p.4). In this study, I generated themes by clustering related codes, allowing for connections between the data and broader conceptual ideas to be drawn. Examples include Trump's character and opposition discreditation, outlined in chapter 6.

The term 'element of influence' (EoI) is unique to this study, used to group themes under overarching categories that capture how right-wing SMIs shape and manage audience engagement. These include narrative construction, audience adaptation, and collective influence.

Data Collection

I collected data through purposive sampling of Trump endorsement videos from a variety of platforms, including YouTube and X. This method was selected to ensure the inclusion of influencers most likely to provide insights relevant to my study's aims (Campbell *et al*, 2020).

Inclusion Criteria

Influencers and videos were selected based on the following criteria, aligned with my study's SMI definition of influence, reach, impact, and intimacy:

1. They have engaged with manospheric-related discourses (e.g. men's rights, anti-feminism, traditional masculinity), positioning them within the broader manosphere network.
2. They have publicly endorsed Trump's 2024 campaign between November 15, 2022, and November 5, 2024.

3. They have a minimum following of 500,000 followers across their personal social media platforms.
4. Selected videos must show significant engagement (e.g. views, likes, shares, comments).

In total, I analysed 46 transcripts, spanning podcasts, videos, livestreams, and Republican rally speeches, from 18 right-wing SMIs endorsing Trump. The number of transcripts per influencer varied depending on the extent of their Trump-related content.

Ethical Considerations

All content analysed was publicly available and produced by public figures, minimising ethical risks related to privacy or anonymisation (Townsend and Wallace, 2016). This study adheres to the relevant platform terms of service and complies with intellectual property guidelines (GOV.UK, 2021).

Chapter 6: Findings

Three key interconnected elements of influence emerged from my findings being narrative construction, audience adaptation, and collective influence (**Diagram 1**), revealing how SMIs interacted with their audiences to shape public opinion. Representative quotes are included in the following findings. See **Table 1** for influencer context and relevance.

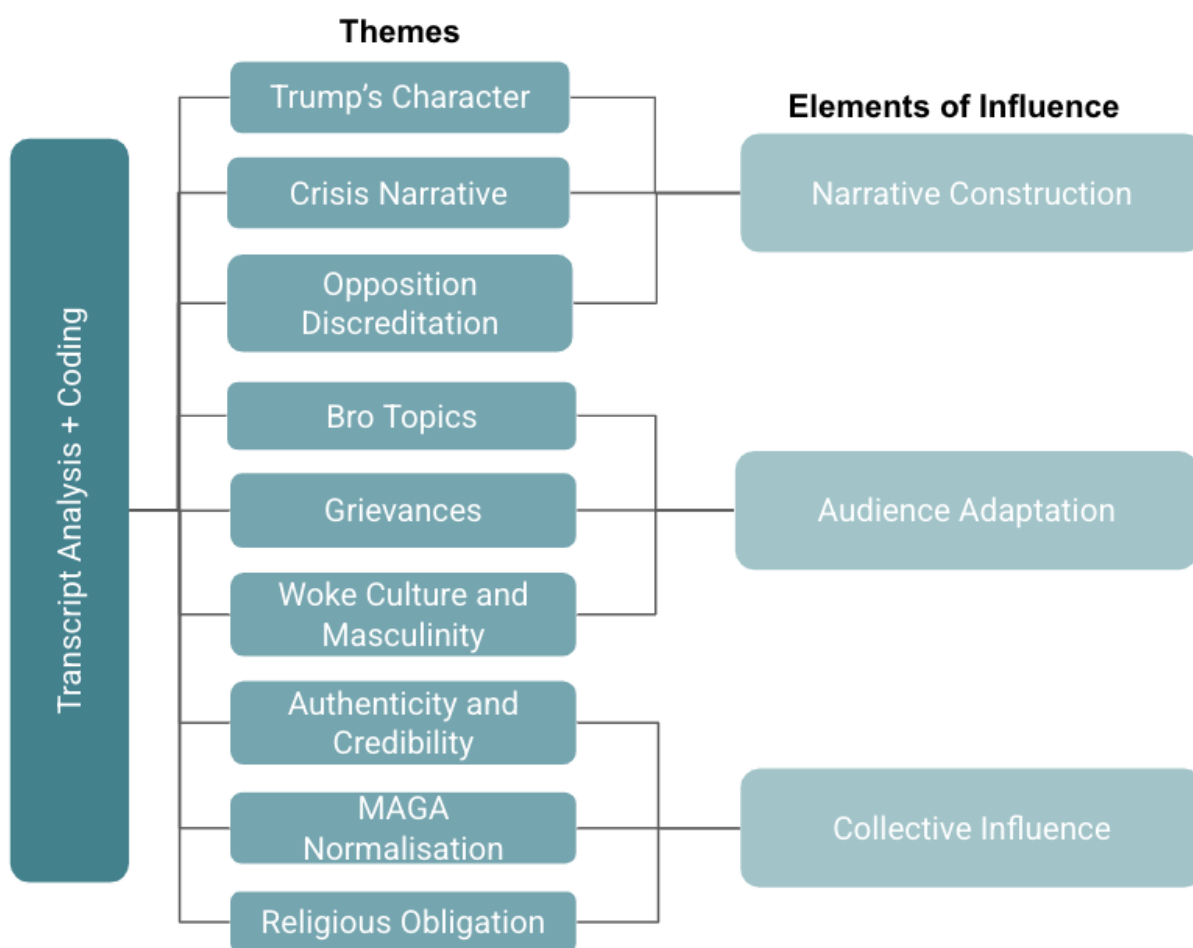


Diagram 1

Table 1	
Influencer:	Key Information and Followers on Main Platforms:
Adin Ross	<p>American online streamer.</p> <p>7.2 million Twitch followers, mostly young men (Washinton, 2024).</p> <p>Output described as misogynistic, transphobic, homophobic and racist (Hall, 2025).</p>
Ben Shapiro	<p>Conservative political commentator, media proprietor, and attorney.</p> <p>7.23 million YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>Engages with masculinity and anti-woke themes (Méndez, 2023).</p> <p>Podcast audience skews 18-44 with 86% male (Krakow, 2022).</p>
Bryce Hall	<p>Internet Personality.</p> <p>23.6 million Tik Tok followers.</p> <p>Posts masculinity content (Chandonnet, 2024).</p> <p>Recognised as important in Trump's appeal to young men (Chandonnet, 2024)</p>
Bussin' with the Boys	<p>Podcast hosted by former NFL players.</p> <p>607,000 YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>Politically incorrect and culturally conservative content (Marcus, 2024).</p> <p>Over 70% male audience aged 21-34 (Anheuser-Busch, 2025).</p>
Charlie Kirk	<p>Conservative activist and media personality.</p> <p>3.22 million YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>72% male viewership (UncommonAd Space, no date).</p>

	<p>Founded Turning Point USA, which promotes themes of masculinity and the importance of gender roles in society (Davis, 2021).</p>
Dana White	<p>President of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), which has a mostly young-male audience (Statista, 2024).</p> <p>10.3 million Instagram Followers.</p> <p>Orchestrated Trump's engagement with manospheric-linked influencers and engages with themes of masculinity (Timms, 2024; Gregory, 2024)</p>
Elon Musk	<p>Businessman known for his leadership of Tesla, SpaceX, and X.</p> <p>219.5 million X followers.</p> <p>Posts far-right content, including transphobic content and platforms racist and sexist provocateurs like the white nationalist Nick Fuentes (Haskins, 2024).</p> <p>Popular amongst young men (Solomon, 2024).</p>
Andrew Schulz	<p>Runs a comedy podcast called Flagrant known for its unfiltered, unapologetic, and unruly hot takes engaging with themes of masculinity and feminism (Fox, 2024).</p> <p>1.89 million YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>Attracts a demographic of young to middle-aged men (Fox, 2024).</p>
Jake Paul	<p>Actor and Professional Boxer.</p> <p>20.9 million YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>Post masculinity content (Chandonnet, 2024).</p> <p>Significant young male following (Weekman, 2024).</p>

Joe Rogan	<p>Podcaster, comedian and Actor.</p> <p>19.7 million YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>Estimated 81% male Audience (Haskins, 2024).</p> <p>Engages with masculine themes on his podcast (Smith, 2025).</p>
Jordan Peterson	<p>Psychologist.</p> <p>8.68 million YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>Promotes sexist and anti-feminist ideas (Hall, 2025).</p> <p>Large young male following (Bryant, 2018).</p>
Lex Fridman	<p>Computer scientist and podcaster.</p> <p>4.69 million YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>Known for extremely ponderous interviews with controversial masculine figures (Chafkin, 2024).</p> <p>76% male audience (Similarweb, 2025).</p>
Logan Paul	<p>Influencer and wrestler.</p> <p>23.6 million YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>Post masculinity content (Chandonnet, 2024).</p> <p>Audience predominantly between 18-24, with 60% male (Semeraro, 2023).</p>
Nelk Boys	<p>YouTube Personalities.</p> <p>8.43 million YouTube subscribers, 88.7% male, target audience 16-25 (StarNgage, no date).</p> <p>Built their audience harnessing frenzied masculine energy (Clarke, 2023).</p>

Robert F. Kennedy Jr (RFK Jr.)	<p>Politician, Lawyer and Conspiracy Theorist.</p> <p>5 million Instagram followers.</p> <p>Strongly engages with anti-transgenderism (Rissman, 2025; Novelo, 2024).</p> <p>Popular among young, male voters (Tierney, 2025; Smith, 2024).</p>
Theo Von	<p>Stand-up comedian and podcaster.</p> <p>3.83 million YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>Has engaged with masculinity and anti-transgender themes (Salt, 2024).</p> <p>Podcast is popular amongst young men (Wolfson, 2024).</p>
Tucker Carlson	<p>Conservative political commentator who hosted the nightly political talk show <i>Tucker Carlson Tonight</i> on Fox News.</p> <p>3.95 YouTube subscribers.</p> <p>Engages with misogynist and anti-transgender themes (BBC, 2019; Ramirez, 2023a).</p> <p>Aims to attract a younger male audience (Ramirez, 2023b)</p>
Vivek Ramaswamy	<p>Entrepreneur and Politician.</p> <p>3.6 million X followers.</p> <p>Engages with anti-woke and anti-transgender themes (TOI, 2024; Pidd, 2023).</p> <p>Recognised as important in Trump's bid to attract young male voters (The Juggernaut, 2024).</p>

6.1 Eol 1: Narrative Construction

A strong Eol was SMI's role in generating and promoting specific narratives. Influencers strategically framed issues to craft emotionally resonant narratives that guided audience interpretation and engagement.

Trump's Character

A dominant narrative was the reframing of Trump's character. While mainstream discourse frequently characterises Trump as narcissistic or dangerous (Ashcroft, 2016; Prusa and Brummer, 2022), right-wing SMIs recast him as honest, resilient, and uniquely committed to the American people.

For example, Dana White²⁹ underscored Trump's strength:

"The toughest, most resilient human being that I have ever met...he [Trump] fights, and this guy never gives up".

Meanwhile, Tucker Carlson³⁰ highlighted his good intentions:

"Whatever you say about him...he's [Trump] a wonderful person...the funniest person I've met in my life...he actually cares because he is interested in the people who live here."

Moreover, Vivek Ramaswamy⁵ positioned Trump's bluntness as a marker of integrity:

“We deserve a better class of politician [Trump], one who actually tells us the truth, even if it comes with some mean tweets from time to time.”

These narratives redefined Trump’s character as admirable rather than problematic, casting him as honest, relatable and strong.

Other influencers acknowledged Trump’s flaws but dismissed them as irrelevant to leadership. Jake Paul²⁵ said in a video viewed by 20.7 million:

“Do I think Trump is a perfect human being? No....I am not concerned with Donald Trump’s character flaws, or what he’s done in the past, I am concerned with how good of a president he is.”

This pragmatic logic, prioritising outcomes over ethics, was echoed by other influencers.

Charlie Kirk⁶ argued that political character should be measured by results, not personality:

“My number one mark of character for a politician: did you do what you say you're going to do...Trump did what he said he was going to do...we have a wall... Southern border crossing went down...Asylum seekers were rejected.”

Finally, Ben Shapiro³ echoed this pragmatism:

"I don't care what you think about President Trump, in terms of character...what he gave you was...better than what these people have given you over the past four years and...over the past 12 of the last 16 years."

Overall, SMIs reframed Trump's flaws as strengths or irrelevant to his leadership ability, using this strategy to counter mainstream criticism and reinforce his legitimacy.

The Assassination Attempt

SMIs framed Trump's survival from an assassination attempt as both divine intervention and evidence of his strength and selfless dedication to the nation, casting him as a symbolic, almost messianic leader.

Carlson¹³, reacting to Trump's past and present challenges, emphasised the extent of his endurance:

"I have never seen anybody treated like Donald Trump...attack him...defame him...indict him...arrest him, let him get shot in the face."

White²⁹, highlighted the sacrifice involved in continuing Trump's political fight:

"He doesn't need this, this guy's got a great life... he has achieved everything that you could possibly achieve in life...Trump is literally putting himself on the line for something bigger than this himself."

These narratives equated Trump's perseverance with moral heroism, portraying his continued public service, despite wealth and mistreatment, as self-sacrifice for the greater-good.

Some influencers elevated this moment further, casting it as spiritual. Paul₂₃ described Trump's survival as:

"Divine intervention for sure, I believe that God stepped in and saved him...we saw the action of god right in front of our eyes."

Carlson₃₀ similarly marked the event as transformative:

"Everything was different after that moment... Trump was no longer just a political party's nominee...this was the leader of a nation."

Furthermore, Elon Musk₁₀ focused on Trump's instinctive courage:

"What I find admirable is that you can't fake bravery under such circumstances, the courage is instinctual".

Together, these perspectives constructed a powerful narrative, Trump's survival signified not just resilience, but providence, portraying him as a fated, selfless leader above partisanship.

The Crisis Narrative

SIMs constructed a powerful crisis narrative, warning that America faced existential decline without Trump's re-election. This rhetoric framed the stakes not as merely political but civilisational.

Bryce Hall¹⁷ captured this sense of urgency:

"I'm looking at the reality of what's happening in our country...we are doomed right now if we don't have a drastic change."

Kirk² reinforced the narrative by elevating the 2024 election beyond policy:

"Bigger than any election that we have lived through because it's not just the typical corporate tax rate debate...it is so much bigger, it is civilizational defining."

Ramaswamy¹² deepened the narrative by linking present decline to a loss of American Exceptionalism, calling for its restoration:

"The US constitution is the strongest and greatest guarantor of freedom in human history...if we can revive that dream...then nobody in the world...is going to defeat us, that is what American exceptionalism is."

This framing positioned Trump as a necessary force to restore a lost national ideal. Robert F. Kennedy Jr.²¹ echoed concerns about American decline:

“Are we really still a role model for democracy in this country, or have we made it...a kind of a joke?”

The erosion of American exceptionalism was a recurring motif, with SMIs blaming weak leadership and the fading American dream (see **opposition discreditation and grievances for more evidence**). They often contrasted this with an idealised past under Trump to heighten the urgency of his return:

“When he [Trump] was president, young people were richer than ever before, and he will do it again...you don't have to stay poor. You don't have to accept being worse off than your parents.”
(Kirk₃₅)

“Trump had peace in the world. Why? Because people respect him.” (Paul₂₅)

“Those four years [2016-2020] were the best we've had in my lifetime of any president who has led us...the second Trump term is going to be even greater.” (Ramaswamy₉)

By contrasting a crisis-ridden present with a prosperous, powerful past, both of peak American exceptionalism and its revival under Trump's first term, SMIs portrayed Trump as the sole path to national restoration, mobilising audiences around the belief that his leadership will save the nation.

Opposition Discreditation

SIMs constructed a parallel narrative delegitimising Trump's opponents. Harris was framed as unelected, unqualified, and emblematic of a failing system.

Shapiro³ dismissed her as intellectually hollow:

"A stupid person's idea of a smart person... there is nothing going on, there is no policy, there is no meat on the bones...She's an empty shell."

RFK Jr.²² reinforced this by criticising her appointment, implying she lacked democratic legitimacy, undermining her authority and, by extension, the Democratic Party:

"Kamala Harris never got a single primary vote. We don't know who appointed her, and that's not democracy."

RFK Jr.'s²⁰ own political shift, from lifelong Democratic to Trump supporter, was used to validate realignment for disaffected voters:

"This [the Democratic Party] is not the party anymore of...peace...constitutional rights...of civil rights...of freedom of speech...that stood up to censorship and surveillance... it's the party today that wants to divide Americans."

This signalled that disillusionment was rational, and support for Trump was a principled stance rather than a partisan betrayal.

SIMs also portrayed the Democratic party as controlling, suppressing free speech and encouraging ideological conformity:

"You are so programmed by the Democrats...please try to have an independent thought." (Kirk₈)

"People are sick and tired of...being told that they have to hide the way that they believe...I've had so many people come up to me and say, thank you for saying the things that I'm not allowed to say." (Hall₁₇)

"American people can't have opinions without outrageous backlash." (Paul₂₅)

The mainstream media was similarly depicted as biased, protecting the Democrats and distorting public opinion:

"The mainstream media likes to push the narrative that he [Trump] doesn't care about anyone but himself, I absolutely know that's not the truth." (White₂₉)

"Don't judge people [Trump] off of a character that the media has portrayed them to be because Democrats control 90% of the US media." (Paul₂₅)

In contrast, Trump was cast as a defender of liberty. RFK Jr.²² concluded:

“Don’t you want a president [Trump] who believes in democracy...wants to see censorship ended...end the surveillance State and make our country the beacon of Freedom around the world once again.”

These narratives, therefore, cast the Democratic Party as suppressors of free speech while portraying Trump and his supporters as truth-tellers resisting censorship, thereby normalising political realignment and encouraging voter defection.

6.2 Eol 2: Audience Adaptation

Audience adaptation was a second key strategy used by right-wing SMIs, tailoring messages and delivery to resonate with the values and grievances of young American men, enhancing influence beyond issue framing.

‘Bro’ Topics

SMIs frequently blended political content with culturally resonant ‘bro’ topics, such as addiction and sports, to engage young male audiences.

Theo Von⁴¹ opened a conversation on addiction, a common struggle among his audience:

“A lot of our audience struggles...with alcoholism, addiction...all types of stuff...its like a pretty normal conversation.”

Trump responded with a personal account of his brother's alcoholism:

"He had a problem with alcohol... he'd have periods where he'd get sick...and we thought we'd lose him."

This exchange aligned Trump with the emotional experiences of Von's audience, reinforcing his relatability.

Influencers also leaned on sports metaphors to simplify political messaging. Paul²⁵ likened Trump to tough but successful NFL coach Bill Belichick:

"Bill Belichick! So hard to work with, he's a dick to all his players, but yet he's the most winningest coach in all of the NFL...Let's look at who was a better president during their terms, statistically."

This reframed Trump's abrasive persona as a sign of effectiveness and results-oriented leadership.

On *Bussin with the Boys*,⁴ political discussion was framed through familiar sports lingo:

"Do you ever get nervous for when the day does come and all the votes start piling in, the pregame Jitters?"

“Something we like to ask, like coaches and players, when they get like a second opportunity in their career...what do you feel like you've learned, how do you feel like you've grown from the from your first term?”

By embedding politics in casual, sports-themed exchanges, SMIs made Trump appear more accessible and in touch with young men’s everyday interests, boosting his perceived authenticity, relatability, and credibility.

Grievances

SMIs tapped into core grievances affecting young American men, positioning Trump as the solution.

Kirk₃₅ highlighted financial pressures facing them:

“If you're a 20-something in America, life has been really tough. You've watched home prices rise 47% since 2020...Home ownership is now out of reach...one-third of today's young Americans will never get married. The average American is having fewer children than ever before. Why?...because...they simply can't afford them...The American dream has become a luxury item for the wealthy elite.”

Paul₁₆ pointed to inflation, job precarity, and disillusionment with education:

“People are struggling with jobs, mortgages are too much...inflation prices are going up...people...are having trouble paying off and going to school and then they're feeling like...I have this college degree but what has this gotten me?”

RFK Jr.²² broadened this into a generational crisis:

“American dream which meant at that time that if you worked hard...you could afford to buy a home...you could raise a family...there's no American now...who believes that that contract applies to them...we have an entire generation that...has lost hope for their own futures...lost their pride in our country.”

Influencers also addressed perceived social neglect. Paul²⁵ noted how contributions by men, such as compulsory military service, were overlooked:

“What about the draft, which requires men to fight for their country, die, go to war, or face imprisonment and \$250,000 in fines...as a man that should frustrate you that she's [Harris] neglecting the truth about what men do for this country.”

Against this backdrop, SMIs presented Trump as the only viable path to restoring the American Dream.

Ramaswamy¹⁴ claimed:

“We don't have to be this nation in Decline... we're still that country where...we mean it...when we tell them [our children] you get ahead in the United States with your own hard work...commitment...dedication...that is the American dream...that is what we get when we send Donald Trump back to the White House.”

Kirk² framed Trump's campaign as transformational:

“Trump is running on a once-in-a-generation campaign to revitalise the American dream.”

White and Musk echoed this hopeful vision:

“Trump is fighting to save the American dream...that's what's at stake in this election, we are choosing who we want to lead us in this fight” (White₂₉)

“America is going to do things that are greater than...we've done in the past, reach new heights that make you proud to be American.” (Musk₁₀)

By emotionally charging male economic and social frustrations, influencers crafted a persuasive appeal, portraying Trump not just as a political choice, but as a personal and generational remedy.

Woke Culture and Masculinity

SIMs leveraged young men's resentment toward progressive norms. They explicitly and implicitly positioned Trump as a defender of traditional masculinity and conservative values, as their attacks on woke culture formed part of their rationale for supporting Trump.

Joe Rogan₃₇, described, in an episode viewed by 57 million, widespread disillusionment with 'woke culture':

“Young people are rejecting a lot of this woke, young people are tired of being yelled at... they're tired of these people...telling them what the moral standards of society should be.”

Rogan and Ramaswamy further attacked transgender rights and gender fluidity, presenting them as irrational and ideologically driven:

“It [wokeism] really does behave like a religion but it's a religion without like a good Doctrine...if you're going to do this whole woke thing...you're going to have to get drugs involved...some parents...want their kid to be a part of the LGBTQ thing because it looks like a flag of virtue that they can post in their front lawn, oh look we have a queer child like, oh you're amazing...the whole thing is crazy.” (Rogan₃₈)

“We’re in the middle of a national identity crisis. Faith in God, patriotism, hard work, family...have disappeared...replaced by wokeism and transgenderism...These are symptoms of a deeper void of purpose and meaning in our country...we need to...fill that void...right now we need the commander-in-chief who will lead us to victory, that is your next president, Donald J Trump.” (Ramaswamy₅)

Gender-affirming care for minors became a focal point in this moral framing. Paul₂₅ portrayed such care as reckless and dangerous:

“What we're not here for is adults campaigning in the streets to young children to have surgeries that will affect them for the rest of their lives...you have to be 18 to vote...but you can mutilate your body at 10 years old it's not okay...vote for Donald Trump...America depends on it”

Rogan₃₈ reinforced this narrative, referencing media suppression of negative data:

"we've always known that children are...easily influenced and...shouldn't be allowed to make life-changing decisions...then all of a sudden because of gender that's abandoned...the New York Times had a whole study about...puberty blockers that showed...they probably have a lot of horrific side effects and so they decided not to release the study."

Influencers also framed transgender athletes in women's sports as a threat to gender divisions, emphasising the masculine responsibility to prevent this and protect women:

"I think it would be better to have a president [Trump] that doesn't want biological men competing in women's sports...as a future father you will find me dead before I send my daughter to a school where men can go into her bathroom and...can compete against her in sports, that is taking away a woman's rights." (Paul₂₅)

"You're free to marry who you want...without the government standing in your way but that doesn't mean that boys get to compete with girls and girl sports." (Ramaswamy₁₄)

"How are you letting them compete with girls in school? That one drives me bananas...they don't even have requirements in some schools, you don't have to be taking hormones, you can just identify and you can compete as a girl." (Rogan₃₈)

Voting for Trump was framed as a cultural stance, a resistance to progressive change. Influencers portrayed 'woke' culture as a threat to masculinity and social order, with Trump as the cultural warrior to oppose it.

6.3 Eol 3: Collective Influence

Collective influence emerged as a significant strategy through which right-wing SMIs interacted with their audiences. This focused on influencers' ability to cultivate a shared sense of identity or normalise certain beliefs within the group.

Authenticity and Credibility

A key driver of collective influence was the perceived authenticity and credibility of influencers, which made them appear trustworthy, independent, and aligned with audience values rather than corporate or political agendas.

White²⁹ emphasised his autonomy:

"I'm nobody's puppet and I'm not telling you what to think, I'm telling you what I know...I know President Trump is a fighter."

Rogan²⁷ reinforced this image through his unfiltered podcast format, rejecting preconditions from Kamala Harris's team:

“There was a few restrictions of things they didn't want to talk about, but I said I don't give a fuck...they want to know if I edit, I'm like there's not going to be any editing...you give someone a couple of hours [on a podcast] and.....I'm going to see whether or not you're calculated or...just free.”

By presenting his content as raw, Rogan²⁷ positioned his platform in contrast to traditional media, which he criticised as performative and artificial:

“I always feel like the environment of debates...interviews on television...of anything you're doing in front of an audience, it's so fake...you don't get a sense of who the person is.”

He also rejected calls to avoid ‘platforming’ controversial figures, reinforcing his commitment to open conversation rather than ideological gatekeeping, strengthening his authenticity:

“There was a thing that was going on for a while where you were platforming people...if you had on a guy like Trump you are platforming this bad person...but it's an authoritarian way to regulate conversations that let you know more about people and it's stupid.” (Rogan²⁷)

Psychologist, Jordan Peterson², leveraged his professional stature to frame Trump's personal life as proof of his moral character and self-control:

“Zero scandal within the Trump family is reminiscent for me of the zero Wars of the Trump presidency...it is...another indication that the bombastic Donald J has at least properly ruled his own Roost. This is also no easy matter, as we have seen in the appalling family scandals of the

Biden White House, and is another fact mitigating against the claim that President Trump is a danger on the temperamental front.”

Peterson²⁶ also praised Trump’s calm response to the assassination attempt as proof of psychological resilience, endorsing Trump’s temperament and leadership under pressure:

“He can handle high levels of pressure on a continual basis; his spontaneous response to being nearly assassinated provided clear and stellar evidence of that.”

Peterson²⁶ extended this credibility to Trump’s allies, framing Elon Musk, Vivek Ramaswamy, and RFK Jr. as a:

“Dream team...every single one...is remarkable in their own right... it is for such reasons...that I...wholeheartedly endorse the Trump X-Men team.”

This public endorsement of Trump and his team reinforced the perception that Trump’s leadership is not only politically sound but psychologically validated.

Ultimately, influencers like Rogan and Peterson built trust and perceived transparency, ideological independence, and professional credibility, making their endorsements of Trump more persuasive, personal, and culturally resonant.

Normalisation of MAGA supporters

Influencers normalised the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement, reframing Trump supporters from a marginalised fringe to a mainstream, morally upright collective.

Carlson¹³ reassured MAGA supporters of their majority status and moral legitimacy:

“Every person in this room needs to understand you are not in a despised minority; you are in an incredibly gentle and tolerant majority.”

He further portrayed them as the nation’s backbone:

“This is a room full of people who love their country...pay their taxes...go to work...and they're the most mistreated group in this nation and they're also the biggest group in this nation, they're not some weird subculture of Maga, they're America itself.” (Carlson¹³)

The *Bussin’ with the Boys*⁴ podcast reinforced this normalisation by treating their Trump interview as an honour, challenging the social taboo of associating with him:

“A lot of people are not going to be stoked about this interview...We had the opportunity to sit down with a former president who was a leader of the Free World...I think that is really cool, and if you have a problem with that, then that’s super unfortunate.”

RFK Jr.²² also advanced this reframing. Questioning his prior dismissal of MAGA:

"I began to have doubts about what I was being told about MAGA...80 million people voted for him [Trump], how can we dismiss 80 million of our fellow Americans as deplorables?"

RFK Jr.²² redefined MAGA not as racist or reactionary, but as a nostalgic yearning for mid-20th-century American stability:

"[Democrats believe] make America great again means going back to the 1950s and they say it's racist... dictatorial...but the more that I get to know you [MAGA supporters] and...Donald Trump I understand what MAGA really means...John F Kennedy...that was the era when America was at its apex...virtually every American believed in the accessibility of the American dream."

By casting MAGA supporters as rational and patriotic, influencers reduced social stigma, encouraged alignment with Trump, and legitimised the movement's collective identity and mainstream appeal.

Religious Obligation

Influencers used religious rhetoric to frame Trump support as a spiritual duty, portraying him as God-ordained and opponents as corrupt, uniting followers under a shared moral vision and mainstreaming his support.

Kirk₂ explicitly tied political participation to Christian duty, emphasising the commonalities between the republican party and religious ideals:

"You have a biblical obligation to engage in this election...to fight evil and to exalt righteousness...for...no other reason than 320,000 missing kids on our Southern border right now, which is modern-day slavery, and Donald Trump will put an end to it."

In particular, he credited Trump with the reversal of Roe versus Wade, urging Christians to show gratitude through political support:

"Donald Trump is the most pro-life president in American history as he was responsible for the reversal of Roe versus Wade." (Kirk₂)

"We had the reversal of Roe versus Wade....as a Christian, will you give him credit for that?"
(Kirk₆)

Kirk₂ contrasted this with a stark moral condemnation of Democratic policies:

"The Democrat Party supports everything that God hates...espousing the death of the unborn, the mutilation of our teenage kids, open borders, the destruction of our sovereignty."

Finally, Kirk₂ framed Trump's rise as divinely orchestrated:

"In a series of events that only God could orchestrate...a billionaire from New York had to get in the arena to tell the other billionaires that have been robbing you...The American people are back in charge."

Paul²⁵ was similarly explicit, describing his endorsement as divinely guided:

“God has sent me here to tell you this message and...put this on my plate to do this. Do the right thing, vote for Donald Trump.”

Other influencers, although less overtly, echoed this religious framing:

“Unequivocally and conclusively God is Among Us right now...God bless you.” (Carlson³⁰)

“God bless you and God bless America” (RFK Jr.²⁰)

“God bless you and the great state of New York and may God bless our United States of America” (Ramaswamy¹⁴)

By invoking religious language, influencers cast Trump as a divinely sanctioned leader, creating a moral imperative to support him. This framing deepened his appeal among audiences while portraying opposition as spiritually illegitimate.

Conclusion

Overall, right-wing SMIs used three overlapping strategies to interact with and shape public opinion. Narrative construction crafted emotionally resonant stories, audience adaptation aligned content with young-male frustrations, and collective influence mainstreamed Trump support. These strategies

deepened engagement and bolstered Trump's appeal. The next chapter discusses these findings in detail.

Chapter 7: Discussion

7.1 Key Findings

My findings show influencers interacted with audiences and shaped public opinion through the strategies of narrative construction, audience adaptation, and collective influence. Narrative construction involved crafting emotionally resonant stories, which included reframing Trump's flaws as virtues, casting him as divinely chosen, and amplifying a sense of national crisis to position him as America's saviour. Audience adaptation enhanced persuasion by aligning messages with followers' frustrations, often by linking Trump as a corrective force to widespread social and economic anxieties. Finally, collective influence, grounded in the perceived authenticity of influencers, leveraged moral framing and religious rhetoric to build trust, foster shared identity and normalise mainstream Trump support.

While these dynamics operated synergistically, narrative construction proved foundational, shaping and amplifying the others. For example, it shaped audience adaptation by framing the American dream as lost, thereby legitimising male grievances. Moreover, it bolstered collective influence by reinforcing the narrative of MAGA supporters as a persecuted group, an identity narrative advanced by figures like Tucker Carlson to consolidate group identity and loyalty. Ultimately, audience adaptation and collective influence were vital, but narrative construction was the primary mechanism through which they were activated and sustained.

7.2 Existing Theories

The stages of influence outlined in my theoretical framework (chapter 4) were readily encountered in the discourse I analysed, demonstrating how these theories function in the context of right-wing SMIs.

Framing theory was central due to its close connection with narrative construction, shaping how people interpret political issues (Chong and Druckman, 2007). Influencers framed political messages in accessible and culturally resonant terms (Gonzalez *et al*, 2024). This was evident in Jake Paul's comparison of Trump to Bill Belichick, which simplified political narratives and enhanced audience receptiveness. This underscores how emotional and familiar framing strategies are at play in shaping public opinion.

Two-step flow theory was pertinent in collective influence. Influencers acted as intermediaries, translating political messages from elites into more relatable forms (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Ahmed *et al*, 2017; Dubois and Gaffney, 2014). For instance, RFK Jr.'s reframing of the MAGA message through the lens of John F. Kennedy's legacy softened accusations of racism and authoritarianism, increasing audience acceptance and reinforcing ideological alignment.

Social influence theory underpinned the persuasive power of the theme of authenticity and credibility. Influencers, such as Joe Rogan's unedited content and Jordan Peterson's objective psychological analysis, appeared raw and unscripted, echoing the theory's assertion that individuals conform to behavioural norms within social networks when influencers seem authentic and trustworthy (Li, 2013; Hudders *et al*, 2020; Aw and Chuah, 2021; Hu *et al*, 2020). Moreover, Theo Von's candid discussion with Trump in the

theme of ‘bro-topics’ about addiction cultivated peer-like connections, enhancing emotional engagement and reinforcing audience loyalty and political alignment.

Ultimately, my findings underscore how established communication theories are present within the political ecosystem of right-wing SMIs, revealing the complex mechanisms through which influencers interact with audiences to shape public opinion.

7.3 Further Contributions

More significantly, my findings showed that influencers interacted with audiences to shape public opinion by reframing foundational elements of American national identity using manospheric discourse, notably American exceptionalism and civil religion.

American Exceptionalism

A central finding of this study, in how influencers interact with audiences to shape public opinion, was the strategic deployment of American Exceptionalism by right-wing SMIs to construct their narrative of national decline. Rather than invoking the traditional aspirational framing of America as a “shining city on a hill” (Madsen, 1998, p.3), influencers reconfigured this ideology into a narrative of its erosion and existential crisis. This was seen prominently through Vivek Ramaswamy, Charlie Kirk, RFK Jr. and Jake Paul. Through this shift, they activated loss aversion, the psychological tendency for individuals to respond more strongly to perceived losses than to equivalent gains (Osmundsen and Peterson, 2020; Passarelli and Del Ponte, 2018; Jervis, 1992). American decline was portrayed as a stolen destiny, one that audiences were compelled to avenge.

The potency of this narrative likely lies in American Exceptionalism's embeddedness in national identity (Deudney and Meiser, 2008; Tomes, 2014). The enduring mythos of a divinely ordained America, tasked with moral leadership and democratic stewardship, remains deeply resonant to American self-perception (McDaniel *et al*, 2022; Caesar, 2012). Influencers seized upon this cultural reservoir, but rather than purely projecting an idealised future, they constructed a golden past, anchored in the American Dream, and framed its loss as symptomatic of weak leadership, economic mismanagement, and cultural degradation.

The American dream, the belief in upward mobility through merit and effort (Wolak and Peterson, 2020), was presented as a casualty of liberal governance under the democrats and a sign of poor national health. Crucially, the dream was gendered. Influencers explicitly and implicitly tied the dream's inaccessibility to a perceived crisis of masculinity, invoking manospheric discourse that emphasises male economic provision as central to masculine identity. Empirical studies confirm (Gonalons-Pons and Gangl 2021; Damaske, 2011; 2020, and Parker and Stepler, 2017) this cultural norm, highlighting that American men continue to internalise financial provision as a core masculine duty. The message emphasised by the influencers that men can essentially no longer provide, highlighted through their stress on dwindling job opportunities and declining homeownership prospects, as evidenced by Charlie Kirk, Jake Paul and RFK Jr., operated as both a political grievance and a gendered identity threat. In this way, national decline was personalised, with men's emasculation mirroring America's fall.

This gendered national identity discourse was instrumentalised to elevate Trump as a figure of restoration. His first presidency was portrayed as a brief reassertion of American greatness, interrupted by progressive decay, with Ramaswamy even claiming these were the best years of his life. Here, SMIs

positioned Trump not simply as a political choice, but as an existential necessity, essential for the nation's revival, with Bryce Hall declaring America is doomed without drastic change. Ultimately, therefore, the reworking of exceptionalist national identity through manospheric discourse to position Trump as a restorer of greatness and gendered order amid decline proved vital to audience interaction and shaping public opinion.

Religion and a Higher Power

An unexpected yet significant finding in how influencers interacted with audiences to shape public opinion was the integration of religious and spiritual rhetoric into their content. At first glance, this appears counterintuitive as young right-wing men, the primary demographic targeted by influencers, are not typically recognised as highly religious. However, this trend obscures a more complex cultural shift. Recent studies suggest rising religiosity among young American men (Fleck, 2024; Longenecker, 2024), often as a reactionary posture against perceived cultural liberalism. Influencers capitalised on this undercurrent, elevating Trump from political candidate to divinely sanctioned redeemer.

This spiritualisation of Trump took both explicit and implicit forms. Charlie Kirk, for example, openly invoked Christian identity, citing Trump's role in overturning Roe versus Wade as evidence of his divine purpose. Similarly, Jake Paul positioned himself as a prophet-like figure, portraying his endorsement of Trump as a divinely sanctioned mission. Others, like Logan Paul, used broader spiritual frameworks, interpreting Trump's assassination survival as a sign of divine favour. Influencers, therefore, reframed political allegiance as a spiritual duty, transforming support for Trump into an act of faith.

Theoretically, this fusion of politics and the sacred aligns with Bellah's (1967) concept of American civil religion, wherein national leaders are sacralised as vessels of divine will. Essentially, a civil religion exists in America as a national identity, alongside and differentiated from traditional churches and synagogues. Crucially, it obtains its own seriousness and integrity, just like any other religion, and it is built on the idea that true authority comes from God, as shown in phrases like 'in God we trust' (p.3). My findings highlighted that similar phrases were used by RFK Jr. and Ramaswamy. Importantly, it serves as a unifying cultural framework, transcending political, racial, and class boundaries, linking diverse individuals through national myths and moral ideals (Gehrig, 1981; Haberski, 2018). Moreover, this civil religion posits that the transcendent goal for the political process is the collective obligation to carry out God's will on earth, a theme deeply rooted in American tradition (Bellah, 1967, pp.1-3). Hence, influencers' framing of Trump's assassination as a sign of divine favour mobilises the underlying national principles of this civic religion. Simultaneously, Trump's portrayal evokes Weber's (1978) notion of charismatic authority, where a leader is legitimised not by institutional norms but by perceived extraordinary qualities and divine favour (Marquez, 2024). This rhetorical move sacralised Trump's candidacy, casting opposition not merely as political dissent but as a rejection of divine order.

This spiritual national identity framing also, again, intersected with manospheric discourse. Trump was not just a chosen one, he was a masculine protector ordained to restore traditional social and gender hierarchies. This alignment tapped into the manosphere's crisis of masculinity narrative (Phiri, 2023; Homolar and Löffmann, 2022), which portrays men as victims of cultural feminisation and weakened institutions, feeling alienated by shifting gender norms (Ruggles, 2015; Marx Ferree, 2020). Issues like gender fluidity and transgender participation in women's sports were cited by influencers as evidence of spiritual societal decline, justifying the need for strong male leadership. Trump was positioned by

influencers, such as Vivek Ramaswamy and Jake Paul, not only to rescue the nation but also the embattled male identity.

This ideological blend of masculine redemption, national revival, and spiritual destiny reflects a new form of digital, faith-driven politics. These findings show that right-wing SMIs have interacted with audiences and shaped public opinion through a fusion of national civil religious identity and manospheric discourse. They have not merely disseminated political messaging but become ideological architects, crafting emotionally resonant national identity narratives that fuse existential fear with a promise of restoration. By merging civil religious symbolism with manospheric discourse, influencers sacralise Trump as a divinely appointed redeemer and masculinised protector, transforming political allegiance into a sacred, gendered, and moral imperative. In this narrative, voting becomes a ritual act, an expression of faith in a divinely sanctioned national order and a reaffirmation of embattled male identity. This convergence of spiritual rhetoric, masculine revivalism, and mythic national destiny reveals how digital persuasion today is driven as much by emotion and storytelling as by policy or political ideology.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my findings offer key insights into how US right-wing SMI's interacted with audiences to shape public opinion. They deployed three key methods of influence being audience adaptation, collective influence, and, most significantly, narrative construction, which underpinned the others. Additionally, the influence strategies of framing theory, two-step flow theory, and social influence theory were readily encountered in my findings, illustrating their relevance in this context. Importantly, further dimensions of SMI influence emerged. Notably, Influencers reframed foundational elements of

American national identity using manospheric discourse. This included reworking American exceptionalism to portray national decline and Trump as a restorer. Moreover, they sacralised, gendered and moralised political allegiance to Trump by drawing on national civil religious identity and masculine discourse, tailored to their audiences.

Chapter 8: Limitations and Future Research

The primary limitation of this study is its inherent subjectivity. While methodological transparency was prioritised to balance flexibility and methodological rigour (Roberts *et al*, 2019), qualitative thematic analysis inevitably reflects the researcher's interpretation (Riger and Sigurvinsdottir, 2016; Joffe, 2011). As such, different researchers might identify different themes from the same data.

Another limitation is the focus on a specific group, right-wing SMIs in the US, during a unique political moment. While this offers valuable insights into an extreme, high-stakes context, its applicability to more mainstream or less polarised settings is limited, constraining its comparative scope and generalisability (Elo *et al*, 2014; Carminati, 2018). Nonetheless, the aim was not broad generalisation but to generate insight into emerging patterns, an established strength of qualitative inquiry (Tenny *et al*, 2017).

Finally, the full impact of the 2024 election is still unfolding. Future data on voter behaviour, such as motivation analyses or approval trends, and influencer adaptation may further illuminate the role of SMIs in shaping public opinion. As this information surfaces, the full extent and exact strategies of SMI influence may become more apparent.

To address these limitations, future research should apply this methodology across different countries to enable cross-national comparisons of influencer strategies. Studies should also examine influencers across the political spectrum, including centrist and left-leaning figures, to assess whether observed strategies are consistent or ideologically specific. Additionally, audience-focused research could examine

how different demographics engage with influencer content, shedding light on how political influence is formed, contested, and sustained online.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

To conclude, my dissertation examined how right-wing SMIs interacted with their audiences to shape public opinion during the 2024 US presidential election, a pivotal and under-researched political development. While existing literature recognises SMIs' mobilising power, it lacks qualitative insight into their persuasive strategies. This study addressed this shortcoming by analysing how SMIs constructed political narratives, engaged followers, and shaped public discourse in the context of right-wing American politics.

I adopted a flexible definition of SMIs, emphasising reach, impact, and intimacy, allowing for a nuanced understanding of individuals who simultaneously occupy other professions. I focused on influencers aligned with manosphere-adjacent discourse, influential among young male voters central to Trump's 2024 success. My theoretical framework integrated framing theory, two-step flow, and social influence theory to help guide how SMIs translate ideology into mobilisation. Methodologically, I employed QCA to examine the symbolic and rhetorical dimensions of influencer content.

I found three core interrelated strategies in how influencers interacted with audiences to shape public opinion. These were narrative construction, audience adaptation, and collective influence. Among these, narrative construction proved most foundational, amplifying and sustaining the others. Moreover, these elements of influence demonstrated that the stages of influence outlined in my theoretical framework were readily encountered in influencer political discourse.

The core contribution of my findings lies in extending existing literature by showing how influencers strategically reframed foundational elements of American national identity to enhance persuasion. Notably, they reworked American exceptionalism into a narrative of decline and stolen destiny, central

to a reimagined American national identity. The American Dream played a pivotal role, reframed through manospheric discourse of male economic provision to emotionally resonate with influencer audiences. This allowed influencers to frame Trump as a restorative figure. Additionally, influencers employed religious and spiritual rhetoric to invoke the national identity concept of American civil religion as a powerful, unifying and standalone belief system. This religious rhetoric was also amplified through intersections with masculinity politics, portraying young American men as casualties of changing gender norms, and again positioning Trump as the figure of restoration. The result was a blend of nationalist, religious, and gendered rhetoric with deep emotional and cultural appeal.

Naturally, this study faces limitations. Its qualitative approach invites subjectivity, and its focus on a single country and election constrains generalisability. Moreover, as the impact of the 2024 election continues to unfold, new information may affirm or challenge my findings. Future research should apply this approach cross-nationally and across the political spectrum. Audience-centred studies could further explore how different groups interpret and spread influencer content.

Ultimately, right-wing SMIs interacted with audiences to shape public opinion through a triad of narrative construction, audience adaptation, and collective mobilisation, strategically weaving national identity and manospheric discourse into a powerful framework of influence. This research offers a foundational step in understanding the growing role of influencers in democratic life and the evolving nature of political persuasion in digital spaces. As online influencer-led communication increasingly shapes political discourses worldwide, these findings raise further questions in need of exploration about the future of political authority and ideological mobilisation in an age where charisma and algorithms increasingly outpace institutions.

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