POLITICS IN 30 SECONDS: HOW TIKTOK'S EMOTIONAL APPEALS INFLUENCE GEN
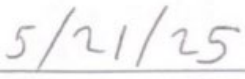
Z VOTERS

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in the School of Communication

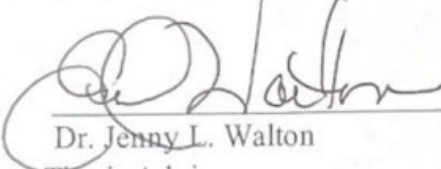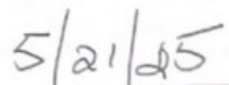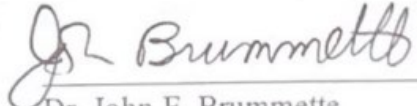Thesis Advisor: Dr. Scott W. Dunn

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ABSTRACT

TikTok has become a powerful platform for political messaging, especially among Gen Z voters who are exposed to emotional content embedded within a mix of entertainment and political discourse. This study explores how emotional appeals in TikTok videos from the 2024 U.S. presidential candidates, Donald J. Trump and Kamala Harris, influence political information efficacy (PIE) and political cynicism among Gen Z voters. Political information efficacy is the confidence individuals have in their political knowledge (Kaid et al., 2007), while political cynicism refers to the level of distrust and negative perceptions individuals hold toward politicians and political institutions (Agger et al., 1961). Using Affective Intelligence Theory, this research examines how emotionally charged political content affects young voters' political perceptions. A pre-test/post-test experimental design was used to measure changes in PIE, cynicism, and emotional state before and after exposure to political videos. The findings reveal that while emotional content on TikTok appears to emotionally engage Gen Z voters, it did not lead to significant changes in political information efficacy or political cynicism. The results suggest that the emotional appeals may have activated the dispositional system, reinforcing pre-existing political beliefs rather than prompting reevaluation or change. This reinforcement could explain the absence of significant shifts in confidence or trust. These results contribute to political communication research by distinguishing between emotional engagement and attitude: Minal change. Future studies should explore the long-term effects of emotional appeals and the role of political identity in shaping how young voters respond to emotionally charged political messaging.

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DEDICATIONS

To my family - Mom, Dad, Gram, Taylor, Addison - and all of my friends and colleagues

Your constant support, encouragement, and belief in me have meant the world. I would not be

where I am today without each of you by my side, and for that, I am truly grateful.

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Introduction

In the age of viral content and 30-second sound bites, TikTok has emerged as a center for political persuasion, where Gen Z voters scroll through campaign messages in between dance trends and meme culture. Unlike other social media platforms, whose algorithm prioritizes a mix of personal connections and trending topics, TikTok's engagement-focused algorithm amplifies emotionally charged content, making it a powerful tool for influencing young voters. With Gen Z emerging as a crucial voting bloc, understanding how emotions shape their political perceptions is more important than ever.

This study is grounded in Affective Intelligence Theory, which explains how emotions like enthusiasm, fear, and anger activate different cognitive systems that influence political behavior. On TikTok, these emotional cues can be seamlessly embedded in campaign videos, making them especially potent in shaping Gen Z's political perception. The emotionally charged nature of the platform makes it a compelling site to examine how political content impacts young voters' trust in politics and their confidence in understanding political information.

The purpose of this study is to examine how emotional appeals in TikTok videos from 2024 presidential candidates Donald J. Trump and Kamala Harris influence political information efficacy and political cynicism among Gen Z voters. Specifically, it investigates how these appeals activate the dispositional and surveillance systems outlined in Affective Intelligence Theory, ultimately affecting how young voters process and respond to political content.

Literature Review

The Shift From Traditional to Digital Media

Traditional campaigning is often characterized by the use of mass media such as TV ads, radio broadcasts, and print materials (e.g., direct mail postcards and newsletters), which were

essential for getting a candidate's message to voters in the early days of campaigning (Adi, 2023). They served to establish visibility and convey key messages, but were largely one-way forms of communication. This means voters received the message but had limited, if any, opportunity to engage with the content or provide feedback. However, personal engagement efforts, such as town halls or door-to-door canvassing, did provide voters with some two-way communications, which though impactful, were constrained by their ability to reach only a small fraction of the voters (Adi, 2023). As a result, the convenience and reach of mass communication led campaigns to depend heavily on one-directional channels.

This approach mirrors the early public relations mode, such as press agentry and public information (Grunig & Grunig, 2013). Press agentry prioritizes publicity and propaganda with minimal regard for feedback or accuracy, while the public information model focuses on distributing fact-based but highly controlled content. In traditional political contexts, these models manifest in rallies, campaign ads, and speeches that generate excitement but offer limited voter engagement. For example, press agentry tactics use emotionally charged appeals, such as fear to emphasize threats or humor to humanize candidates, to influence audiences without fostering meaningful dialogue (Kopfman & Ruth-McSwain, 2017). Meanwhile, public information tactics surface in press releases and policy announcements that maintain a favorable image but allow little room for public input.

However, political public relations (PPR) differs from organizational public relations in several critical ways due to the unique nature of the political environment. PPR is a strategic communication process designed to build and manage relationships with the public, media, and stakeholders in order to influence opinion, shape policy, and achieve political goals (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011). While organizational PR typically promotes products or services with success

measured by profit, sales, or market share, PPR is focused on electoral outcomes and public perception, making it inherently more ideologically charged and high-stakes (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2013).

The audiences in political contexts are broader and more diverse because political decisions affect society as a whole, not just targeted publics (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2013). PPR also deals with normative concerns such as justice, rights, and the public good, unlike corporate PR which is often limited to market or brand outcomes. The number and complexity of political stakeholders is much greater, and the environment is often adversarial, resembling a zero-sum game in which one party's gain is another's loss. This intensifies political scrutiny, especially amid competing interests, media pressures, and ideological divides (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2013). As a result, PPR operates in a more volatile, public, and ethically charged space than traditional organizational PR.

Despite these differences, PPR shares core principles with the models of public relations proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984). For example, historically, political actors have relied on one-way communication strategies to control messaging and shape public perception. However, these methods often encountered challenges, particularly in democratic societies where the media serves as a watchdog (Weaver & Willnat, 2012). To overcome these constraints, many political actors have turned to digital platforms, particularly social media, to expand their reach and gain more direct control over their narratives (Bossetta, 2018). Through platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and X, they bypass traditional media channels and engage with audiences in more interactive, tailored, and two-way communication models.

Political public relations (PPR) applies Grunig and Hunt's public relations models within the political context, as Strömbäck and Kiousis (2013) argued. The PR models are highly

relevant in PPR but need to be applied with flexibility, acknowledging the distinct political environment and the varied strategies political actors may use to influence publics and achieve their goals (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2013).

According to public relations research, two-way communication falls into two categories: asymmetrical and symmetrical (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Two-way asymmetrical communication uses research and data to craft messages that persuade the public to align with the organization's goals, but it does not seek mutual understanding (Grunig, 2013). In contrast, two-way symmetrical communication relies on dialogue, research, and conflict resolution to create communication that benefits both the organization and the public (Grunig, 2013). The shift from traditional to digital media has allowed political actors to refine their communication strategies to influence voter behavior more effectively.

With the rise of digital media, campaign strategists have increasingly moved away from one-way communication, leveraging technology to create interactive platforms that boost voter turnout, engage younger audiences, fundraise, and strengthen grassroots movements (Chester & Montgomery, 2017; Kreiss, 2016; Tufekci, 2014). This shift marks a fundamental transformation in political communication, as campaigns now prioritize engagement, interactivity, and data-driven outreach over traditional broadcast-style messaging. Hence, digital campaigning has become an increasingly dominant force in modern political strategies, offering new ways to engage voters and shape public perception.

For over ten years, political campaigns in the United States have utilized digital technologies, continuously refining their tools and strategies with each election cycle (Adi, 2023). However, the integration of digital tools into political campaigns did not happen overnight. While early digital tools like campaign websites, email newsletters, and voter

databases began to emerge in the 1990s, it was not until the 2000s that digital technologies began to reshape political campaigning (Baldwin-Philippi, 2018). A key turning point came in 2004 with Howard Dean's campaign, which showcased how the internet, specifically email newsletters, could be used for fundraising, organizing supporters, and mobilizing volunteers, even if it did not secure the Democratic nomination (Baldwin-Philippi, 2018). Dean's use of digital tools demonstrated the power of the internet to engage voters on a national scale, laying the foundation for the social media revolution in politics. Interestingly, the 2004 U.S. presidential election was considered a breakthrough for internet-based political engagement, with 75 million citizens using the web for political purposes (Tedesco, 2011).

The percentage of Americans relying on the Internet for campaign news grew significantly from 10% in 2004 to 33% in 2008, marking a pivotal shift in political communication (Tedesco, 2011). By 2008, Barack Obama's campaign fully embraced the potential of digital campaigning, specifically social media, marking a significant milestone in the evolution of digital campaigning. While Dean had shown the potential of early internet tools, such as email, Obama's campaign took it to the next level by fully utilizing platforms like Facebook, Myspace, and Meetup (Baldwin-Philippi, 2018). This shift changed how political campaigns operated. This approach allowed the campaign to target specific groups across different platforms, tailoring messages to resonate with diverse audiences (Barbu, 2014). For example, Obama reached out to disabled Americans through Disaboom, a social networking platform for individuals with disabilities, their families, and caregivers (Hughes et al., 2010). The 2008 election saw social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace playing a crucial role in political information sharing, interaction, and mobilization (Tedesco, 2011).

Obama's 2008 presidential campaign is often credited with pioneering the use of social media to engage younger voters and create an interactive, community-driven movement (Tufekci, 2014). His campaign transformed social media from a simple communication tool into a central platform for political engagement, redefining its role in modern politics. By shifting from a predominantly one-way communication model to an interactive, two-way engagement, the campaign empowered supporters to feel like active participants rather than passive observers. Using platforms like Facebook and YouTube, Obama's team engaged voters in real-time, encouraging them to share their stories and experiences while making the candidate more accessible through personal messages and updates (Hughes et al., 2010). This approach not only amplified the campaign's reach but also fostered a sense of community and shared purpose among supporters. What started as a tool for simple communication evolved into a means of not only disseminating information but also building relationships, mobilizing supporters, and fostering direct dialogue with voters (Baldwin-Philippi, 2018; Hughes et al., 2010; Tufekci, 2014).

Past research has extensively examined how politicians use traditional campaigning to influence voters' perceptions and behaviors (e.g.,; Ridout & Searles, 2011; Weber, 2013). However, with the rise of digital media, research has shifted to digital campaigning, exploring how online platforms, microtargeting, and computational politics are used to persuade voters and enhance political engagement (e.g., Baldwin-Philippi, 2018; Chester & Montgomery, 2017; Kreiss, 2016; Tufekci, 2014). This shift highlights the growing significance of digital tools in modern election strategies, as campaigns continue to refine their methods to effectively reach and engage voters.

Social Media as a Political Tool

Social media are online platforms that allow users to interact with one another, share content, and create or consume user-generated material (Carr & Hayes, 2015). In the context of political campaigning, social media allows politicians to broadcast messages to large audiences while also allowing them to target specific groups, and they provide these groups with the opportunity to interact, respond, and directly engage with candidates (Baldwin-Philippi, 2018; Jenkins, 2006; Theocharis et al., 2022). Social media campaigning refers to the use of digital platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, to engage with voters, mobilize support, and promote political candidates (Adi, 2023). This shift has been amplified by the rise of computational politics and microtargeting, which leverage vast datasets and behavioral insights to refine outreach and persuasion strategies (Barbu, 2014; Tufekci, 2014). These practices often align with a two-way asymmetrical communication model, where interaction exists but is ultimately designed to benefit the communicator more than the audience. Political campaigns may use the feedback to further fine-tune persuasive messaging, rather than engage in mutual understanding or balanced exchange.

For instance, microtargeting enables campaigns to create highly personalized messages based on voters' online behavior, interests, and demographics (Agan, 2007; Barbu, 2014). It involves segmenting audiences, estimating the impact of tailored messages on specific subgroups, and delivering content that aligns with individual characteristics (Agan, 2007). Initially limited to postal code-based targeting, microtargeting has evolved into advanced psycho-geographic segmentation powered by social media and user data (Barbu, 2014).

Computational politics builds on these capabilities by applying computational methods to large datasets from online and offline sources to enhance outreach, persuasion, and mobilization (Chester & Montgomery, 2017; Kreiss, 2016; Tufekci, 2014). Computational politics often

involves profiling individuals or groups to tailor persuasive and mobilization strategies (Tufekci, 2014). It allows campaigns to profile groups and develop highly targeted strategies. As a result, computational politics has become a common practice in modern campaigns (Chester & Montgomery, 2017; Kreiss, 2016; Tufekci, 2014). Microtargeting and computational politics are ways campaigns collect voter data and behavioral feedback to craft persuasive messages aimed at influencing voter behavior without necessarily adjusting the campaign's own stance or messaging strategy (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

While early digital tools offered new forms of engagement, their alignment with public relations models varied. For instance, campaign websites varied in their interactivity; some offered static content (one-way), while others included features like comment sections or contact forms (two-way asymmetrical). Email newsletters and blasts were largely one-way, providing information without soliciting meaningful feedback. Online petitions, on the other hand, represent two-way asymmetrical communication: they allowed voters to express support or preferences. Regardless, campaigns used these tools to engage voters, but these interactions were heavily controlled and designed to persuade rather than facilitate true dialogue (Baldwin-Philippi, 2018; Jenkins, 2006).

What sets social media apart from earlier digital political campaigns is its higher level of interactivity (Adi, 2023). Social media platforms offer features that make two-way symmetrical interaction more feasible. Unlike digital tools such as campaign websites and emails news blasts, platforms like X and Instagram allow direct conversations between candidates and voters, enabling immediate responses to concerns and feedback (Theocharis et al., 2022). This interactivity not only allows candidates to address voter concerns almost instantly but also gives voters a greater sense of involvement and agency in the political process. By replying to

comments, sharing user-generated content, and hosting live Q&A sessions, campaigns create a more participatory and inclusive atmosphere, shifting away from the persuasion-driven model of early digital campaigns (Hughes et al., 2010).

Now, with microtargeting and computational politics, campaigns are better equipped to refine their outreach strategies, tailoring messages to specific voter segments based on online behavior and demographics. With 68% of Americans using some form of social media (Dixon, 2024), politicians have had to adapt their messaging to fit the unique dynamics of each platform.

Facebook and Instagram, for example, allow candidates to create official pages where they share videos, live streams, and updates, encouraging direct engagement through comments and shares (Bossetta, 2018). While these interactions can provide valuable feedback, they are often used asymmetrically to test and fine-tune messages that reinforce campaign narratives. Facebook's open network structure and sophisticated targeting tools have made it particularly dominant, allowing campaigns to simulate personalized dialogue while controlling the flow and framing of communication (Bossetta, 2018).

Instagram, while less interactive than Facebook, still plays a key role in shaping a candidate's public image through carefully curated content that resonates with voters (Bossetta, 2018). Platforms like Twitter (X) and Instagram serve as valuable feedback loops, allowing candidates to gauge public sentiment, address grievances, and refine their strategies in real time (Bossetta, 2018). Still, this feedback is typically used to strengthen persuasive strategies, not necessarily to foster mutual understanding. In this way, modern political communication reflects a blend of enhanced interactivity and strategic asymmetry, driven by data and tailored to platform-specific behaviors.

The use of social media as a political tool gained significant momentum after Barack Obama's groundbreaking 2008 campaign. Many candidates followed in his footsteps. For instance, Ron Paul, Mitt Romney, John McCain, Hillary Clinton, and others all utilized social media as a political tool, recognizing its potential to directly communicate with voters and shape their public image. To illustrate, Ron Paul was an early adopter of social media platforms, especially on Reddit and YouTube, spreading his message through videos that highlighted his libertarian stance (Chen, 2017). Mitt Romney and his campaign recognized the importance of social media, using Facebook as an image-building and voter-engagement platform (Miller, 2013). John McCain and his campaign team focused on crafting videos on YouTube, using humor and relatability (Savoie, 2009). Additionally, Hillary Clinton used platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to post regular videos, which became prominent in her campaign (Enli, 2017). These candidates understood the importance of building an online presence that felt accessible, transparent, and personal, elements that were difficult to achieve through traditional campaign methods.

The rise of social media use by presidential candidates continues to dominate the political landscape. For example, both the 2024 presidential candidates, Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, have posted behind-the-scenes TikTok videos from rallies on their official political campaign accounts. In just 10 seconds, they offer a glimpse into the less scripted moments of their campaigns, such as interactions with supporters, impromptu speeches, and candid moments with their teams. This type of direct communication fosters a sense of authenticity and transparency, enabling candidates to break down the barriers between themselves and voters (Grow & Ward, 2013). The unpolished, spontaneous nature of these videos is particularly

appealing to younger voters, who value real-time moments that feel less manufactured and more authentic (Petrarca, 2021).

The role of social media in political campaigns has been studied, with researchers examining how platforms like Facebook, Twitter (X), and Instagram have shaped voter engagement, candidate image-building, and digital political discourse (e.g., Bossetta, 2018; Enli, 2017; Miller, 2013). Scholars have also explored the ways in which campaigns use these platforms to micro-target voters, personalize political messaging, and foster interactive communication between candidates and the public (e.g., Baldwin-Philippi, 2018; Barbu, 2014; Theocharis et al., 2023). As social media continues to evolve, newer platforms have emerged that further enhance candidates' ability to connect with voters in more authentic and engaging ways. Among the most impactful is TikTok, which has rapidly gained popularity, particularly among younger voters (Dixon, 2024).While platforms like Facebook, Twitter (X), and Instagram laid the foundation for social media's role in politics, TikTok stands out for its unique ability to blend entertainment with political messaging, offering an unfiltered, highly engaging, and algorithm-driven space for candidates to connect with voters in ways that differ from previous platforms.

Introducing TikTok Into the Political Realm

TikTok, originally launched in September 2016 as a platform for viral dance challenges and lip-syncing videos, has since evolved into one of the world's most downloaded apps, becoming the second-most downloaded globally by 2019 (Cervi et al., 2023; Medina Serrano et al., 2020). What started as an entertainment platform has quickly transformed into a space for diverse content, including political discourse and activism (Cervi et al., 2023; Vijay &Gekker, 2021). The unique engagement style and algorithm TikTok offers is an invaluable tool for

political candidates, offering them a direct, effective means of connecting with a broad, diverse voter base in ways other platforms cannot match.

Karimi and Fox (2023) demonstrate this shift, highlighting how TikTok has significantly increased political participation among Gen Z voters. They found that the platform's viral nature and interactive features have led to higher levels of engagement in political discussions, especially among younger generations. In fact, 58% of Gen Z users actively engage in political content on TikTok, which has now become their primary news source, surpassing traditional media outlets (Flynn, 2024). This surge in political participation is particularly notable given the platform's ability to quickly spread political messages, memes, and activism, making it an essential tool for political campaigns aiming to mobilize younger voters.

The key to TikTok's viral nature lies in its algorithm, which amplifies content quickly through the *for you page* (FYP) (Vijay & Ramos-Ruiz, 2024). The FYP curates content based on a user's interaction with videos, meaning that even users with no established following can gain massive visibility for their posts. This algorithm-driven amplification ensures that political messages, memes, or activist content can spread rapidly, reaching audiences far beyond the creator's immediate circle, allowing for viral political engagement (Vijay & Ramos-Ruiz, 2024). The viral nature of TikTok means that content can spread organically through user participation, often with little to no involvement from the original creator. This way, politicians can craft emotional appeals that resonate deeply with users and rely on the platform's viral capabilities to quickly spread their message.

Additionally, TikTok's interactive design sets it apart from platforms like Facebook and Instagram, encouraging highly engaged participation. On social media, users can easily engage with content through likes, comments, shares; however, TikTok sets itself apart through its

signature feature, duetting (Medina Serrano et al., 2020). Duetting allows users to create response videos that appear side-by-side with the original content or follow it sequentially. This feature encourages users to engage directly with political messages, expressing their opinions and creating a more collaborative conversation around the content (Medina Serrano et al., 2020). Combined with algorithmic amplification, this interactive participation has redefined how political campaigns leverage digital platforms. TikTok, therefore, functions not only as a source of entertainment but also as a powerful space for influencing political discourse, reaching younger generations, and engaging audiences in ways that are both fun and impactful (Medina Serrano et al., 2020).

While TikTok's role in shaping modern media consumption has already been well-established (Bestvater, 2024; Cervi et al., 2023; Leppert, 2024; Medina Serrano et al., 2020; Vijay & Ramos-Ruiz, 2024), its use by political figures is a relatively new development. Initially, political candidates did not actively engage with audiences through TikTok, as this platform was not considered a significant space for political discourse in their early stages. However, with the rise of TikTok and its popularity among Gen Z, a major shift occurred in the 2024 presidential election cycle. Political figures, such as Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, began appearing on TikTok's FYP, bringing politics directly to younger generations. This shift demonstrates the growing influence of TikTok on Gen Z voters, marking a new era in how political candidates engage with voters and navigate digital campaigns.

This change in how political candidates use social media platforms is part of a larger trend in political engagement, particularly with younger generations. Gen Z, being the most active demographic on TikTok, has made it a crucial space for political candidates to influence and mobilize voters (Dixon, 2024; Leppert, 2024). Reaching an audience often overlooked by

traditional campaign strategies is critical, especially when considering platforms like TikTok, which has become an essential space for political discourse. In 2024, TikTok solidified its role as a major news source, with 39% of adults under 30 reporting that they regularly use the platform to stay informed (Leppert, 2024). Among Gen Z, this influence is even more pronounced, as multiple polls suggest TikTok has become their primary source for news (Flynn, 2024). With TikTok's immense popularity among this generation, it has become a critical space for politicians to create discourse.

While research has extensively explored the role of older social media in political campaigns, TikTok presents an entire new frontier for political communication. Unlike earlier platforms, where political content was often secondary to entertainment or news consumption, TikTok fosters a highly interactive and algorithm-driven environment that accelerates the spread of political messages, placing political messaging at the forefront, while still intertwining them with entertainment (Cervi et al,, 2023; Hung, 2022; Karimi & Fox, 2023; Medina Serrano et al., 2020; Pinto et al., 2024; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). This shift is largely driven by Gen Z, the generation that has not only embraced TikTok as a primary news source but also redefined political discourse through trends, memes, and viral activism (Leppert, 2024).

As digital natives, Gen Z engages with politics in ways that differ from previous generations. Their deep integration with TikTok has compelled political candidates to adapt their messaging strategies, ensuring their campaigns resonate with a younger, more digitally connected electorate (Cervi et al., 2021). Understanding how Gen Z interacts with and perceives political content on TikTok is crucial for evaluating the platform's impact on voter behavior,

political cynicism, and information efficacy, key factors in shaping the future of political communication.

Gen Z as a Political Audience

There are two primary definitions of generation: one chronological and the other social (Edmunds & Turner, 2002). Scholars debate the key influences on political beliefs, with some emphasizing factors like family dynamics, social class, and religiosity, while others argue that generational experiences shaped by historical events play a more significant role (Abramson, 1975; Hout & Fischer, 2002). Research suggests that these differences are not solely a product of age but are also shaped by the shared impact of social, economic, and political events (Beck & Jennings, 1991; Fisher, 2020; Geiger, 2015). As a result, a generation develops a collective identity formed by historical events, such as wars or economic crises, that influence their worldview (Fisher, 2020).

Thus, a voter's age remains a key factor in political behavior, often shaped by major social, economic, and political events. Generational context, therefore, plays a crucial role in shaping political identity. Each generation is defined by shared experiences that collectively influence their perspectives on politics and society (Beck & Jennings, 1991; Fischer, 2020). These experiences, including exposure to specific historical moments, cultural shifts, and technological advancements, shape how individuals within the same generation perceive political issues and engage with the political process. For example, formative events like the 2008 financial crisis for Millennials or the rise of social justice movements for Gen Z significantly influence their political ideologies and behaviors.

For Gen Z, the rapid rise of the internet and digital technologies has profoundly shaped their worldview and political engagement (Suprihatin et al., 2024). Gen Z, typically defined as

those born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019), occupies a unique space between Millennials and Gen Alpha. Their experiences and perspectives have been shaped not only by their birth years but also by the transformative digital era in which they have grown up.

Having grown up during the digital age, Gen Z's way of learning, socializing, and interacting with the world is largely influenced by digital media (Suprihatin et al., 2024; Szymkowiak et al., 2021). Constant exposure to diverse online information sources and social media platforms can broaden their perspectives on political issues, but it also requires a learned ability to discern the information that is available. The internet acts as a source of expanding horizons, allowing Gen Z to quickly engage with political content and absorb information about political events, ideologies, and candidates (Szymkowiak et al., 2021).

The rise of digital platforms has fundamentally altered how Gen Z acquires knowledge (Szymkowiak et al., 2021). With unprecedented access to resources beyond traditional classroom education, they can shape their understanding of political issues independently. This democratization of information fosters informal learning, playing a crucial role in shaping their political identities and behaviors (Szymkowiak et al., 2021). Given that Gen Z's consumption of political content is so closely tied to their preference for digital media, political candidates must adapt their strategies to engage with this new generation. This is why presidential candidates now appear on Gen Z's TikTok FYP and other digital spaces.

While traditional media remain important, especially for maintaining visibility among older voters, social media have become essential for engaging Gen Z, a generation of digitally savvy voters (Suprihatin et al., 2024). For instance, hashtags such as #2024Elections, #MAGA, #Trump2024, #VoteBlue, and #Kamala have been widely used by younger generations to mobilize support and spark political discussions on social media platforms (Pinto et al., 2024).

These hashtags not only serve as tools for expressing political opinions but also foster interactive discussions, making them central to how Gen Z engages with and shapes the political discourse during the 2024 election cycle.

As a result, traditional political campaigns primarily targets Gen X (born 1965–1980) and Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964), groups that have had comparatively less exposure to digital media and social platforms, as they have historically relied on traditional forms of media (Adi et al., 2023). This shift in media consumption reflects the different expectations of political content across generations. Consequently, the strategies that resonate with Gen Z may differ from those that appeal to Millennials. While both generations are highly tech-savvy, Gen Z demonstrates a stronger reliance on mobile-first engagement, favoring smartphones, apps, and short-form content across platforms like TikTok and Instagram (Wandhe, 2024). Their preference for visual, fast-paced, and interactive content reflects a need for immediate and engaging communication. In contrast, Millennials, who bridged the transition from traditional to digital, are more comfortable with a mix of traditional and digital media (Wandhe, 2024). These generational differences highlight the need for campaigns to adopt distinct strategies that align with each group's media habits and expectations. For younger, tech-savvy voters, platforms like Instagram, X, and TikTok offer spaces for active participation in political discussions, giving them the ability to influence political messaging directly (Suprihatin et al., 2024).

Age, therefore, in this context, is a key factor, as it not only marks generational differences but also links to broader societal factors, including values, experiences, and political ideologies. This is why age continues to be a strong indicator of political leanings, with distinct preferences emerging across generations (Pew Research Center, 2018). For example, 31% of Boomers classified themselves as conservative Republicans or Republican-leaning, while 55% of

Millennials identified as Democrat or Democrat-leaning (Pew Research Center, 2018).

Generation Z, however, is just beginning to enter the political scene and has yet to establish a

strong partisan identity, making them a prime target for political candidates seeking to shape

their political views. Having grown up with social media, memes, and viral content, Gen Z is

frequently exposed to emotionally charged messages. Because emotions are processed more

quickly than logic, political campaigns increasingly rely on emotional appeals to resonate with

and persuade Gen Z voters.

For instance, on November 5th, 2024, Harris posted a video on her official TikTok

account, @KamalaHarris, in which she dueted TikTok videos from Gen Z voters expressing

excitement about supporting her (Harris, 2024). In the video, she acknowledged their

enthusiasm, smiled warmly, and spoke directly to the camera, encouraging them to vote and

reminding them of the power they hold through their voices and their votes. By duetting TikToks

from Gen Z voters expressing enthusiasm for her campaign, Harris reinforced their excitement

and made them feel seen and valued. This created a sense of connection and belonging. By doing

this, Harris emphasized the importance of Gen Z in the election and demonstrated her

understanding of TikTok as an effective tool for engaging this demographic.

While Trump did not directly address Gen Z on TikTok like Kamala Harris did, he

strategically featured popular Gen Z influencers who resonate with this age group on his TikTok

account, @RealDonaldTrump, such as Logan Paul, Jake Paul, and Adin Ross (Trump, 2024).

This strategy further illustrated his recognition of the platform's reach with younger voters. By

featuring well-known Gen Z influencers, Trump tapped into the existing emotional connections

young voters have with these internet personalities. Their endorsement or association with his campaign can make him seem more relatable and trustworthy to their audience.

This highlights the central role of emotions in political messaging, as both candidates recognized that engaging with Gen Z requires more than just sharing information or enabling two-way communication. By leveraging emotional appeals, whether through personal, direct engagement like Harris' video or influencer endorsements like Trump's, both candidates aimed to connect with voters on a deeper level - seeking to shape perceptions, build trust, and influence political attitudes through relatable and emotionally resonant content (Brader, 2005) This strategy reflects the growing importance of emotion-driven content, particularly on platforms like TikTok, where the speed and viral nature of emotional messages can significantly influence political opinions and behaviors (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020).

Scholars increasingly recognize Gen Z as a distinct political audience due to their high social media engagement, digital fluency, and evolving political perspectives compared to previous generations (e.g., Bestvater, 2024; Dixon, 2024; Suprihatin et al., 2024; Szymkowiak et al., 2021). With politicians' growing use of social media, research has also focused on how Gen Z uses these platforms for political purposes (e.g., Bestvater, 2024; Bossetta, 2018; Cervi et al., 2023; Flynn, 2024). For example, Szymkowiak et al. (2021) found that Gen Z voters prioritize authenticity, emotional relatability, and issue-based politics over party loyalty, making them a challenging yet crucial demographic for political engagement. As Gen Z begins voting amid a critical moment in U.S. politics, political messaging targeted at this generation has become more strategic. Having grown up immersed in social media, memes, and viral content, they are constantly exposed to emotionally charged messages that shape their political views. Since emotions are processed more rapidly than logic (Brader, 2005), political candidates increasingly

leverage emotional appeals in their messaging to connect with Gen Z voters and influence their decisions.

The Role of Emotions in Political Messaging

Emotions trigger automatic, often subconscious responses when we perceive a stimulus (Brader, 2005). These emotional reactions occur when the brain recognizes the significance of an object or event, typically before any logical thought takes place. Because emotional responses are processed more quickly than logical reasoning, politicians use emotion to grab the attention of their audience. Blanchette and Richards (2004) found that emotional content, whether preexisting or induced, significantly influences logical reasoning, even when emotional changes are small. Emotions do not operate in a vacuum; rather, they are deliberately used to shape how people attend to and evaluate political information, ultimately influencing their reasoning and decision-making (Marcus, 2003).

This study uses Brader's (2005) definition of emotional appeals, which he describes as communications designed to provoke an emotional reaction from some or all of those who encounter them. This framework is particularly useful for analyzing political messaging, as it helps identify how emotions like fear, enthusiasm, and anger motivate voters to engage with campaigns and potentially act on their beliefs. For example, Brader (2005) explains that images, sounds, and symbols, such as foreclosure signs, flags, or sirens, evoke specific emotional responses that can drive action. Foreclosure signs and layoff notices resonate with individuals affected by economic downturns, prompting them to act on concerns about their financial security. Flags evoke patriotism in veterans, inspiring action based on national pride, while the sounds of sirens or gunfire stir fear in those concerned with crime, motivating them to support policies aimed at improving safety. These symbols serve as potent emotional triggers, resonating

deeply with personal experiences or widely shared values like safety, security, and justice, ultimately influencing political beliefs and decisions (Brader, 2005).

Understanding the emotional underpinnings of political messaging reveals how emotions serve as a key tool for voter perceptions and engagement. Emotions like fear, anxiety, hope, and enthusiasm have the power to move voters in profound ways. Fear and anxiety are particularly effective in drawing attention to issues and creating a sense of urgency, while hope and enthusiasm reinforce existing beliefs and motivate action (Marcus et al., 2000). Fear arises as an immediate response to tangible threats, whereas anxiety stems from uncertainty about future outcomes (Black et al., 2023; Elster, 1996; Steenbergen & Ellis, 2006). Politicians strategically leverage these emotions to frame political issues in ways that mobilize voters and drive engagement.

A notable example is Donald Trump's TikTok video on August 20th, which had the caption "Bring Back Law and Order" accompanied by an American flag emoji. In the video, he stood in front of a police car with its lights flashing and declared, "Our nation is in decline. Nobody is safe, absolutely nobody" (Trump, 2024). In this brief clip, he successfully elicited fear by referencing a real and immediate danger to public safety. Another notable example is a TikTok made by Kamala Harris on October 16th, stating that "Donald Trump is increasingly unstable" and "unfit to be president" (Harris, 2024). She elicits fear by framing Trump as a dangerous and unpredictable leader, which implies a threat to national stability, safety, and democratic values if he were to regain or remain in power.

On the other hand, hope is described as a positive emotion triggered by the potential for a favorable outcome (MacInnis & De Mello, 2005), while enthusiasm is a reaction to events that signal success or positive momentum (Brader, 2005). The key difference is that hope is future-

oriented, evoking optimism, whereas enthusiasm is more focused on the present, driving

sustained motivation.

For example, Kamala Harris posted a TikTok with the caption "We are going to win" and

a call to action, "Get out there and vote, America." The video featured upbeat music and

energetic rally footage, emphasizing her campaign's momentum and growing support (Harris,

2024). This video is a clear appeal to enthusiasm, as it celebrates progress, projects confidence,

and energizes her supporters, motivating political participation through positive emotional

reinforcement. Similarly, Donald Trump posted a TikTok with the caption "TIME TO LIVE

THE AMERICAN DREAM," declaring that "everyone will prosper, every family will thrive,

and every day will be filled with opportunity and hope, and filled with the American dream"

(Trump, 2024). This message evokes hope and optimism, two core components of enthusiastic

emotional appeals, by promising a prosperous future and painting a vivid, uplifting vision of

what his leadership offers.

By eliciting strong emotional responses, politicians are able to connect with voters on a

personal level, creating the emotional momentum necessary to drive political action (Widmann,

2021). These emotional strategies serve as powerful tools to influence how voters engage with

campaigns and make choices, positioning emotional appeals as indispensable elements of

modern political communication. By tapping into emotions like fear, anxiety, enthusiasm, and

hope, politicians aim to sway public opinion and rally support, often more effectively than

through rational argumentation alone (MacKuen et al., 2007; Marcus, 2017; Ridout & Searles,

2011). Political strategists understand that simply presenting facts or policy proposals is often not

enough to elicit the emotional responses necessary to drive voter action. Instead, they focus on

crafting messages that resonate with voters' feelings, knowing that emotional connections can often be more persuasive than logical reasoning.

In recent years, scholars have increasingly argued that politics is becoming more emotionally driven (Banks, 2014; Halperin, 2015; Marcus, 2003). This has led to a growing body of research on how political campaigns strategically use emotional appeals to shape messages and engage voters (Marcus et al., 2011; Ridout & Searles, 2011; Widmann, 2021). For instance, Heaney (2019) demonstrated that emotional capital has become a crucial tool for political engagement. The deployment of emotional appeals, such as fear and enthusiasm, can heighten political interest and participation by creating connections between politicians and voters. Building on this, Marcus et al. (2011) suggest that fear can weaken partisan loyalties, prompting voters to seek new information, while enthusiasm reinforces existing political preferences. Ridout and Searles (2011) further found that fear-based appeals in campaign ads significantly increase voter attention and mobilization. Likewise, Widmann (2021) highlighted how populist leaders use anger-driven rhetoric to engage politically disengaged voters. Collectively, these studies emphasize the strategic role of emotions in political campaigns, illustrating how emotional narratives capture voter attention, reinforce political identities, and drive electoral participation.

While emotional appeals in political messaging are crucial for engaging voters and encouraging action, their true impact extends far beyond this initial stage. These appeals have the power to shape political perceptions, influence behaviors, and ultimately determine the outcomes of elections (Marcus et al., 2017; Ridout & Searles, 2011; Valentino et al., 2011). Politicians strategically tap into emotions to not only sway opinions but also to influence decision-making processes that drive voter behavior. By eliciting emotional responses, candidates can redirect the

focus of political discourse, craft compelling narratives, and connect with voters on a deeper, personal level.

As Marcus (2017) highlights, emotions are central to shaping campaigns, driving voter mobilization, securing support, and potentially influencing electoral outcomes. Therefore, the use of emotional appeals goes beyond mere engagement; it directly affects how voters perceive candidates, make electoral decisions, and participate in the democratic process, thereby can determine the success or failure of a campaign (MacKuen et al., 2007; Marcus, 2017; Ridout & Searles, 2011).

The Influence of Emotions on Political Outcomes

Given the critical role of emotional appeals in shaping voter perceptions, these tactics are more than just engagement tools, they are powerful forces that drive political outcomes. By leveraging both positive and negative emotional appeals, politicians can profoundly influence voter decision-making, ultimately shaping election results (Marcus, 2017).

For instance, the Theory of Affective Intelligence suggests that ads incorporating enthusiasm-eliciting or fear-evoking music and imagery can significantly influence behavior (MacKuen et al., 2007). Enthusiastic ads increase political participation and reinforce existing loyalties, while fear-based ads heighten anxiety and may prompt a shift in voter behavior, which aligns with findings from Marcus (2017). This means that people who already support a candidate or party are more likely to vote and engage in campaign activities. This is because in familiar and recurring political contexts, voters draw on past experiences and preferences, reinforcing existing beliefs (MacKuen et al., 2007; Marcus, 2017). Specifically, when political content evokes hope or enthusiasm, individuals feel validated in their prior choices, making them less likely to seek alternative perspectives (Brader, 2005; Marcus et al., 2000). This

psychological reinforcement aligns with broader theories on how emotions regulate attention and decision-making in politics (Marcus et al., 2000), particularly in explaining how different emotions either reinforce existing beliefs or encourage exploratory behavior.

Consider a supporter viewing a campaign video of their favored candidate. Whether its Harris talking about her plans or Trump talking about his accomplishments, such content may evoke emotions like enthusiasm and hope, reinforcing their commitment to the candidate and increasing the likelihood of engagement, such as sharing political content or turning out to vote. By strengthening political identities and motivating action, positive emotional appeals play a significant role in influencing election outcomes (MacKuen et al., 2007; Marcus, 2017).

On the other hand, emotions such as fear and anxiety can prompt voters to seek out new information (MacKuen et al., 2007). This dynamic increases susceptibility to persuasion, especially among undecided or weakly affiliated voters (Brader, 2005). Fear acts as an alarm, signaling a potential threat that requires immediate attention and action. When a message evokes fear, it disrupts reliance on prior beliefs and prompts individuals to reassess their political choices (MacKuen et al., 2007). This heightened vigilance makes voters more open to reevaluating their beliefs and can lead to shifts in candidate preference based on perceived risks or threats (Marcus, 2017).

For example, if Trump were to release a video warning about rising crime rates and the consequences of weak immigration policies, it could trigger anxiety in some voters, prompting them to reconsider their stance on law enforcement and border security. Likewise, if Kamala were to post a video highlighting threats to reproductive rights or rising hate crimes, it could evoke fear or anger among her supporters, motivating them to advocate for policy change or turn out to vote. By framing issues as urgent crises, fear-based appeals can disrupt political loyalty,

shift candidate support, and mobilize voters to take action, whether by changing their vote, increasing political engagement, or advocating for specific policies (MacKuen et al., 2007). In this way, negative emotional appeals wield significant power in shaping electoral outcomes.

Ultimately, emotional appeals can shape how voters process information, make decisions, and take action (Marcus, 2017). These emotional responses directly influence political outcomes by altering voter behavior, decision-making, and participation (Brader, 2005). This underscores that both positive (enthusiasm, hope) and negative (fear, anxiety) emotional appeals are potent in influencing voter behavior, but they operate in distinct ways.

The rise of social media has further transformed how emotions influence political behavior. Social media platforms amplify the expression of emotions and enable users to observe, react to, and reinforce the emotions of others (Pliskin & Halperin, 2021). Specifically, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), and TikTok allow politicians to use emotional appeals, especially high-arousal emotions like anger or fear, to drive engagement and political participation (Marquart, 2023). This creates an echo chamber effect that intensifies emotional engagement (Pliskin & Halperin, 2021).

Research indicates that emotional posts, particularly those that trigger anger, empathy, or guilt, are more likely to go viral, influencing political learning, decision-making, and participation (Marquart, 2023). While simply following a candidate on social media may not directly increase participation, the exposure to emotionally charged political content can shape voter attitudes, drive engagement, and influence turnout (Marquart, 2023). This demonstrates how digital platforms serve as both amplifiers and accelerators of emotional influence in political decision-making, making it essential to analyze how different platforms shape political behavior through emotional appeals.

Past research shows that emotional appeals are not just engagement tools, they directly influence political outcomes by shaping voter behavior, decision-making, and election results (MacKuen et al., 2007; Marcus, 2017; Pliskin & Halperin, 2021). Emotions can be strategically transformed into political capital - the social power and prestige that politicians use to influence others and gain support (Heaney, 2019). Through these emotional appeals, politicians can reinforce existing loyalties or provoke reevaluation of beliefs, thereby guiding voter choices and political alignment. For instance, when people encounter messaging that feels familiar and predictable, such as appeals to enthusiasm, they tend to rely on their existing beliefs and loyalties. However, when faced with messaging that evokes uncertainty or fear, they are more likely to question their prior values and reevaluate their choices (MacKuen et al., 2007). When it comes to social media specifically, Pliskin and Halperin (2021) suggested that political discussions on social media are highly emotional due to the nature of political issues, which engage identity, group belonging, and competition.

Research indicates that widespread dissemination of emotional political content on social media can significantly shape voters' confidence in their political knowledge and their trust in the political system (Kaid et al., 2007; Opdycke et al., 2013; Song et al., 2022). For instance, Song et al. (2022) found that relying on peers for political news through social media can contribute to increased political cynicism. This suggests a complex relationship between passive news consumption and political engagement, where feeling informed enhances political efficacy, but political cynicism may hinder actual participation. Similarly, Opdycke et al. (2013) discovered that, despite being an important source of information for younger voters, social media did not significantly increase voter turnout due to the negative impact of political cynicism. Exposure to emotionally charged content on social media can have a dual impact on

voter decision-making - either enhancing political information efficacy (PIE) or increasing political cynicism. These factors play a critical role in shaping voters' political perceptions and engagement, making it essential to understand how emotional appeals influence both PIE and political cynicism in evaluating the effectiveness of campaigns.

Political Information Efficacy and Cynicism

Political information efficacy and political cynicism are two key factors influencing voter behavior, especially among young voters who consume political content primarily through social media. Political information efficacy stems from the broader concept of political efficacy, which is divided into two components: internal and external (Acock et al., 1985; Clarke & Acock, 1989; Finkel, 1985; McPherson et al., 1977). External efficacy is the belief that the government will respond to citizens' demands, while internal efficacy refers to the confidence in one's ability to understand political issues and to influence outcomes through actions like voting or other forms of participation (Niemi et al., 1991). Kaid et al. (2007) built on this idea with their theory of political information efficacy, which, while similar to internal efficacy, specifically refers to a voter's confidence in their political knowledge and whether they feel it is adequate for participating in the political process, such as voting. Therefore, in essence, political information efficacy reflects a voter's confidence in their ability to understand and interpret political information effectively (Kaid et al., 2007).

Exposure to political content on social media not only influences political information efficacy but also plays a significant role in shaping political cynicism. Political cynicism refers to the level of distrust and negative perceptions individuals hold toward politicians and political institutions (Agger et al., 1961). It is considered a key component of political trust, which is a general emotional attitude toward the government, based on whether citizens believe government

actions align with their expectations (Rudolph & Evans, 2005). Agger (1961) found that individuals from lower-class backgrounds, particularly those with lower levels of education, are more likely to retain high levels of political cynicism. However, he explains that this cynicism can be mitigated through educational attainment. As more individuals from these backgrounds attain higher levels of education, political trust tends to increase (Agger, 1961). While Agger's (1961) findings are dated, they established early links between education and political trust that have since been expanded upon by contemporary researchers. A more recent study by Dekker and Meijerink (2013) found that subjective political knowledge (boosted by education) can reduce political cynicism. Schools, teachers, and well-designed civic education programs could be key tools in fighting cynicism and encouraging healthier political attitudes among youth.

As such, research has demonstrated that exposure to political content can influence both political information efficacy and political cynicism; however, the definitive effects of this exposure remain a subject of ongoing debate. Some studies suggest that exposure can increase efficacy, while others indicate it may heighten cynicism (Agger, 1961; Fu et al., 2011; Kaid et al., 2000; Kaid & Postelnicu, 2005; Pinkleton & Austin, 2004; Sweetser & Kaid, 2008; Warner et al., 2017). For instance, For instance, Sweetser and Kaid (2008) found that individuals who actively engage with political content tend to feel more confident in their knowledge and show lower levels of cynicism about their own influence in the political process. This suggests that greater access to information might help mitigate negative perceptions, providing a more complex understanding of how social media shapes political attitudes.

However, there is still considerable debate about the nature of these effects. For some individuals, exposure to political content can actually increase cynicism, especially if the content reinforces negative or disillusioning views about political figures or institutions (Platt, 2024). In

fact, while cynicism may discourage voter turnout by fostering apathy, it may also stimulate critical thinking about politics, potentially increasing political efficacy (Fu et al., 2011; Pinkleton & Austin, 2004). Thus, while we are beginning to understand the complex relationship between exposure to political content and these outcomes, further research is needed to definitively determine the long-term implications and the varying effects on different groups of voters.

The media are often blamed for contributing to low levels of political trust, which in turn can reduce voters' motivation to seek out information or even participate in elections (Capella & Jamieson, 1996; Kaid et al., 2000). While some studies suggest that exposure to candidates' websites can help reduce cynicism and enhance political engagement, particularly among young voters (Corrado & Firestone, 1996; Milbank, 1999; Tedesco & Kaid, 2000), the impact of online content is not always straightforward. For example, Kaid and Postelnicu (2005) found that online political content did not have a significant effect on reducing political cynicism, indicating that the influence of digital platforms on voter attitudes may be more complex than initially assumed.

Despite the abundance of political content available on social media, how informed individuals feel, and their corresponding levels of political cynicism vary significantly, ultimately affecting whether this translates into increased participation. Kaid et al. (2007) found that social media platforms play a critical role in shaping political information efficacy, which in turn influences engagement with the political process. For instance, individuals who feel they lack sufficient knowledge are less likely to vote, a trend observed among young citizens who often cite inadequate knowledge as a reason for abstaining from elections (Kaid et al., 2007).

Despite the abundance of online political information, young voter turnout remains relatively low. During the 2024 election, young voters accounted for just 14% of all ballots cast, according to a National Election Pool exit poll by Edison Research (CIRCLE Tufts, 2024).

Moreover, only an estimated 42% of voters aged 18–29 participated in the 2024 presidential election, marking a decline from 2020 (CIRCLE Tufts, 2024). While research indicates that exposure to online political communication can increase political efficacy (Tedesco, 2011), it remains unclear whether this enhanced sense of efficacy ultimately leads to higher participation among those who primarily consume political content passively.

The concept of the *news finds me* perception, where individuals believe they can stay informed about public affairs indirectly through general Internet use, information from peers, and social networks, further complicates this relationship (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). Individuals who passively encounter news on social media, without actively engaging with or reflecting on it, tend to have lower political knowledge and therefore, lower political efficacy scores (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). This finding is consistent with Kaid et al. (2007), who argued that without active engagement with political content, people may not feel sufficiently informed to participate in the political process, thereby reducing voter turnout.

Past research has demonstrated that exposure to political content can influence both political information efficacy and cynicism, though the direction of this influence remains debated (e.g., Agger, 1961; Fu et al., 2011; Kaid et al., 2000; Kaid & Postelnicu, 2005; Pinkleton & Austin, 2004; Warner et al., 2017). Some studies suggest that greater access to political information enhances confidence in political knowledge and fosters engagement (Pinkleton & Austin, 2004), while others indicate that exposure to negative or conflicting political messages can increase distrust and disengagement (Platt, 2024). Given the increasing role of social media, particularly TikTok, in shaping political attitudes, it is essential to examine how emotional appeals in presidential candidates' content influence young voters' political efficacy and cynicism. This study focuses on two key research questions:

RQ1: How do presidential candidates' emotional appeals on TikTok affect political information efficacy among Gen Z voters?

RQ2: How do these emotional appeals influence political cynicism?

Understanding these dynamics will provide insight into whether exposure to emotionally charged political content strengthens or undermines young voters' trust in political institutions and their sense of political agency, ultimately influencing their behavior. The complex relationship between political efficacy and cynicism warrants a deeper exploration of the emotional factors at play in political engagement. One effective way to analyze these dynamics is through the lens of Affective Intelligence Theory (AIT).

Affective Intelligence Theory

Affective Intelligence Theory (AIT), developed by Marcus et al., (2011), argues that emotions are central to how individuals process political information and make decisions. Unlike traditional models that assume political behavior is primarily driven by stable preferences or rational calculations (Oppenheimer, 2008), AIT suggests that emotions influence how people engage with new information, evaluate candidates, and respond to political events (Marcus, 2017). The theory identifies two distinct emotional systems: the dispositional system and the surveillance system (Marcus et al., 2011).

The dispositional system processes familiar political situations through automatic, habitual responses driven by emotions like enthusiasm and aversion. Enthusiasm reinforces existing beliefs and encourages political engagement, while aversion avoids situations that challenge those beliefs, maintaining consistency with pre-existing attitudes (Marcus, 2017). For instance, a voter consistently supporting a particular political party might feel enthusiasm upon

seeing a campaign ad from that party, reinforcing their beliefs and motivating them to engage in behaviors like donating or sharing the ad (Marcus, 2017).

In contrast, the surveillance system is activated when individuals encounter uncertainty or unusual situations, relying on emotions like anxiety and fear to signal that something is amiss. This system prompts individuals to reassess their beliefs and seek new information (Marcus, 2017). For example, during political crises, fear or anxiety can push individuals to engage more critically and thoughtfully with new information, shifting them from automatic to more deliberate decision-making (Marcus et al., 2011).

Marcus et al. (2011) suggest that emotions play a role in determining whether individuals rely on established habits or engage in more thoughtful consideration of new information. Specifically, when voters experience emotional states like fear, they are more likely to reassess their political beliefs by seeking new information. However, when voters experience emotional states such as or hope, they are more likely to rely on their existing habits and beliefs, and engage in political behaviors, such as voting or supporting a candidate (Marcus, 2017). On social media platforms like TikTok, these emotional appeals can activate both decision-making systems: content that aligns with a user's pre-existing beliefs triggers the dispositional system, reinforcing partisan behavior, while content that challenges those beliefs engages the surveillance system, prompting critical reflection and the search for new information (Marcus et al., 2011).

Previous studies have explored the impact of emotional appeals on political behavior, particularly in traditional media contexts (Brader, 2005; Chang, 2001; Ridout & Searles, 2011; Scammell & Langer, 2006). For instance, Chang (2001) examined how emotional responses to positive and negative political print advertising influenced message recall, cognitive responses,

and candidate evaluations. Similarly, Scammell and Langer (2006) investigated how different types of traditional political advertising, such as positive, negative, emotional, and aesthetic, affect voter mobilization and engagement. While these studies underscore the importance of emotional appeals in political ads, they focus primarily on traditional media, such as print and television.

However, with the rise of social media, research has begun to explore how emotional appeals function on digital platforms (Abu Bakar et al., 2024; Rahman & Pial, 2019; Xie et al., 2022). For example, Rahman and Pial (2019) found that emotional appeals on social media were particularly effective among younger individuals and students, influencing their purchasing decisions. Additionally, Abu Bakar et al. (2024) explored how creative videos and multimedia effects on social media can effectively influence attitudes and behaviors, particularly in the context of water conservation.

Although research on emotional appeals on social media has increased, studies specifically examining their role in political contexts remain limited (Caiani & Di Cocco, 2023; Kim, 2023; Martella & Bracciale, 2022). For example, Martella and Bracciale (2022) analyzed the use of negative emotional appeals by Italy's political leaders during the 2018 general election campaign on Facebook. Additionally, Kim et al. (2023) examined how emotional appeals, such as fear, and identity cues influenced audience interactions with anti-vaccine TikTok videos. While some studies have explored the intersection of TikTok and politics, they have yet to fully investigate how emotional appeals shape political discourse on the platform (Hung, 2022; Vijay & Gekker, 2021). For example, Vijay and Gekker (2021) discussed TikTok's role in political discourse but did not specifically address how emotional appeals on TikTok activate emotional responses in line with Affective Intelligence Theory.

AIT has been widely used in political communication and psychology to study how emotions influence political behavior and information processing. Previous studies have applied AIT to explore the effects of emotions on political engagement, candidate evaluations, and voting behavior (e.g., McKeun et al., 2007; Marcus et al., 1993; Valentino et al., 2011). Marcus et al. (1993), for example, examined how anxiety and enthusiasm shaped political learning and engagement, finding that anxiety prompted individuals to seek additional political information, in line with the surveillance system's function. Valentino et al. (2011) found that anger can dramatically boost political engagement, helping explain shifts in voter turnout across different elections.

While these studies provide valuable insights into how AIT explains emotional responses in political contexts, most have focused on traditional media environments like television and newspapers. As social media platforms, particularly TikTok, have become central to political communication, it is necessary to extend AIT to digital spaces where emotionally charged content circulates rapidly. Although some research has applied AIT to online political discussions, it has primarily focused on platforms like Facebook and Twitter (e.g., Baroni & Rigoni, 2021; Hasell & Weeks, 2016; Rahim et al., 2021). For example, Rahim et al. (2021) found that social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook play a significant role in shaping public opinion and advancing political agendas, particularly in the context of Pakistani political discourse. Similarly, Baroni and Rigoni (2021) found that emotions play a critical role in shaping user engagement with political content on Twitter, particularly in the context of partisan news outlets. Hasell and Weeks (2016) explicitly applied AIT's concepts of the surveillance and dispositional systems to explore how emotions like anger could influence online political behaviors, especially sharing content on social media, specifically Facebook, Instagram and

LinkedIn. However, research explicitly applying AIT to TikTok's unique political environment remains scarce.

This gap in the literature highlights the need for research examining how emotional appeals on TikTok activate the dispositional and surveillance systems among Gen Z voters. By applying Affective Intelligence Theory to the analysis of TikTok's political messaging, this study seeks to fill that gap and deepen our understanding of how politicians' emotional appeals shape political information efficacy and cynicism among younger voters. Research Question 1 (RQ1) explores how emotional appeals on TikTok affect political information efficacy, while Research Question 2 (RQ2) examines their impact on political cynicism. These questions provide important insights into how emotions influence Gen Z's political engagement and perceptions of political information. However, while RQ1 and RQ2 shed light on how emotions shape Gen Z's confidence in their political knowledge and trust in political information, they do not explain how specific emotions trigger these perceptions. Therefore, Research Question 3 (RQ3) focuses on how emotional appeals activate the dispositional and surveillance systems, offering a deeper understanding of the emotional mechanisms underlying political decision-making. Accordingly, Research Question 3 is:

RQ3: To what extent do emotional appeals in presidential candidates' TikTok videos activate the dispositional and surveillance systems among Gen Z voters?

RQ3a: To what extent do emotional appeals in TikTok videos increase anxiety and fear, indicating activation of the surveillance system among Gen Z voters?

RQ3b: To what extent do emotional appeals in TikTok videos increase enthusiasm and anger, indicating activation of the dispositional system among Gen Z voters?

By applying Affective Intelligence Theory to emotional appeals on TikTok, this research provides insights into how such messaging influences Gen Z voters' information processing, which in turn affects their political information efficacy and political cynicism. Understanding these processes is critical for analyzing the 2024 election and shaping future digital campaigns.

Methods

This study employed a quantitative research design to assess the influence of emotional appeals in TikTok videos by politicians on political information efficacy and political cynicism among Gen Z voters. A pretest-posttest experimental design was conducted using Qualtrics. Participants first completed a pretest survey assessing their political information efficacy, political cynicism, and emotional state. They were then shown a series of videos from each candidate, with an emotion questionnaire administered after each set of videos. Finally, participants completed a post-exposure survey to measure any changes in their political information efficacy, cynicism, and emotional state.

Participants

Participants in this study were eligible Gen Z voters, specifically individuals born between 1997 and 2006, who were eligible to vote in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election. Participants did not have to vote in the 2024 election; they just had to have been eligible to vote. To ensure engagement with political content on TikTok, participants are required to have used TikTok before. The participants do not have to have a current TikTok account, however. Potential participants completed a Qualtrics survey designed to gather demographic and contact information (view Appendix A for survey questions). These questions were designed to ensure participants met the study's eligibility criteria and to facilitate the recruitment process for the group experiment sessions.

There were a total of 64 completed surveys (N = 64). Among these participants, 36 (57%) participants were female, 23 (37%) were male, 5 (6%) were nonbinary or did not want to say. In terms of race, 49 (77%) identified as white, 7 (11%) identified as African American, 3 (5%) identified as Hispanic or Latino, 2 (3%) identified as Asian, and 3 (5%) identified as other or preferred not to say. When asked about their interest in politics, 15 (23%) reported to be very interested, 27 (42%) reported to be somewhat interested in politics, 19 (30%) reported a neutral stance, 2 (3%) reported to not really be interested in politics, and 1 (2%) reported to not be interested at all in politics.

Recruitment was conducted through convenience sampling, targeting students at Radford University. Convenience sampling was selected as the most feasible recruitment method due to time and resource constraints. Convenience sampling is a quick, inexpensive method for collecting data, especially when resources are limited or when researchers want preliminary insights (Simkus, 2023). While participants are likely to provide valuable insights into how emotional appeals on TikTok influence political information efficacy and cynicism, their experiences and perceptions may differ from those of Gen Z individuals outside this specific context. Despite these limitations, this recruitment strategy allows for an accessible and practical means to gather meaningful data within the scope of this study. By focusing on eligible voters who have been engaged with TikTok, the study can provide insights on how TikToks platform influences this key demographic group, laying the groundwork for future research with a more diverse and representative sample.

The majority of participants were recruited from undergraduate communication courses. Even though the recruitment took part in communication classes, the majors still varied, as most

of these courses were entry level. Some majors included communication, criminal justice, psychology, and political science.

With colleagues' permission, the researcher visited their classes and dedicated a few minutes of class time to ask students if they would be willing to participate in the survey. The students scanned the QR code on the board and filled out the initial eligibility survey to provide their contact information. If the researcher was unable to visit the classroom, the professors were given a script to read from to discuss the experiment. Additionally, any professor offering extra credit for this assignment was asked to provide alternative ways for students to earn extra credit, ensuring that none of the participants felt obligated. It was clearly emphasized that participation in this study is voluntary.

Stimuli

To assess political information efficacy and political cynicism, the researcher conducted a preliminary content analysis of TikTok content produced by the 2024 U.S. presidential candidates. This analysis involved watching and evaluating every video posted to each candidate's official TikTok account from their first upload through November 5th, resulting in a comprehensive and representative dataset. Using a qualitative coding framework grounded in Affective Intelligence Theory, the researcher identified and categorized the dominant emotional appeals - such as fear, hope, anger, enthusiasm, anxiety, scorn, and disappointment - present in each video. Each video was assessed holistically, with attention to tone, visuals, music, and messaging, in order to capture the overarching emotional theme. Rather than focusing on isolated technical elements, the researcher examined how these multimodal cues interacted to evoke a primary emotional response.

Following the coding process, the researcher calculated the frequency with which each candidate employed specific emotional appeals, creating a overview of their affective messaging strategies. Both Donald Trump and Kamala Harris used a broad range of emotional appeals, with fear and hope emerging as prominent themes across both candidates' content. However, Trump's videos most frequently featured fear and hope in relatively balanced proportions, suggesting a mix of negative and positive affect. Harris's content also included fear, but was more frequently characterized by hope and enthusiasm, indicating a tilt toward positive emotional appeals overall. This preliminary analysis informed the selection of TikTok video stimuli for the main study, ensuring a balanced representation of emotional content to examine its influence on participants' political information efficacy and political cynicism.

The researcher focused on the primary emotions evoked in the videos to capture the central emotional tone of each candidate's content. This focus allowed for a more streamlined and targeted analysis, which was critical for understanding how the candidates used emotional appeals to influence voter perceptions and engagement. While each video contained a variety of emotional cues, the decision was made not to attempt to capture every single emotion present in order to avoid overwhelming complexity. By concentrating on the dominant emotional appeal, the researcher was better able to identify each candidate's core affective messaging strategy, aligned with Affective Intelligence Theory, and its potential impact on viewers' emotional responses and political cognition.

Again, for Trump, the two primary emotions found were fear and hope, each appearing in 15 videos. Fear, a recurring theme in his content, creates a sense of urgency, encouraging viewers to perceive critical issues as pressing and in need of immediate action. For example, on August 15th, 2024, Trump posted a TikTok captioned "STOP THIS DISASTER," highlighting

the rising costs of everyday food items (Trump, 2024). The video featured signs with red arrows

pointing to the increased prices, with Trump stating, "Every single item is up. Eggs are up 48%,

cookies up 27%…" (Trump, 2024). In contrast, Trump also appeals to hope, presenting himself

as a problem-solver and visionary leader. On November 4th, 2024, he posted a video titled

"TIME TO LIVE THE AMERICAN DREAM," where he declared, "everyone will prosper,

every family will thrive, and every day will be filled with opportunity and hope" (Trump, 2024).

These emotional appeals offer stability and direction, reinforcing his image as a decisive and

capable leader.

Trump's TikTok strategy was more selective. He posted significantly fewer videos than

Harris, with just 55 videos over five months. Additionally, his videos tended to be shorter in

length. This curated approach suggests a focus on maximizing the emotional impact of each post,

ensuring that his messages are attention-grabbing and memorable, particularly for his established

base.

In comparison, Harris's TikTok content heavily relied on hope and enthusiasm, appearing

in 59 and 67 videos, respectively. Enthusiasm, the most dominant emotion in her videos,

generated excitement around her campaign and energizes her supporters. For example, on

November 5, 2024, Harris posted a video with the caption, "When we vote, we win. Are you

ready to make your voices heard?" The accompanying text echoed this sentiment, saying,

"Today is Election Day. When we vote, we win," while images of Harris smiling, supporters

cheering, and people holding campaign signs flashed across the screen (Harris, 2024).

Enthusiasm drives excitement and mobilizes voters, while hope adds a personal touch, deepening

emotional connections with her audience. For instance, on September 13, 2024, Harris posted a

video of herself conversing with an independent voter at a bookstore, smiling warmly as the
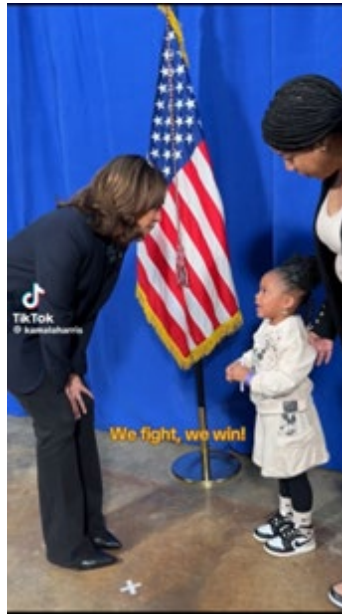
voter thanked her for her efforts. The caption read, "Cassidy, thank you for your support. We're all in this together" (Harris, 2024). Together, these emotions create a sense of shared purpose and positivity, key elements of Harris's messaging style.

Harris's broader approach, demonstrated by her higher number of videos - over 150 in total - aimed to engage a wider audience. Interestingly, her videos tended to be longer in length. This consistency ensures a regular presence on the platform, helping her connect with diverse voters and maintain visibility.

The study featured five videos from each candidate, designed to evoke specific emotions: hope and enthusiasm for Kamala Harris, and fear and hope for Donald Trump, as these were the primary emotions identified in their TikTok videos.

The TikTok videos from Kamala Harris' official account included one that evoked only hope, one that evoked only enthusiasm, and three that evoked both emotions simultaneously. The video evoking only hope, posted on October 7, features Harris greeting a child who says, *"I love you so much, Kamala. We fight, we win"* (Harris, 2024). Harris responds by praising the child, calling her a leader and highlighting her intelligence. This interaction creates a sense of hope by portraying a future where the next generation is inspired and empowered by Harris' leadership. The focus on the child's potential and Harris' optimistic praise fosters a sense of future possibility, which justifies labeling this video as evoking hope.

The video evoking only enthusiasm, posted on August 22, features Harris delivering a

passionate speech:

> On behalf of every American, regardless of party, race, gender, or the language
>
> your grandma speaks, on behalf of my mother and everyone who has ever set out
>
> on their own unlikely journey… I accept your nomination for President of the
>
> United States of America.

Harris' assertive tone, inclusive language, and emphasis on the greatness of the nation create a

sense of enthusiasm. The emotional energy and urgency in her speech inspire excitement and

motivate action, making this video evoke enthusiasm.

The three videos evoking both hope and enthusiasm simultaneously were posted on

October 7, October 18, and November 5. On October 7, Harris spoke to a child during a rally,

saying, "You are leaders, and I'm counting on you" (Harris, 2024). She emphasized both the

child's potential and the responsibility to rise to that potential, inspiring hope for the future while

also energizing the child and others by requiring them to step into their leadership. This combination of future possibilities and motivating action is why this video evokes both emotions.

On October 18, Harris addressed the promise of America, stating, "I see the promise of America in all of you, I see it… I see it in the young people who are voting for the first time" (Harris, 2024). She also highlighted women's refusal to accept a future without reproductive freedom. This message inspired hope by focusing on a brighter future where individuals take action for change, while also invoking enthusiasm through her passionate words that encourage people to actively participate in shaping that future. The video effectively blended both hope and enthusiasm as it calls for belief in the future and immediate action.

Figure 2

Screenshot from a TikTok video by @Kamalaharris (2024). Retrieved from
https://www.tiktok.com/@kamalaharris/video/742719523602514255

Finally, on November 5, Harris expressed gratitude for Gen Z's participation in voting, saying, "This is your country, this is your future, and you have a right to weigh in, so get out and vote" (Harris, 2024). This message created hope by reinforcing the importance of Gen Z's role in shaping the future, while the call to action, "get out and vote," generated enthusiasm, motivating

young voters to act and be a part of the democratic process. The combination of optimism and an immediate call to action makes this video evoke both hope and enthusiasm.

The videos selected from Donald Trump's official TikTok account included three that evoked fear and two that evoked hope. The videos posted on November 4th and 5th were categorized as evoking hope. In the November 4th video, Trump stated, "If you vote for him, everyone will prosper, every family will thrive, and every day will be filled with opportunity, hope, and the American dream" (Trump, 2024). This message fostered hope by emphasizing economic success and the American dream, reassuring viewers that a prosperous and stable future is within reach.

Figure 3
Screenshot from a TikTok video by @RealdDonaldTrump (2024). Retrieved from
https://www.tiktok.com/@realdonaldtrump/video/7433546039254142250

Similarly, in the November 5th video, Trump encouraged supporters by saying, "Republicans are doing really well. Stay online, vote, and we will have a big victory tonight" (Trump, 2024). While this statement carried an element of encouragement, it primarily evoked hope by reinforcing the belief that success is within reach. The emphasis on continued

engagement and the prospect of victory reassures viewers, creating a sense of confidence in the future rather than just momentary excitement.

The three videos categorized as evoking fear were posted on August 15th, August 20th, and November 1st. These videos focused on economic instability and uncertainty about the future. On August 15th, Trump stated, "Credit card debt is at an all-time high, and prices have never been like this before. If you want to lower your prices, you better vote for Trump" (Trump, 2024). This message instilled fear by emphasizing financial hardship, suggesting the economy is in crisis, and highlighting rising debt and inflation to create a sense of urgency and concern about the cost of living.

In the August 20th video, Trump warned about the increasing costs of basic necessities, stating, "Eggs up 48%, cookies 28%, butter 31%. This is just the beginning" (Trump, 2024). This statement amplified fear by implying that prices will continue to rise, making everyday essentials unaffordable. The phrase "this is just the beginning" suggests that economic conditions will worsen, creating fear among viewers.

Lastly, the November 5th video, where Trump said, "border surge is costing Americans/ bankrupting them. Illegal immigrants are terrorists coming from mental institutions/ prisons. Millions of them coming in" (Trump, 2024), can also be interpreted as evoking fear. This statement evoked fear by framing immigration as an immediate and overwhelming threat to Americans' financial stability and safety. The phrase "border surge is costing Americans/bankrupting them" suggests that immigration is directly harming citizens by draining resources and increasing financial burdens. This instills anxiety about economic instability and personal financial hardship.

These emotions align with Affective Intelligence Theory, which posits that emotional responses play a crucial role in influencing political behavior and decision-making through the disposition and surveillance systems. The emotional content of these videos will help provide insights into how emotional appeals shape participants' political perceptions, by activating either the dispositional system, which reinforces pre-existing beliefs, or the surveillance system, which encourages individuals to reevaluate their political views in response to emotional cues.

Measures

The pretest-posttest experiment incorporated Likert scale items adapted from previous studies to measure political information efficacy, political cynicism, and emotional response. These instruments were selected for their reliability in assessing participants' political engagement, trust in political institutions, and emotional reactions to campaign messaging.

To measure political information efficacy, the researcher adapted a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*) from McKinney et al. (2014). The scale included four statements designed to assess participants' confidence in their political knowledge and ability to understand political information. These statements include (a) I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics; (b) I think I am better informed about politics and government than most people; (c) I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country; and (d) If a friend asked me about the Presidential election, I feel like I would have enough information to help my friend.

Political cynicism was measured using an eight-item scale adapted from Jasperson and Yun (2007). The scale captured participants' level of distrust in the government and political institutions. Participants rated their agreement with statements such as (a) Whether I vote or not has no influence on what politicians do, (b) One never knows what politicians really think, (c) People like me do not have any say about what the government does, (d) sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what's going on, (e) One can be confident that politicians will always do the right thing (reverse coded), (f) Politicians often quickly forget their election promises after a political campaign is over, (g) Politicians are more interested in power than in what the people think, and (h) One cannot

always trust what politicians say. The PIE and cynicism scales were combined into a single

Likert scale. The full scale can be found in Appendix B.

Finally, to measure participants' emotional responses to campaign videos, the researcher

adapted and modified the 10-item battery of affect terms derived from the Affective Intelligence

Theory (Marcus et al., 2000) as used in Neuman et al. (2018), which measured three emotional

dimensions: anxiety, enthusiasm, and anger/aversion. Anxiety was assessed using terms like

"scared," "afraid," and "worried"; enthusiasm was reflected by terms like "proud," "hopeful,"

and "enthusiastic"; and anger/aversion was measured by terms like "hateful," "bitter," "angry,"

and "resentful." While the original study used a 0 to 100 scoring range, the researcher modified

the approach by asking the participants to rate how strongly they felt each emotion, using a 5-

point scale ranging from "not at all" to "extremely." A 5-point scale ranging from *not at all* to

extremely is more straightforward and easier for participants to understand and answer than a 0

to 100 scale. A 5-point scale is more consistent with the other measures in the study. Overall, this

scale assessed emotions such as enthusiasm, anxiety, and anger, which are central to Affective

Intelligence Theory. Participants rated their emotional state before and after viewing the videos.

The full scale can be found in Appendix C.

Procedure

Prior to conducting the study, IRB approval was obtained from Radford University. The

IRB ensures that research meets ethical standards, particularly regarding participant protection.

The researcher followed IRB protocols to safeguard privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, and

informed consent. Eligible participants interested in the study completed a Qualtrics survey,

where they were informed of the study's purpose and voluntary nature. All participants provided

informed consent before participating, and their contact information was kept confidential.

Eligible participants who indicated willingness to participate were contacted via email or phone number to sign up for a 45-minute time slot on Doodle. Doodle is an online tool used to schedule meetings with multiple people. The study took place in various designated Radford University classrooms. Upon arrival, participants were given an overview of the study, including its purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature. They were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time. After explaining, the researcher allowed participants to ask questions before starting.

Once all participants were given the run-down of the study, a QR code was displayed on the TV screen. They first read and selected whether they accepted the agreement, then answered eligibility questions to ensure they met the study criteria. If they did not agree to participate or did not meet the eligibility criteria, they were directed to a screen that stated, "Thank you for your time." If eligible, they proceeded to a pre-test survey measuring political information efficacy, political cynicism, and their current emotional state using two validated Likert-scale items.

After completing the pre-test, participants saw a message instructing them to pause until further instructions were given. The researcher asked all participants who were on the pause screen to look up from their device and look at the researcher directly, so they knew when everyone was finished. When all participants reached this point, the researcher presented five TikTok videos from Donald Trump's official campaign account. These videos were played consecutively.

After viewing, participants were asked to complete a post-exposure emotional state assessment using the Likert scale. The researcher asked them to reflect on the emotions the videos made them feel. Once all participants submitted their responses, they saw another

message instructing them to pause. Again, the researcher asked all participants to look up from their device to indicate they were done with the first section.

Once all the participants were on the pause screen, the researcher presented five TikTok videos from Kamala Harris' official campaign account. These videos were shown consecutively. Participants then reassessed their emotional state based on the feelings aroused watching the videos, using the same Likert scale. Finally, participants were asked to think about both videos overall, and complete a post-test survey remeasuring political cynicism, political information efficacy, and overall emotional shifts. After submitting, participants received a message thanking them for their participation, explaining its significance to the research, and providing the primary researcher's contact information.

When everyone was finished with the experiment, the researcher thanked them for their participation, allowed for any questions, and told them where they would be able to find the final paper once finished. Additionally, the researcher gave participants their and the principal investigators emails for any further questions.

Data Collection

All data were collected using Qualtrics. Qualtrics is a platform that helps businesses and organizations collect and analyze online survey data. In the eligibility survey, participants were asked for their birth year, whether they were eligible to vote in the 2024 election, if they had used TikTok before, their contact information, and the best time for them to participate in the experiment. The primary researcher contacted 84 participants.

Since the eligibility survey collected contact information, it was treated as confidential. However, the data collected from the eligibility survey was not used in this research paper. During the experiment, participants were not asked for any identifying information, and their

responses remained anonymous. The researcher activated the Anonymize Response option on Qualtrics, ensuring the participants that the survey was not collecting any identifiable information.

All participants were under no obligation to answer any question they felt uncomfortable answering. They had the ability to withdraw at any time without facing any negative consequences. If a participant decided to withdraw from the study before they finished the survey, their data were not included in the final analysis. Since responses are anonymized in Qualtrics (with no IP addresses or identifying information collected), any incomplete surveys were automatically excluded from the dataset. If a participant had already submitted their responses, they were able to contact the researcher to withdraw their responses. However, they had to supply enough information (e.g., approximate date and time they completed the survey) to identify their submission. Once deleted, the data cannot be recovered or used in any way. The researcher did not have anyone request deletion of their response.

Data Analysis

Once data collection was complete, all responses were exported from Qualtrics into SPSS for statistical analysis. Data cleaning was the first step in the analysis to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the responses. Incomplete responses were flagged, and missing data were addressed. The researcher deleted 19 incomplete responses from the data set. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated for all key variables such as political information efficacy, political cynicism, and emotional responses. This provided an overview of the data and helped identify any patterns before further analysis.

To assess the internal consistency of the emotional response scales (enthusiasm, anxiety, and anger/aversion), Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each scale. This was important to

ensure the reliability of the instruments before interpreting the results. Each scale demonstrated acceptable to high reliability post-experiment (Enthusiasm: $\alpha = .826$, Anxiety: $\alpha = .908$, Aversion: $\alpha = .869$), confirming that the items within each construct were internally consistent and appropriate for further analysis.

Next, paired samples t-tests were conducted to assess whether there were significant differences in participants' emotional responses and levels of PIE or cynicism before and after watching the TikTok videos. Paired sample t-tests were chosen because they allow for the comparison of scores from the same participants, providing insights into within-subject changes. This allowed for the measurement of change in enthusiasm, anxiety, and aversion, as well as shifts in perceived political knowledge and trust in the political system resulting from exposure to the candidates' content.

In addition, independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine whether there were significant differences in political information efficacy (PIE) and political cynicism based on gender (male vs. female).

Finally, Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated to explore the relationships between political interest and each post-exposure emotional variable (enthusiasm, anxiety, and aversion). These correlations were run separately for each candidate group (Trump and Harris) to determine how political engagement influenced emotional reactions to the TikTok videos.

Overall, the data analysis aimed to answer the research questions by examining both the statistical and practical significance of the changes in political information efficacy, political cynicism, and emotional responses, offering a glimpse into how emotional appeals in TikTok videos influenced Gen Z voters.

Ethical Considerations

The risks associated with participating in this study were minimal but should still be considered. As the research involved analyzing participants' perceptions of political content on TikTok, some psychological, social, and data-breach risks could have arisen. Participants could have experienced mild emotional discomfort, especially if they held strong opinions about the candidates featured. Emotionally charged TikToks could evoke frustration, anger, or anxiety, particularly when the content conflicts with their personal beliefs. However, this risk is similar to what users encounter on regular social media platforms, where exposure to counter-attitudinal information can induce negative emotions (Lu, 2019).

To mitigate psychological risks, politically neutral TikTok videos were initially considered, but this would have undermined the study's goal of examining emotional appeals in political messaging. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. This information was communicated both orally and through a consent form presented before participation. The form emphasized that data would remain anonymous and that participants could withdraw at any point without penalty. Additionally, when the pause screen appeared between each set of videos, the message reiterated the participants of their right to withdraw at any time.

While there was a minimal risk of social discomfort if participants are concerned about how their political views might be perceived, research shows that web-based surveys generally lead to more accurate reporting of sensitive information due to the reduced pressure to conform (Kreuter et al, 2008). To mitigate this risk, the researcher used Qualtrics, a web-based survey tool, to complete the survey. Additionally, the students completed the survey on their individual devices, further reducing the likelihood of social discomfort. To further elevate concerns,

participants were assured that their responses would be anonymous, minimizing concerns about judgment or social repercussions.

While web-based surveys carry the risk of data breaches, a secure, institution-approved platform, Qualtrics, was used for data collection. Concerns about third-party data storage led to the decision to use Qualtrics, as it provided better control over sensitive information. All data was stored on password-protected, encrypted university-owned devices, with no IP addresses collected. In compliance with IRB guidelines, data will be retained for three years post-study, in accordance with university and federal retention standards

Personal information collected in the eligibility survey, such as birth year and contact details, was treated confidentially. This information was not used for analysis and was securely stored, separate from research data. The experiment itself was anonymous. If participants chose to withdraw before completing the survey, their responses were excluded from analysis. They could also contact the researcher to request deletion of their data after submission, provided they gave approximate details about their response time and date. Once deleted, the data could not be recovered or used.

Findings

Participants were recruited from undergraduate communication courses, with a total of 64 participants who completed the entire study (N = 64). The group consisted of 23 males (N = 23), 36 females (N = 36), four non-binary participants (N = 4), and one participant who preferred not to specify gender (N = 1). Data collection occurred from Wednesday, March 26 to Wednesday, April 9, 2025.

Before presenting the results related to the research questions, the internal consistency of the scales used in the study was assessed. Reliability analyses for the emotional scales revealed

varying levels of internal consistency. The anxiety (α = .840/.908), anger/aversion (α = .891/.869), and PIE (α = .844/.892) scales showed high reliability in both pre- and post-tests. Enthusiasm reliability improved from acceptable to high (α = .744/.826), while political cynicism increased from borderline acceptable to acceptable (α = .687/.769) after video exposure.

In terms of specific video content, the Trump videos exhibited strong internal consistency across emotional responses. The anxiety post-test, taken after watching the Trump videos, demonstrated excellent internal consistency (α = .889). The enthusiasm post-test, taken after watching the Trump videos, also demonstrated excellent internal consistency (α = .909). Additionally, the anger/aversion post-test, taken after watching the Trump videos, demonstrated excellent internal consistency (α = .907). For the Kamala videos, the results were similarly strong. The anxiety post-test (α = .916), indicating very strong reliability. The enthusiasm post-test (α = .949) reflected a very high reliability. Lastly, the anger/aversion scale for the Kamala videos had excellent reliability (α = .900). These findings indicate these items consistently measured participants' anxiety, enthusiasm, anger, and aversion in response to the video content.

Given these reliability results confirming the measures, the study now turns to the results related to Research Question One, which aimed to explore how emotional appeals in the TikTok videos of both presidential candidates influenced political information efficacy among Gen Z voters. To address this question, a paired sample t-test was conducted to compare pre- and post-test responses. The results revealed no significant change in political information efficacy, with the pretest mean (M = 3.49) and post-test mean (M = 3.54) showing no difference, ($t(63)$ = – 1.037, p = .152). This suggests that participants' confidence in understanding political information remained stable.

Research Question Two examined the influence of presidential candidates' emotional

appeals on political cynicism. A paired sample t-test was performed, revealing no significant change in political cynicism between the pre-test (M = 3.397) and post-test (M = 3.47) ($t(63)$ = – 1.003, p = .16). This indicates that participants' skepticism about politics did not significantly shift after watching the TikTok videos.

Research Question Three investigates the extent in which emotional appeals in TikTok videos influence the activation of the surveillance and dispositional systems, aligning with Affective Intelligence Theory. Sub-question A focused on the activation of the surveillance system through negative emotional appeals like aversion and anxiety. Sub-question B focused on how positive emotional appeals, such as enthusiasm, might activate the dispositional system. To explore this, a series of paired-sample *t*-tests were conducted comparing participants' emotional responses at three stages: before viewing any TikTok videos (pre-test), after watching each candidate's videos (Trump and Harris), and following the full set of videos (overall post-test). In addition, a Pearson correlation was conducted to examine the relationships between different emotional responses (anxiety, enthusiasm, and anger/aversion) and political interest, in relation to specific candidates (Harris and Trump).

The analysis of emotional responses to the TikTok videos revealed significant changes in participant reactions following exposure to Trump's content. Specifically, there was a notable decrease in aversion and anxiety post-video, as well as a significant increase in enthusiasm. In contrast, Harris's videos did not significantly affect participants' emotional responses, with no substantial changes observed in aversion, anxiety, or enthusiasm. However, there was a notable increase in enthusiasm and decrease in anxiety and aversion overall. Table 1 presents the results of the paired samples t-test.

Table 1

Paired Samples t-Test Results for Emotional Reactions to TikTok Stimuli

Candidate	Emotion	M Pre-test	M Post-test	t-Statistic	p-Value
Trump	Anger/Aversion	1.34	2.06	-5.121	<.001**
Trump	Anxiety	1.51	2.05	-3.719	<.001**
Trump	Enthusiasm	2.37	2.06	2.002	.025*
Harris	Anger/Aversion	1.32	1.52	-1.095	.139
Harris	Anxiety	1.51	1.52	-.088	.465
Harris	Enthusiasm	2.37	2.53	-.787	.192
Both	Anger/Aversion	1.32	1.96	-5.564	<.001**
Both	Anxiety	1.51	2.05	-5.521	<.001**
Both	Enthusiasm	2.37	2.15	1.951	.028*

While the primary analyses addressed the study's core research questions, additional post hoc analyses were conducted to further investigate potential relationships between participants' emotional reactions, political interest, PIE, and political cynicism. It is important to note that these correlations were not hypothesized a priori and therefore should be interpreted with caution. These findings are meant to generate insights for future research rather than confirm specific theoretical predictions.

To explore potential patterns in participants' responses, post hoc Pearson's correlation analyses were conducted for Trump's TikTok videos. While not central to the study's original aims, these exploratory analyses revealed interesting relationships. The correlations between emotional reactions showed strong negative relationships between both anxiety and enthusiasm, as well as aversion and enthusiasm, meaning that higher anxiety or aversion was associated with lower enthusiasm. Anxiety also had a strong positive correlation with aversion, suggesting that participants who felt more anxious about Trump's content also tended to express greater aversion. A summary of these findings is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Correlation Matric of Emotional Responses to Donald Trump Stimuli

Variable	Interest	Anxiety	Enthusiasm	Aversion
Interest	1	.093	.208*	1.39
Anxiety	.093	1	-.409**	.839**
Enthusiasm	.208*	-.409**	1	-.409**
Aversion	.139	-.839**	-.409**	1

For Harris's content, similar patterns emerged with slight variations. Political interest was positively correlated with enthusiasm, aversion, and anxiety, suggesting that individuals with higher political interest tended to report higher levels of all three emotions after watching Harris's TikToks. In other words, more politically engaged viewers reacted more strongly, both positively and negatively.

Additionally, anxiety post-TikTok was negatively correlated with enthusiasm and strongly positively correlated with aversion. These findings indicate that those who felt more anxious after watching Harris's videos were less enthusiastic and more likely to feel strong aversion toward the videos. A summary of these findings is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Correlation Matric of Emotional Responses Kamala Harris Stimuli

Variable	Interest	Anxiety	Enthusiasm	Aversion
Interest	1	.428*	.223*	.263*
Anxiety	.248*	1	-.345**	.848**
Enthusiasm	.223*	-.345**	1	-.368**
Aversion	.263*	-.848**	-.368**	1

Pearson's correlations were also examined between political information efficacy (PIE) and political interest, revealing strong positive relationships between both pre-test and post-test

PIE with political interest. Additionally, a very strong correlation was found between pre-test

and post-test PIE, indicating stability in participants' political efficacy ratings before and after

watching the videos.

Further analysis showed a negative correlation between pre-test PIE and political

cynicism, suggesting that those with higher political efficacy before the videos were somewhat

less likely to report high political cynicism. Conversely, a positive correlation between post-test

PIE and post-test political cynicism suggests that higher political efficacy post-video was

associated with higher political cynicism.

Additionally, slight negative correlations were observed between political cynicism and

political interest, although they did not achieve statistical significance. A strong positive

correlation was found between pre-test and post-test political cynicism, indicating consistency in

cynicism levels before and after exposure to the videos. The results of these correlations can be

found in Table 4.

Table 4

Correlation Analysis of Political Information Efficacy, Cynicism, and Political Interest

Variables Compares	Correlation (r)	p-Value
PrePIE & PostPIE	.909	<.001**
PrePIE & InterestRev	.717	<.001**
PostPIE & InterestRev	.741	<.001**
PrePIE & PreCyn	-.286	.011
PostPIE & PreCyn	-.284	.012
PrePIE & PostCyn	-.098	.221
PostPIE & PostCyn	.619	<.001**
PreCyn & PostCyn	.619	<.001**
PreCyn &InterestRev	-.182	.075
PostCyn & InterestRev	-.101	.213

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the PIE and cynicism scores

between male and female participants. For pretest PIE, the male mean was 3.24 and the female mean was 3.53, with a t-value of 1.385, indicating no statistically significant difference between genders. Similarly, for posttest PIE, the male mean was 3.36 and the female mean was 3.53, with a t-value of 0.789, again showing no significant gender difference. For pretest cynicism, the male mean was 3.29 and the female mean was 3.5, with a t-value of 1.41, indicating no statistically significant difference between genders. Similarly, for post-test cynicism, the male mean was 3.48 and the female mean was 3.43, with a t-value of -0.278, again showing no significant gender difference.

However, when analyzing the data from male participants only, results indicated that both political cynicism and political information efficacy demonstrated directional trends toward statistical significance, though neither effect met the conventional threshold of $p < 0.05$. Specifically, political cynicism showed a modest decrease from pretest to posttest ($t(22) = -1.788, p = 0.044$), and political information efficacy exhibited a slight increase ($t(22) = -1.348, p = 0.096$). Although these results were not statistically significant by traditional standards, the observed trends suggest potential emerging effects, indicating that exposure to emotional political content on TikTok may influence male participants' political attitudes. These trends warrant further examination in future studies with larger, more diverse samples to determine the robustness of these findings

Discussion

This study examined the influence of emotionally charged TikTok videos on Gen Z's political information efficacy and cynicism. Specifically, it explored how these videos, by eliciting specific emotional responses, activate either the dispositional or surveillance systems, as outlined in Affective Intelligence Theory. The goal was to determine whether these emotional

triggers impact Gen Z's confidence in their ability to comprehend political information (political information efficacy) or create skepticism and distrust in political processes (political cynicism). By analyzing the effects of emotional appeals used in these TikTok videos, this study aimed to uncover how these responses shape political attitudes and perceptions among younger voters, particularly in relation to presidential candidates. To determine the effects of the stimuli on efficacy and cynicism, participants responded to a series of questions and statements designed to assess their confidence in their political knowledge and their level of skepticism toward political leaders. To determine the effects of the stimuli on enthusiasm, anxiety, and aversion, participants responded to a list of emotions to assess how they felt before and after watching the videos. This section will discuss the findings related to the confidence in Gen Z's knowledge and overall distrust in politics as well as the activation of the dispositional and surveillance systems as well as the correlations between these outcomes.

To begin, this study found that political information efficacy levels in participants did not increase at a significant level from pretest to posttest, which is inconsistent with previous findings (Kaid et al., 2007; Tedesco, 2011). Nearly all prior studies have demonstrated that exposure to political messaging tends to increase PIE. However, a key distinction lies in the type and duration of content exposure. Previous researchers have often relied on long-form content such as televised debates, campaign advertisements, print articles, or news broadcasts, forms of media that allow for sustained engagement and deeper cognitive processing. For instance, debates usually last at least an hour, and studies that involve articles often have participants read a few articles per day over several days.

In contrast, this study utilized short-form TikTok videos, which represent a newer, faster-paced, and visually driven method of political communication. The platform's algorithm

tends to prioritize entertainment, trends, and virality over informational depth (Peña-Fernández et al., 2022). For instance, the five videos analyzed for Trump totaled approximately one and a half minutes, while Harris's five videos totaled just over three and a half minutes. This extremely limited exposure time stands in sharp contrast to the extended formats used in previous studies, potentially explaining why PIE did not significantly increase among participants in this context. It is possible that with a greater number of videos or repeated exposure to content over a longer period, the outcome may have been more closely aligned with prior research.

However, despite the lack of significant change in PIE, the videos still elicited notable shifts in emotional responses. Notably, this study found that after watching the TikToks, aversion and anxiety decreased significantly while enthusiasm increased significantly. In the case of TikTok, where content is often fast-paced and surface-level, viewers may feel some type of emotion in the moment, but those feelings may not translate into a stronger sense of political understanding or confidence. This suggests that for emotional appeals to effectively shape political efficacy, they may need to be paired with content that encourages thoughtful engagement and provides the tools or information necessary to process and act on those emotions (Nabi, 1999). Emotional appeals might spark initial attention or interest, but without critical thinking, context, or a clear path for action, that emotion may dissipate without leading to lasting cognitive or behavioral change.

Had the TikTok videos included more substantive content alongside their emotional appeals, the outcomes may have been different. While emotional appeals can serve as an effective entry point in persuasive messaging, research suggests they are most impactful when paired with substantive, informative content that promotes deeper cognitive engagement and motivated processing (Nabi, 1999). Although such content may have boosted political efficacy,

TikTok videos are typically not grounded in information. Instead, they rely heavily on emotion and virality, whatever can get the next share. Political candidates are not just competing against one another; they are also fighting for a spot on the screen. With TikTok's algorithm prioritizing virality over substance, candidates are often pushed to make bold, attention-grabbing choices to stand out, often at the expense of more meaningful, efficacy-boosting content.

Marcus (2000) argues that emotion and reason are not opposing forces in political judgment; rather, they operate together in a complementary fashion. Emotional appeals can capture attention and motivate engagement, while logical information and context help guide thoughtful consideration and critical evaluation. When used together, they can create a more influential message. Hence, emotional appeals can draw viewers in, while contextual or educational content can guide them toward more meaningful political learning, critical thinking, and ultimately, higher political efficacy.

This link between emotion and information demonstrates a broader issue, namely, the growing need for stronger media literacy among Gen Z. Although often labeled *digital natives* due to their lifelong exposure to the internet and digital platforms, this label does not necessarily equate to an ability to critically or confidently assess online content. Rather, it primarily reflects their frequent and early use of digital tools, a familiarity and preference for navigating platforms; not necessarily skilled in identifying bias, manipulation, or emotionally charged messaging. Platforms like TikTok reward engagement over accuracy, meaning content that is viral or emotionally provocative tends to spread more widely than content that is nuanced, balanced, or educational.

Therefore, educating Gen Z to recognize emotionally manipulative tactics, assess credibility, and seek out additional context can empower them to engage more thoughtfully with

content, regardless of the platform. Even on TikTok, where brevity and virality are important, small shifts such as encouraging viewers to fact-check information, identify persuasive techniques, and reflect critically on the messages can raise their media literacy. Media literacy can help them make sense of what they are seeing and inspire them to become more confident in their knowledge and ability to participate in the political process.

While the results for Research Question One did not reveal a statistically significant change in PIE after watching the emotionally elicited TikTok videos, several interesting patterns emerged that are worth noting. The strong positive correlation between political interest and political information efficacy, both before and after exposure, suggests that individuals who are already more interested in politics feel more confident in their understanding of political information. These findings align with Painter's (2021) research, emphasizing that higher levels of political information efficacy are linked to more active engagement with online political content, suggesting that individuals with greater confidence in their ability to process political information are more likely to seek out and engage with interactive digital platforms. This suggests that political interest serves as a key filter for processing political information, with preexisting attitudes reinforcing their confidence in understanding politics.

The interaction between preexisting attitudes and political efficacy demonstrates the importance of audience segmentation and microtargeting as core components of political communication strategies. To be effective, politicians must tailor messages to different subgroups of the audience (segmentation), especially based on things like values, political beliefs, or how engaged or efficacious they are (Tappin et al., 2023). This way, microtargeting allows campaigns to speak more directly to people's specific motivations, concerns, or emotional triggers, which increases the chance of resonance.

This becomes even more apparent when considering the strong correlation between pre- and post-test political information efficacy (PIE) scores. This indicates that participants' efficacy is relatively stable and not easily influenced by brief exposure to short-form content like TikToks. Individuals' preexisting beliefs and attitudes act as anchors, potentially making them less malleable to the emotional appeal persuasive strategies that are typical on TikTok. Therefore, TikTok, despite its potential to engage audiences, might not be sufficient to alter deeply held perceptions of political efficacy in the absence of sustained, contextualized engagement.

In terms of Research Question Two, which measured political cynicism, the study also found no significant change from pretest to posttest, which is consistent with some previous research (Kaid & Postelnicu, 2005). While several studies have shown that exposure to political media can both increase and decrease political cynicism, depending on factors such as content type, platform, and individual differences, not all digital content has demonstrated a reliable effect. In fact, some findings have reported no significant impact of online political exposure on political cynicism, particularly among younger audiences (Kaid & Postelnicu, 2005).

There are many different reasons that could be speculated. One key factor may be, again, the brevity of the content used in this study. The short-form TikTok videos shown to participants were not long or informative enough to meaningfully influence their attitudes or beliefs about the political system. Long-form content such as debates or articles provide more context and depth, whereas most TikToks are surface-level. Consequently, the casual and entertainment-driven nature of TikTok as a platform might have reduced the seriousness with which participants engaged with the content.

This aligns with the news finds me perception, in which individuals do not actively seek

out political information but rather encounter it passively while scrolling through entertainment-focused platforms (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). Viewing political content on an app associated with humor, memes, and lighthearted scrolling may have prompted a more dismissive or superficial cognitive response. As a result, users may process it passively rather than actively, which limits its ability to shift beliefs or attitudes about the political system.

These findings suggest that emotional appeals used by presidential candidates on TikTok did not meaningfully influence Gen Z voters' political cynicism. This aligns with Pinkleton et al. (2002) study, where they found that negative ads did not have an effect on PIE or cynicism. Even though the videos provoked emotional responses like decreased anxiety and increased enthusiasm, especially with Trump's videos, these emotional shifts did not translate into changes in trust or skepticism about politics. This suggests emotional appeals can shape how Gen Z voters feel in the moment, but not necessarily how they think about broader political systems or trustworthiness. Therefore, TikToks format may not be powerful enough to disrupt or change pre-existing attitudes of skepticism, especially if those attitudes have been shaped by years of political disappointment, polarization, or perceived governmental inaction.

Although the results for Research Question Two did not reveal a statistically significant change in political cynicism after viewing the TikTok videos, several noteworthy patterns emerged. Political interest, measured after the videos, was significantly negatively correlated with pre-video political cynicism, suggesting that those who were more cynical before the videos tended to report lower interest in politics. However, this relationship was not significant when correlated with post-video cynicism, indicating a possible shift in how cynicism related to political interest after viewing the videos.

One possible explanation for these patterns is that the videos might have disrupted the

initial link between cynicism and disinterest in politics. Although participants remained skeptical, exposure to political messaging through a familiar and accessible mode such as TikTok may have encouraged more reflective consideration of political interest. So, while the videos may not have affected participants' distrust or skepticism about politics, they may have increased emotional arousal or curiosity, resulting in higher political interest, regardless of how they felt about the system itself.

Additionally, before viewing the videos, a small but significant negative correlation emerged between political information efficacy and political cynicism, indicating that those who already felt confident in their political knowledge tended to be slightly less cynical. However, after watching the videos, participants who reported higher levels of confidence in their political understanding also expressed higher levels of political cynicism. So even though the efficacy and cynicism levels did not change much, the link between them did.

One reason is because the videos may have prompted participants to re-evaluate the meaning of being informed. After exposure to emotionally charged content, participants may still feel the same level of informed, but now associate that information with more problematic or corrupt political realities, thus flipping the relationship between PIE and cynicism. These findings are consistent with some findings that state higher levels of political information efficacy can results in higher levels in cynicism (Fu et al., 2011; Pinkleton & Austin, 2004).

This suggests that exposure to emotionally driven political content on TikTok may not alter individual attitudes in isolation but rather reorganize the way those attitudes relate to one another. Participants may still feel equally confident in their political understanding, but now associate that confidence with greater cynicism, perhaps due to the tone, framing, or emotional appeals in the videos (Song et al., 2022). This shift could reflect a growing disillusionment that

comes not from lacking knowledge, but from feeling informed about a flawed or dysfunctional system. Hence, while anxiety or enthusiasm may not have caused a measurable shift in cynicism levels, it may have influenced how participants connected their emotions to their sense of political knowledge.

In the same sense, TikTok content is often designed to prioritize engagement over depth, with messages tailored to provoke strong emotional responses rather than provide information. This focus on eliciting reactions can lead to a heightened emotional engagement without necessarily increasing understanding. Consequently, political content on TikTok may be more likely to generate negative emotional responses, such as skepticism, or distrust, especially when complex political issues are oversimplified into soundbites or catchy clips. It can create surface-level confidence paired with deeper disillusionment. These finding aligns with recent scholarship indicating that exposure to political information may simultaneously foster both a sense of empowerment and disillusionment (Fu et al., 2011; Pinkleton & Austin, 2004; Platt, 2024).

Although no statistically significant differences were found between male and female participants in levels of political information efficacy or political cynicism, within-group analyses revealed that male participants exhibited a slight directional shift. Specifically, men showed a modest decrease in political cynicism and a slight increase in political information efficacy from pre- to post-test, both trending toward significance. This suggests that while gender did not significantly moderate the overall effect of emotional political content, men may have been more susceptible to attitudinal change, pointing to potential gendered nuances in how emotional appeals on TikTok are received.

One possible explanation lies in differences in media consumption patterns or emotional processing styles. The algorithmic design of TikTok, which emphasizes bold, emotionally salient

content, might align more closely with content styles that resonate with male users. Additionally, these shifts may reflect broader patterns of political engagement or skepticism, where men could be more reactive to messages that challenge their existing beliefs or introduce novel emotional cues.

These findings partially align with research by Cappella and Jamieson (1997), which found that age is not consistently correlated with political cynicism, suggesting that demographic variables may have limited predictive power in certain contexts. Conversely, the results contrast with prior studies that suggest women generally possess lower levels of political knowledge than men (Dalager, 1996; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Jennings, 1996; Kaid et al., 2007), as no such disparities were observed in this study's sample. Future research should continue to explore how gender interacts with emotional political messaging, particularly on emerging digital platforms like TikTok.

Research Question Three explored how emotional appeals in TikTok videos activated the surveillance and dispositional systems in accordance with Affective Intelligence Theory (AIT). Sub-question A investigated whether emotions like anxiety and fear would activate the surveillance system, prompting increased vigilance and reassessment. Sub-question B examined whether emotions like enthusiasm and anger would activate the dispositional system, encouraging habitual political engagement. According to Affective Intelligence Theory (AIT), emotions such as anxiety and fear are central to the surveillance system, which is activated when individuals encounter novelty or perceived threats (Marcus et al., 2000). On the other hand, enthusiasm and anger are core emotions of the dispositional system, which is activated when individuals perceive familiar, goal-congruent situations and rely on established habits, beliefs, or commitments to guide their behavior (Marcus et al., 2000).

Even though there was no statistically significant shift in PIE or cynicism, there were still notable emotional changes between the pretest and posttest. Specifically, participants experienced a significant decrease in anxiety and aversion, along with an increase in enthusiasm. Taken together, these emotional shifts suggest a broader transition from negative to more positive affect, aligning with the activation of the dispositional systems as proposed by AIT. As participants felt less anxious and less scared, their emotional response shifted toward enthusiasm, which is a key emotion of the dispositional system. This shift encourages the reinforcement of habits, and not reevaluation of beliefs (Marcus et al., 2000).

Reinforcing habits, such as increased political interest or enthusiasm, can be triggered by emotional responses (Marcus, 2017). This was supported by strong negative correlations between anxiety and enthusiasm, as well as aversion and enthusiasm, indicating that as participants felt less anxious and less averse, they were more likely to feel enthusiastic. Additionally, anxiety and aversion were strongly positively correlated, demonstrating how these fear-related emotions tended to rise and fall together. While anxiety is typically associated with the surveillance system and aversion with the dispositional system, their co-occurrence in this context may reflect the complex emotional experience of encountering political content that is both unfamiliar and morally charged.

This emotional interplay reinforces the idea that, even though cognitive measures like political information efficacy and cynicism remained unchanged, participants still experienced a meaningful shift in emotional response. In other words, the TikTok videos appeared to influence how participants felt, which may have prompted reliance on preexisting beliefs, potentially explaining the lack of change in their perceived political knowledge or levels of cynicism.

These results may seem counterintuitive, especially considering the videos were

purposefully selected to elicit emotional responses tied to fear and hope. Yet, the emotional shift from negative to positive affect suggests that participants did not respond uniformly to all content. Instead, this affective change appears to have been largely driven by one candidate in particular. While Kamala Harris's TikToks did not produce any statistically significant emotional changes, Donald Trump's videos were the ones that meaningfully impacted participants' emotions. This finding is particularly intriguing given the intention behind Trump's TikToks, which were designed to elicit both fear and hope simultaneously. This distinction is important, as it highlights that not all emotionally framed content resonates equally with viewers, and in this case, Trump's content stood out in its ability to move participants emotionally.

Many of Trump's videos seemed to follow a pattern: first, invoking a sense of fear or crisis, highlighting issues like economic instability, crime, or political corruption, and then offering himself as the solution, thereby instilling hope. Despite his controversial style, participants felt less anxious and even more enthusiastic afterward, a counterintuitive but significant finding. This blend of emotional appeals suggests an attempt to simultaneously trigger both the surveillance and dispositional systems.

This decrease in anxiety suggests that the surveillance system was not strongly activated by the fear-based appeals in the way AIT might predict. One interpretation is that participants, especially those in favor of or familiar with Trump's long-standing rhetorical style, may have become desensitized to his emotionally charged messaging. Trumps political persona has been built on emphasizing danger, whether real or perceived, which, over time, may have dulled the emotional shock value of such messaging for some audiences.

In this context, emotional appeals meant to provoke fear may have instead been interpreted as familiar or routine, thereby failing to activate the kind of novelty or uncertainty

needed to stimulate the surveillance system. Rather than pausing to reassess their political views or seek out new information, participants may have processed his videos through preexisting cognitive filters shaped by their prior exposure to his communication style and political brand.

It is also extremely likely that political leaning played a role in how these messages were interpreted, supporters may have viewed the fear-based rhetoric as justified or even motivating, while non-supporters may have perceived it as performative or unconvincing. Prior research supports this idea, showing that partisan affiliation can shape not only what individuals believe, but also how they emotionally and cognitively process political information (Michael & Breaux, 2021). For example, partisanship has been shown to influence how strongly individuals rely on political misinformation in their reasoning, even after receiving factual corrections (Ecker et al., 2022). Together, these findings suggest that political identity can play a powerful role in shaping both the interpretation and emotional impact of political content.

Although political orientation was not measured in this study, its likely influence highlights the need for future research to account for partisanship when analyzing responses to emotionally charged political content. This context may also help explain the emotional outcomes observed. Trump's videos significantly increased enthusiasm, a core emotion associated with the dispositional system. While his videos were crafted to activate both the surveillance and dispositional systems, drawing on fear-based imagery and rhetoric to heighten vigilance, alongside hopeful messaging to inspire enthusiasm, the emotional outcomes suggest that only the dispositional system was meaningfully engaged. The rise in enthusiasm indicates that, rather than prompting critical reflection or alertness, the videos likely reinforced participants' existing political preferences (Marcus, 2017).

Therefore, for viewers who already support Trump, or even those simply accustomed to

his dramatic communication style, these emotional cues may have functioned more as a motivational boost than a signal to reassess their beliefs. In other words, the fear-based appeals, though seemingly intended to stimulate concern or urgency, may have been too familiar or predictable to evoke the kind of novelty needed to trigger the surveillance system. Instead, the emotional content appeared to engage the dispositional system, with the mix of fear and enthusiasm reinforcing existing preferences and motivating positive engagement rather than critical reflection.

On the other hand, Harris' TikTok videos, which were designed to evoke enthusiasm and hope, resulted in no significant emotional changes among participants. The tone of her content was generally lighthearted, often leaning into humor, relatability, and optimism for the future of America. Many of the videos showed her smiling, dancing, or engaging in casual conversation with children and Gen Z. These messages appeared to be crafted to inspire a sense of national progress and confidence in leadership, positioning Harris as a figure of stability and positive change. Despite these intentions, the emotional impact appeared muted, as it they did not activate the dispositional system.

There are several plausible explanations for this outcome. Notably, Harris' videos were shown after Trump's, introducing the possibility that the emotional intensity of his content may have influenced how participants subsequently interpreted hers. While both candidates' videos were emotionally driven, Trump's content appeared to carry a greater emotional intensity. His messaging employed intensely emotionally charged language and dramatic framing, using terms like "disaster" and "nation in decline," alongside imagery of police cars and handcuffs, features that likely amplified its emotional impact on viewers In comparison, Harris' emotionally driven content leaned more toward warmth, relatability, and optimism, which may not have registered

as strongly due to its less urgent tone in comparison. In this context, Trump's videos may have felt more visceral emotions, engaging viewers at a deeper or more immediate level.

Hence, this may have caused her content to seem comparatively subdued or less impactful. From a sequencing perspective, participants who were already primed by Trump's emotionally charged appeals may have been less receptive to the more optimistic and relational tone of Harris' videos. As such, the contrast in affective framing could have diminished the perceived salience of her messaging, highlighting how emotional context and message order can shape audience response.

This is not only relevant within the controlled environment of a study but also mirrors the way content is consumed on TikTok more broadly. On a typical TikTok feed, users encounter a rapid succession of videos varying widely in emotional tone and intensity. A highly provocative or emotionally intense video can color the reception of the content that follows, making softer or more nuanced messages feel less compelling by comparison. This suggests that the emotional pacing and contrast of content, both in research settings and on algorithm-driven platforms like TikTok, can meaningfully shape how political messaging is interpreted and emotionally processed.

Consequently, The TikTok algorithm plays a central role in determining what content users see, and understanding this context is critical for interpreting how political messages are received and processed on the platform. TikTok's personalized recommendation engine is designed to surface content that aligns with a user's previous interactions, interests, and engagement patterns, effectively tailoring the experience to individual preferences (Peña-Fernández, 2022). However, this personalization process is double-edged: while it enhances user experience by presenting content likely to resonate, it can also limit exposure to diverse

perspectives, especially when it comes to political content.

If participants were not already inclined to engage with political content on TikTok, then the algorithm would not prioritize political videos in their feeds. This means that for individuals who have not interacted with political content regularly, TikTok's algorithm may not reinforce political messages, thereby reducing the effectiveness of these videos as an intervention for political efficacy and cynicism. However, when political videos do appear, they can still elicit emotional reactions. Even for those less engaged with political material, the emotionally charged nature of the videos may still activate the emotional systems described in AIT while not affecting PIE or cynicism. This demonstrates that emotions can be influenced without altering cognitive assessments of political content.

While the outcomes of political messaging, like increasing political information efficacy or reducing cynicism, are often seen as primary indicators of persuasive success, this study reveals a different kind of impact: emotional resonance. Even though participants did not report feeling more politically informed or less cynical, their emotional responses shifted in meaningful ways

Rather than promoting informed, two-way engagement as seen in symmetrical communication, which aims to creates mutual understanding and dialogue, the messaging in this study seemed to align more closely with the asymmetrical model of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). PPR often utilizes this model to influence public opinion and align it with political goals without necessarily encouraging mutual understanding or dialogue (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011). This aligns with what Strömbäck and Kiousis (2013) describe as a strategic function of political public relations, where communication efforts are designed to manage public perception and achieve political goals. In this study, the emotional engagement observed may reflect the

activation of participants' dispositional system, which reinforces emotional patterns associated with preexisting political preferences. While not necessarily increasing mutual understanding, this kind of affective response is still a form of persuasive success.

For Gen Z, whose political engagement is increasingly influenced by digital platforms, such emotional appeals may be particularly salient. Although this study did not find significant changes in cognitive outcomes such as political information efficacy or cynicism, the presence of meaningful emotional shifts, especially enthusiasm correlating negatively with anxiety and aversion, suggests that emotional resonance may serve as an alternate form of persuasive impact. In rapidly moving digital environments, this kind of affective response may influence political behavior indirectly, even in the absence of explicit changes in knowledge or attitude. These findings highlight the potential of political messaging on platforms like TikTok to engage users through emotion-driven mechanisms that operate alongside or independently from traditional markers of persuasion.

Implications

Nevertheless, these findings carry meaningful implications for political campaigns and professionals working in political public relations. Campaigns must recognize that emotionally charged messages – specifically enthusiasm and hope appeals – serves to reinforce existing political beliefs rather than shift opinions. This insight is especially relevant in highly polarized contexts, where emotionally resonant messaging tends to strengthen in-group identification rather than foster cross-party persuasion. For practitioners, this means audience segmentation is critical. Messaging strategies should be tailored based on the emotional dispositions and preexisting beliefs of target audiences to increase resonance and relevance.

Additionally, the role of social media platforms like TikTok introduces both opportunities

and challenges for political outreach. TikTok's algorithm, designed to prioritize content aligned with a user's past interactions, may limit the exposure of political messages to those not already engaged with such content. As a result, political campaigns may find their reach restricted to echo chambers. This highlights the importance of diversifying campaign strategies across multiple platforms to ensure broader reach. Furthermore, the emotional context set by one message can influence how subsequent messages are received. The sequencing of content, particularly when videos vary dramatically in emotional tone, can reduce the impact of less intense messages. Political campaigns must carefully consider how they time and organize their messaging to maximize emotional engagement.

These patterns reflect a broader shift toward a political public relations model, where the strategic management of audience relationships, emotional appeal, and message timing mirrors the tactics used in corporate PR, but with higher stakes. Political public relations integrates relationship-building principles from the PR discipline with the goal of achieving electoral success, not mutual understanding. Campaigns targeting Gen Z, in particular, should consider blending emotional storytelling with content that promotes political literacy and civic engagement. This dual approach can drive both affective resonance and informed participation, helping campaigns connect more deeply with young, digital-native voters.

Limitations

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, its reliance on convenience sampling, primarily recruiting participants from undergraduate communication courses at Radford University, introduces potential sampling bias. Because the sample largely consists of college students, particularly those studying communication, the findings may not accurately represent the broader Gen Z population, especially individuals not enrolled in higher

education or those who engage with political content on platforms other than TikTok. As a result, the generalizability of the findings to the entire Gen Z voter demographic is limited.

Furthermore, the relatively small sample size (N = 64) may not capture the full spectrum of Gen Z perspectives. However, given that paired-sample t-tests were the primary statistical method, the sample size is considered adequate for this type of analysis, as these tests do not require large samples to detect meaningful differences. That said, the sample was regionally and demographically constrained due to time and resource limitations, potentially underrepresenting national diversity in terms of race, socioeconomic status, political ideology, and geographic background. This demographic skew may influence both the emotional responses and political perceptions observed in the study.

All data related to political information efficacy, political cynicism, and emotional response were self-reported by participants. Self-reporting is inherently susceptible to issues like social desirability bias, inaccurate recall, and personal interpretation of survey items. As a result, the reliability of some findings may be affected by participants' subjective assessments. Furthermore, participants' emotional states could potentially fluctuate during the study, without relating to the study, potentially affecting their perceptions of the videos.

Another limitation lies in the emotional appeals used in the TikTok videos for each candidate. While the study selected videos based on primary emotions (hope, enthusiasm, and fear), this limited scope may not encompass the full range of emotional content typically used in political campaigns. The lack of variety in emotional appeals may restrict the depth of the study's conclusions regarding the emotional influence on political perceptions. Additionally, the brief exposure to the TikTok videos may also fail to capture the long-term effects of emotional appeals on political information efficacy and cynicism. Emotional responses to political

messaging can evolve over time or be reinforced through repeated exposure, which this study does not account for.

The focus on TikTok as the sole platform for political engagement further limits the applicability of the study's findings. While TikTok is popular among Gen Z, this choice restricts the findings to a single platform, ignoring others like Instagram or Twitter, where political content may be presented differently and evoke distinct emotional responses. Additionally, the study does not consider the influence of other media or content that participants may consume outside of the TikTok videos, which could also shape their political perceptions. Isolating the effect of TikTok alone presents a challenge, as participants' views may be influenced by various other sources.

While the study aims to measure emotional responses to political TikToks, participants' reactions may have been shaped by uncontrollable external factors such as personal life events or other media exposure. Moreover, gaining insight into participants' political leanings could have offered valuable context for interpreting these emotional responses and their influence on political information efficacy and cynicism.

Lastly, while emotional responses were measured before participants were exposed to the TikTok videos, the absence of control groups still limited the study's ability to fully isolate the effects of the videos on political information efficacy and cynicism. Without a control group that did not receive exposure to any political messages, it is difficult to definitively conclude that the observed changes in emotional responses and political perceptions were solely due to the political TikTok videos themselves, rather than other factors such as participants' prior political leanings, media consumption, or inherent emotional tendencies. The inclusion of control groups would have provided a clearer baseline, helping to ensure that any shifts observed were directly

attributable to the stimuli rather than confounding variables.

Future Research

Building on the limitations, several opportunities for future research are apparent. First, expanding the sample to include a more diverse and nationally representative population of Gen Z voters would improve the generalizability of findings. Future studies should aim to recruit participants from various educational backgrounds, geographic regions, and socioeconomic statuses to better capture the full range of Gen Z political perspectives. In addition to expanding the sample size, future research would also benefit from increasing the sample size. This would allow for a more robust statistical analysis and could help identify how contextual factors like education level or geographic location shape emotional responses to political content.

Incorporating additional demographic measures – such as political ideology, educational background, and socioeconomic status – would allow for a more nuanced analysis of participant responses. Collecting this information enables researchers to break down the data demographically, offering deeper insight into how different groups interpret emotional appeals and how these appeals influence political cynicism and information efficacy.

Additionally, given the limitations of self-reported data, future studies could incorporate alternative data collection methods, such as behavioral tracking or physiological measures, to more objectively assess emotional reactions. Combining self-report with biometric data may provide a more objective view of how emotional appeals influence political attitudes and perceptions.

Exploring a broader range of emotional appeals – beyond anger, enthusiasm, and anxiety – as well as examining how these emotions are used across multiple platforms could provide valuable insights. Including emotions such as pride, scorn, or humor could provide a more

comprehensive understanding of how emotional content in political messaging affects Gen Z audiences. Comparing how these broad range of emotional appeals function across platforms may also reveal differences in how political content is framed, consumed, and internalized by Gen Z users.

Future research should also aim for a more longitudinal design. While this study provided a snapshot of participants' immediate emotional reactions, a longer timeline could reveal whether these emotional shifts lead to meaningful changes in political efficacy and cynicism over time. A longitudinal approach would also allow researchers to examine whether repeated exposure to emotionally charged content, particularly on platforms like TikTok, has a cumulative effect, deepening or diminishing certain emotional responses and influencing political attitudes in a more sustained way.

Lastly, incorporating a control group to establish a more reliable baseline for comparison would be beneficial. Doing so would strengthen claims and reduce the influence of potential confounding variables, allowing for a clearer assessment of how political content on social media affects Gen Z viewers.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how emotional appeals in TikTok videos from U.S. presidential candidates, Donald J. Trump and Kamala Harris, activate the dispositional and surveillance systems within Affective Intelligence Theory (AIT), and how this activation impacts political information efficacy and political cynicism among Gen Z voters. Given Gen Z's deep integration with digital platforms and their growing influence as voters, this research aimed to examine how emotional appeals on a short-form, algorithm-driven social media platform impacted their confidence in understanding politics and their trust in the political system. While

the findings revealed that emotional appeals used by politicians did evoke strong emotional

responses, they did not result in significant changes in PIE or cynicism. These results suggest

that although TikTok videos can provoke strong emotional reactions, they are not sufficiently

persuasive to alter Gen Z voters' PIE or levels of political cynicism.

The observed increase in enthusiasm, along with the reduction in anxiety and anger,

indicates that Gen Z voters were likely relying on their preexisting beliefs rather than re-

evaluating or reconsidering their political views, according to Affective Intelligence Theory.

This suggests that emotional appeals may not be enough to prompt significant shifts in political

perceptions if voters are not open to reconsidering their current attitudes.

These findings offer valuable insights into the potential of social media, particularly

TikTok, as a tool for political persuasion. While the emotional appeals used in these TikTok

videos did not significantly alter Gen Z voters' political information efficacy or cynicism, they

highlight the complex nature of social media's influence on political attitudes. The emotional

appeals in these videos primarily activated the dispositional system, rather than the surveillance

system. This may explain why there was no significant shift in their confidence in their

understanding or trust – Gen Z voters were likely reinforcing their existing political views, rather

than reevaluating them in response to the emotional appeals. If the videos were able to evoke the

surveillance system, as outlined in Affective Intelligence Theory, the emotional appeals might

have prompted Gen Z voters to critically reassess their political beliefs and engage more deeply

with the political content.

For future research, exploring a broader range of emotional appeals beyond the ones

tested could help in activating the surveillance system more effectively. Additionally, extending

the study over a longer period might reveal whether sustained exposure to political content leads

to shifts in political attitudes, as initial emotional responses might not be enough for long-term impact. Furthermore, studies could explore how individuals' political stances affect their interpretation of emotional appeals in TikTok videos, shedding light on the role of pre-existing beliefs in shaping responses to political content. Only with continued research will we gain a clearer picture of how emotional appeals on TikTok, in combination with other factors, can affect participants' confidence in their understanding and trust in politics.

Regardless, these findings are important for campaigns because they demonstrate the need for strategic messaging tailored to specific target audiences. The activation of the dispositional system could be particularly beneficial for audiences with a strong political lean toward a specific party, as it may help motivate them to take action, such as getting out to vote. However, the need to activate the surveillance system for audiences that either lean toward the opposite party or do not have a strong political affiliation is equally important. Activating the surveillance system could encourage these voters to reconsider their political beliefs and engage more thoughtfully with the content, ultimately influencing their political perceptions. By investigating these areas further, campaigns can better understand how to effectively use TikTok and similar platforms to shape voters' perceptions.

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Appendix A

Eligibility Survey

The following questions were used to determine eligibility for participation in the study.

- What year were you born?

- Were you eligible to vote in the 2024 election?

- Have you used TikTok before?

- Would you be willing to participate in a pretest-posttest experiment measuring political information efficacy and cynicism?

- If you answered 'Yes' or 'Maybe' to the previous question, please provide your preferred contact method (email or phone number) and any questions you may have for the researcher.

- Please state the best day and time for you to conduct the 20-30 min study in a RU classroom.

Appendix B

Political Information Efficacy and Cynicism Scale

Participants indicated their level of agreement with statements measuring their confidence in their political knowledge and their distrust of the political system using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). The political information efficacy items were adapted from McKinney et al. (2014) and assess participants' perceived competence and confidence in understanding and engaging with political information. The political cynicism items, adapted from Jasperson and Yun (2007), measure participants' skepticism and distrust toward politicians and the political process.

Political Information Efficacy

- I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics.

- I think I am better informed about politics and government than most people.

- I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.

- If a friend asked me about the presidential election, I feel I would have enough information to help my friend figure out who to vote for.

Political Cynicism

- Whether or not I vote has no influence on what politicians do.

- One never knows what politicians really think.

- People like me don't have any say about what the government does.

- Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on.

- One can be confident that politicians will always do the right thing.

- Politicians often quickly forget their election promises after a political campaign is over.

- Politicians are more interested in power than in what the people think.

- One cannot always trust what politicians say.

Appendix C

Emotional Response Scale

Participants indicated their emotional responses using a 10-item Emotional State Scale adapted and modified from Neuman et al. (2018), which was derived from Affective Intelligence Theory (Marcus et al., 2000). This scale measures three core emotional dimensions: anxiety, enthusiasm, and anger/aversion. Unlike the original 0 to 100 scoring system, this study employed a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "not at all" to "extremely" to improve clarity and maintain consistency with other scales.

Anxiety

- Afraid

- scared

- worried

Enthusiasm

- Enthusiastic

- Proud

- Hopeful

Anger/Aversion

- Hateful

- Resentful

- Angry

- Bitter