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Framing Political Leadership: A Study of How Irish Politicians Presented Themselves on Social Media During the 2024 General Election

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Abstract: *This article investigates the strategic self-presentation of Irish political leaders Mary Lou McDonald (Sinn Féin) and Simon Harris (Fine Gael) on TikTok and X during the 2024 General Election. Using a comparative framing analysis, the research examines whether opposing political stances influence framing strategies and if politicians adapt messaging to suit platform affordances and audience expectations. Findings reveal that Simon Harris adopted a neutral, positive image-focused approach, prioritising TikTok to reach younger demographics. Conversely, Mary Lou McDonald employed a more confrontational tone, utilising negative emotional and conflict frames to critique opponents, with a greater emphasis on X for political discourse. Both leaders tailored their content, reserving humorous, trend-based posts for TikTok while maintaining a serious, professional image on X. Despite Harris's reputation as the 'TikTok Taoiseach,' McDonald achieved significantly higher engagement overall. This study contributes to the limited literature on Irish digital political communication, highlighting how platform dynamics and strategic framing shape modern political leadership.*

Keywords: *Irish politics, social media, framing theory, TikTok, X (platform), political communication*

Introduction

We live in an era where social media significantly shapes communication, and political communication is no exception (Stier et al., 2018). A strong social media presence has become central for politicians aiming to connect with the public, particularly young people, and build a valued persona (Arijeniwa and Nwaoboli, 2023; Marquart et al., 2020). This article investigates how Irish politicians construct these digital personas, focusing on the strategic use of framing across different platforms. This research is guided by two central questions: (1) Do politicians with opposing political stances employ different framing strategies? and (2) Do politicians adapt their messaging to suit the affordances and audience expectations of different platforms?

This research aims to examine the procedures through which political self-presentation is shaped by both platform dynamics and strategic framing. Although there is a growing body of research on political communication in digital contexts, little research has been conducted in relation to Irish politicians. This study contributes to filling that gap by providing a comparative framing analysis of two politicians with differing political stances. Due to these apparent ideological differences between the chosen politicians, the question arose of whether the politicians would frame themselves differently to each other during the election campaign period. The hypothesis stemmed from this question, predicting that two politicians with opposing views would frame themselves differently to each other as they may want to connect with different audiences and seek different benefits.

Past literature has made it apparent that all social media platforms do not have consistent audiences and uses. Peña-Fernández et al. (2023) highlight a more unbiased audience on TikTok compared to X. Tirado-Espín et al. (2022) also emphasise these platforms' differences by stating TikTok's ability to make posts go viral easier than other platforms, while X is used more for serious, political content. These differences make for an interesting study of whether politicians will alter their content to fit in with the expectations of each platform and if they will favour one over the other, which will reveal the type of audience they are aiming to attract. This article's second hypothesis,

based on the study of existing literature, is that both politicians will avail of the different audience expectations from these contrasting platforms to maximise the potential benefits offered by each platform.

The central trends analysed in this research are the distinct framing strategies used by Mary Lou McDonald and Simon Harris on social media platforms X and TikTok. By 'framing,' this study refers to the ways in which information is selectively presented on social media by the chosen politicians to evoke certain emotional responses in their audience and alter public interpretations to benefit their popularity during an election (Goffman, 1974). It is expected that once the differences in framing strategies across platforms and between each politician are revealed, the findings will contribute to uncovering broader trends in political communication across digital contexts.

Drawing on literature surrounding political communication, social media use during elections, Irish politicians' online practices, platform differences between X and TikTok and framing theory, this study examines how Irish politicians present themselves across digital platforms through a structured analysis of their communication strategies.

Literature Review

There has been plenty of debate surrounding how social media shape election campaigns, especially regarding voter engagement, the rise of personality-driven politics and overall campaign impact. Some research argues the advantages of social media, allowing politicians to gain a fanbase and therefore perform better in the election (Rahat and Sheafer, 2007; Poguntke and Webb, 2005). Others worry that it pulls attention away from genuine policy discussions and turns politics into a branding exercise (Xue, 2014). This section of the article investigates these debates, specifically addressing how politicians use social media. In particular, how Irish politicians use social media during elections, while also examining framing theory, with the aim of offering a clear theoretical perspective to guide the structure and content of this research.

The shift to social media for political campaigns

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) describe social media by proposing that '[S]ocial Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content' (p. 61). Social media has emerged as an important platform for political communication during elections, shaping the way politicians connect with voters and run their campaigns (Stier et al., 2018). Scholars Arijeniwa and Nwaoboli (2023) assert that politicians are valuing their social media presence and image just as much as their offline reputation, positing: 'In this period, no media has significantly influenced human activities as much as the social media' (p. 36). Sahly et al. (2019) add: 'It is unsurprising that campaign strategists have prioritized social media as a main channel for message delivery and persuasion' (p. 8).

Previous studies on this topic examine why social media became a popular resource for politicians; some highlight the shift away from social class holding power over electoral politics, leading politicians to social media due to the link between social status and voting choices becoming more fluid and unpredictable (Manning et al., 2016). A more recent study stresses the significance of social media by drawing attention to it being a primary source from which young people get their news (Marquart et al., 2020). Other researchers point to social media causing the transition from the prominence of political parties to the popularity of individual politicians (Suiter, 2015). Politicians can benefit from this because it boosts their public image, making them seem more like celebrities with their own fanbase (Bronstein et al., 2018). This is known as the 'presidentialisation of politics' or 'political personalisation' (Rahat and Sheafer, 2007; Poguntke and Webb, 2005). On the one hand, it is argued that there are major advantages to political personalisation such as suppressing opposition while strengthening loyalty (Erikson, 2008) and relating to voters through sharing personal anecdotes

(Manning et al., 2016). On the other hand, existing research highlights that disadvantages also exist, including discourse on the politician's social media accounts consisting of how the public feel about the politician rather than about politics (Xue, 2014). As political campaigns have increasingly shifted to social media (Manning et al., 2016), the advantages of this new approach have become more evident as discussed below.

Benefits of social media for politicians during elections

Many scholars debate the advantages of social media for politicians when campaigning. Effing et al. (2011) explored the influence of social media on political engagement and democracy. They conducted a comprehensive content analysis examining data from the 2010 and 2011 elections in the Netherlands to assess how platforms like Facebook, X and YouTube impact political participation. Their study concluded that social media platforms have great benefits, including the potential to increase political participation, as they facilitate direct communication between politicians and citizens. Their analysis of Dutch elections indicated that parties that actively used social media as an element of their campaign strategies experienced positive effects on their electoral performance. This depicts the strategic importance of integrating social media into political campaigns.

Some argue that politicians favour social media because, unlike traditional media, they can communicate directly with the public (Sahly et al., 2019; Hemphill et al., 2013). Loughlin (2021) points to research which discovered that politicians who actively engage on social media platforms receive increased invitations to appear on traditional media outlets, such as television and radio. Manning et al. (2016) also mention democracy in relation to social media and politics, positing: '…social media and the Internet are considered to be effective tools in revitalising democracy' (ppp. 131). A similar study by Petrova et al. (2021) investigated how politicians' adoption of X influences campaign contributions. This research discovered that new candidates experienced a 1-3.1% increase in campaign donations after joining X p(pp. 2997). This finding suggests that social media platforms benefit newcomers by enhancing their visibility and outreach, although there was no benefit or disadvantage to serving politicians in this study. An earlier study undertaken by Hong (2013) finds the opposite. Hong's research indicates that incumbents and well-established politicians gain the most from their presence on X. This difference could come down to evolution or what each study focuses on. Petrova et al. (2021) look at campaign donations, while Hong (2013) examines overall visibility and influence. However, neither study interrogates how issues such as the political system, media bias or platform algorithms might shape these effects. It would be interesting to see if the same patterns hold up in different election systems or in countries where the media have more, or less, freedom.

Studies suggest that social media enable politicians to appear more relatable, encouraging voter engagement (Manning et al., 2016). Younger voters are drawn to informal political discussions, which they view as more accessible than traditional party politics (Marquart et al., 2020). Bronstein et al. (2018) highlight how social media help cultivate a sense of loyalty through interactions such as likes and direct responses from candidates. Similarly, Sundar and Kim (2005) argue that these digital interactions create an illusion of proximity, forming stronger emotional ties between voters and politicians. Researchers have even been able to forecast election results using social media data (Brito et al., 2021). This highlights how beneficial social media have become as tools for politicians during elections. Although Suiter (2015) argues that while the benefits of including social media in campaigns are apparent, the challenge for politicians lies in how to integrate them into their traditional campaigns.

Several scholars have highlighted drawbacks of using social media in election campaigns. Manning et al. (2016) argue that it can jeopardise credibility among voters with traditional views. Bronstein et al. (2018) note that direct interaction with the public can create an unpredictable environment, making it harder for candidates to maintain a consistent message. Stier et al. (2018) and

Loughlin (2021) warn that social media can intensify political bias, distorting public discourse. Despite several limitations, the advantages of social media for political campaigns are clear. Politicians can gain strategic advantages through the use of social media in their campaign strategies, however, these advantages depend on the strategic and effective use of these platforms (Peng, 2021; Stier et al., 2018).

Politicians' use of social media during elections

In terms of how politicians use social media during elections, Bronstein et al. (2018) present several relevant findings for this study. They carried out a content analysis of politicians' Facebook accounts to examine how Israeli party leaders use the platform during election periods. Their key findings conclude that politicians tend to utilise emotional language in their posts to inspire voters to engage and feel a connection to the politician. This study, along with others (Stanyer, 2013), highlights how politicians often take to social media to post about their own life experiences, again aiming to create a closer relationship with the public while also adding to their online persona.

Numerous studies on this topic emphasise that young people (18 years-early twenties) are the primary target audience for politicians' social media posts (Arijeniwa and Nwaoboli, 2023; Marquart et al., 2020; Manning et al., 2016). This is attributed to the shift toward informality among politicians being appreciated by young citizens (Manning et al., 2016). Young people are highly active online, engage frequently with digital content and can be influential in shaping public discourse (Marquart et al., 2020). Since young people are familiar with social media, politicians use their platforms to make political discussions clearer and make politics more accessible during voters' formative years (Marquart et al., 2020). Suiter (2015) believes that politicians may utilise social media in their campaigns to appear up to date with trends so that they relate to a younger audience. Tirado-Espín et al. (2022) discovered that one politician had a better outcome in an election than another due to his ability to tailor his content to each social media platform, appealing to multiple audiences.

The effectiveness of using social media to influence younger voters is demonstrated in recent analysis of the 2024 general election campaign. Sinn Féin hugely outspent rival parties in the weeks leading up to the general election announcement and was the only party to advertise on multiple platforms (McDermott, 2024). See Figure 1 below.

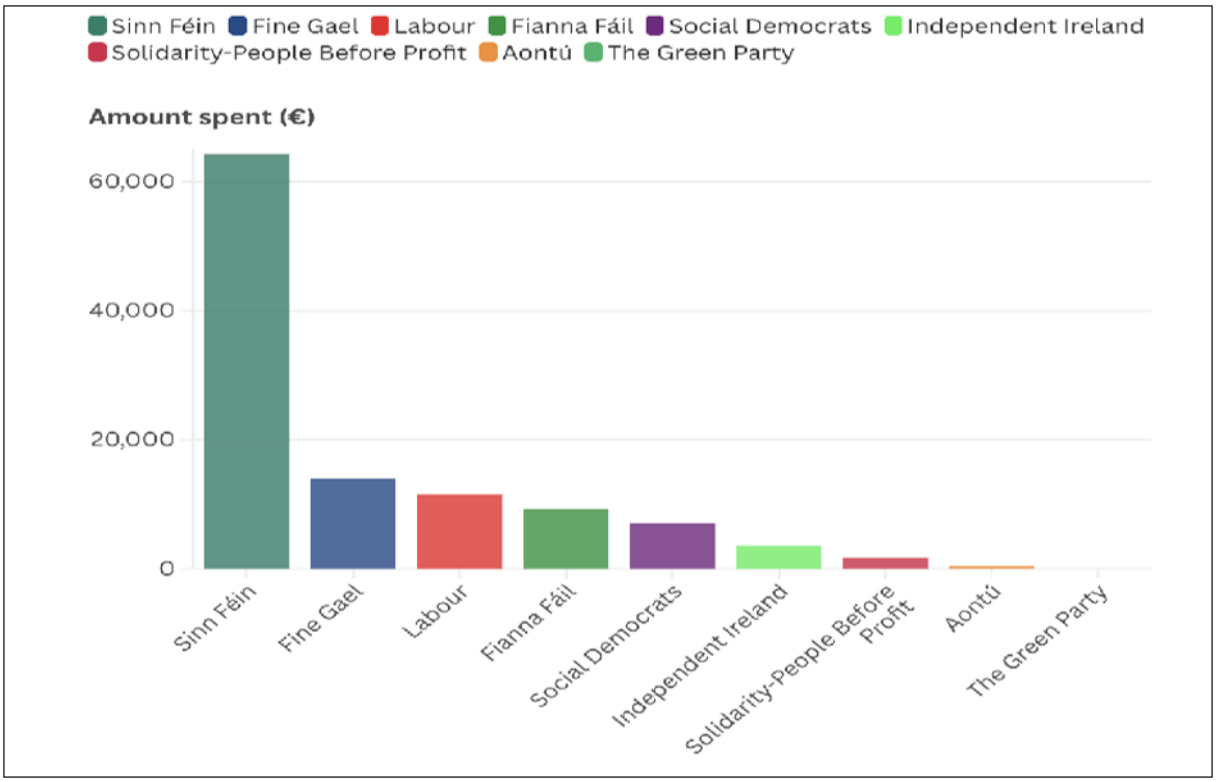


Figure 1: Social Media Spending by Political Parties 25th Aug to 3rd Nov 2024. Reproduced from The Journal, 9th November 2024. Copyright by Journal Media Ltd. 2024.

Although the gap between Sinn Féin and other parties narrows when the whole campaign is analysed, Sinn Féin still outspent the number two spender, Fine Gael, at a rate of 2:1 (McQuinn, 2024). While it is important not to mistake correlation for causation, it is reasonable to assume that Sinn Féin's strategic decision to invest in social media has played some role in its extraordinary domination of voter intent among younger demographics (Scott, 2025). See Figure 2 below.

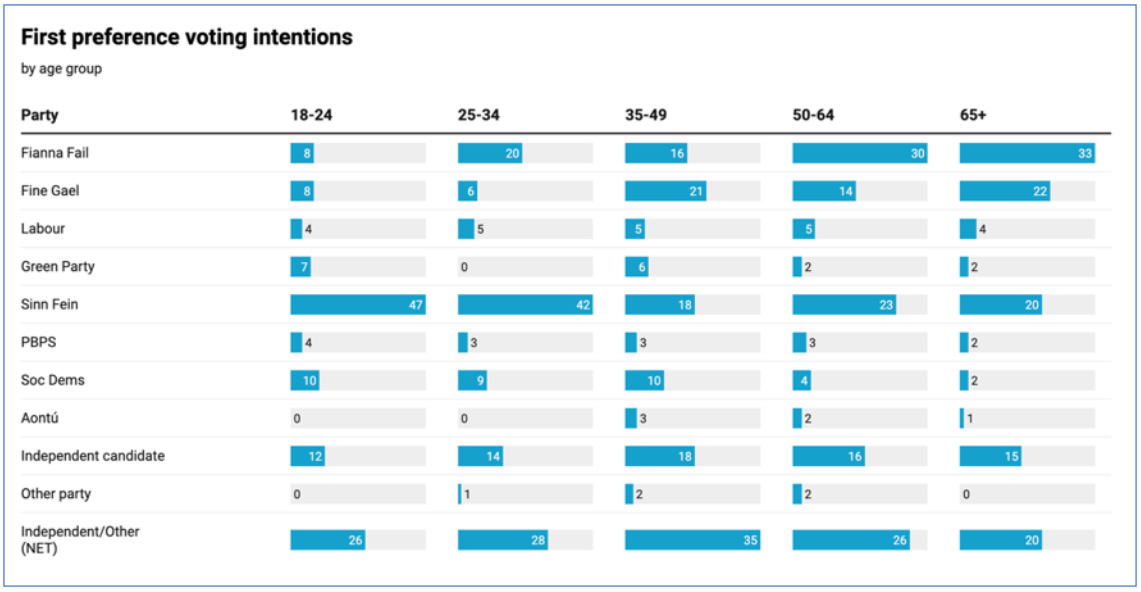


Figure 2: First Preference Voting Intentions, April 2025 (Scott, 2025). Reproduced from The Irish Times, 17th April 2025, based on Ipsos research. Copyright by The Irish Times DAC.

Farkas and Bene (2020) discovered that the audience of one social media platform may favour different content to the audience of a different platform, and politicians conform to this. This study

found that Facebook content from politicians consisted of more traditional, policy-centred posts, whereas their Instagram content consisted of more personal posts. Tirado-Espín et al., (2022) also highlight the way in which politicians tailor their content to resonate with the audience of the platform they are posting on, which will be discussed in the next sub-section.

The role of X and TikTok in politics

Peña-Fernández et al. (2023) analysed the types of audiences on X compared to TikTok. Their findings discovered that discourse on X was confrontational, whereas TikTok audiences were more neutral. This difference in audiences may lead politicians to post more controversial content on X than on TikTok.

In a global sense, very few comparative analyses have been undertaken regarding politicians' use of TikTok and X in political campaigns. However, one Ecuadorian study described the different capabilities of X and TikTok, saying that X serves as a tool to measure public opinion over extended periods, while TikTok's ability for videos to go viral enables them to reach a widespread audience more efficiently than platforms such as Facebook and Instagram (Tirado-Espín et al., 2022). This study found that both candidates being studied engaged more with TikTok than X, underlining TikTok's significance in political campaigns. They noted how politician Xavier Hervás successfully used the platform to engage voters through viral, visually driven content. His success prompted other candidates to integrate TikTok into their campaign strategies (pp. 231-232). However, while TikTok excels at capturing attention and broadening a candidate's reach, X plays a more prominent role in agenda-setting and political discourse. Tirado-Espín et al. (2022) argue that X has greater political influence because it is where journalists, policymakers and politically engaged users discuss issues that shape the media agenda and public debate (ppp. 233). This suggests that while TikTok is effective for mobilising younger voters and increasing visibility, X remains dominant in shaping elite political discourse and policy narratives. The study gives credit to TikTok for being a key part of changing traditional political actions.

By breaking the indifference and disconnection many felt towards the political system, TikTok tailors content to young people's interests and needs (pp. 234-235). Harfoush (2009) has the opposite view and argues that X is a platform mainly for interaction and not a significant place for broadcasting. Cervi et al.'s (2023) analysis of politicians using TikTok finds the opposite, stating that politicians did not fully leverage the platform's interactive features. Instead of engaging in two-way communication with users, they mainly used TikTok to push content rather than interact with audiences. A recent change in X is noted following the change of ownership in 2022. Following Elon Musk's takeover of X, recent studies have identified a rise in offensive language, or 'hate speech' on the platform (Hickey et al., 2025; Tassi, 2024). One study examined scholars' use of X post-Musk takeover and found that verified accounts have reduced their original posting on X, but their interaction with the platform, such as reposting, remained the same (Bisbee and Munger, 2024). Newspapers highlight that a significant 10% of European users have left the platform, a notable decline (Speed, 2025; Businesstechweekly.com, 2025). The next section examines social media in Irish politics.

How Irish politicians use social media during elections

Research on how politicians use social media during an election has been conducted worldwide, including Nigeria (Arijeniwa and Nwaoboli, 2023), Israel (Bronstein et al., 2018), Germany (Jungherr et al., 2015) and the USA (Sahly et al., 2019). The USA has dominated this field of research (Sahly et al., 2019; Gainous and Wagner, 20134; Hong, 2013). However, there have been few analyses carried out in Ireland.

Suiter's (2015) 'Political Campaigns and Social Media: A Study of #mhe13 in Ireland' examined the role social media played during the 2013 Meath East by-election. Suiter (2015) uses '#mhe13' to

refer to the 2013 Meath East by-election in Ireland, by-election referring to a special election held to fill a vacant seat in Dáil Éireann between general elections. Suiter does this through an analysis of how candidates utilised social media platforms X and Facebook to market their campaigns, motivate the public to vote and engage with supporters. Suiter (2015) found that nearly all candidates did not prioritise engagement with voters but instead focused on rallying and advertising. Suiter (2015) posits that Irish candidates rely on social media for broadcasting campaign messages, rather than fully engaging with followers or utilising their interactive capabilities. The report reveals that even though most Irish candidates use social media primarily as an expansion of traditional local campaigning, with varying focus on marketing and mobilising, they still have a small but significant impact on vote share. This shows an evolution in thinking since Effing et al.'s (2011) study in the Netherlands, which found that social media did not have an impact on their elections.

Most studies evaluating politicians' use of two social media platforms chose Facebook and X due to both platforms' widespread use by politicians (Stier, et al., 2018; Suiter, 2015; Hong, 2013; Enli and Skogerbø, 2013). According to Suiter's (2015) study, Irish politicians used X significantly more than Facebook for marketing during the 2013 Meath East by-election. Suiter (2015) found that only 3 out of the 5 candidates she analysed had public Facebook pages, but they did not post often or did not post political content, and they all favoured X. Molony (2014) highlights one incident that depicted X's growing influence in Irish politics in 2010. In this instance, X led to the resignation of one minister due to Green Party chairman Senator Dan Boyle's posts. Boyle frequently used X to share his opinions on political issues and one of his posts about Minister Willie O'Dea, who had been involved in a scandal, reignited public debate leading to O'Dea's resignation just a day later. Boyle's use of X showed how the platform could offer a more informal way of communicating, giving him the freedom to stir up controversy or bring attention to issues that might otherwise be forgotten. This section of the literature review has examined the limited available literature on Irish politicians' use of social media during elections. This lack of literature shall be expanded upon by this study. The next section shall analyse the theory utilised in this article: Framing theory.

Framing theory

Framing theory, introduced by Goffman (1974) and expanded by scholars such as Entman (1993) and Iyengar (1991), explores how information is selectively presented to shape public perception and influence interpretations. Framing theory was developed further by researchers such as Chong and Druckman (2007) and Güran and Özarslan (2022) to apply to political communication, where it is used to study how political actors, the media and other communicators present issues to the public. Politicians use social media to employ frames that will directly influence public opinion, particularly when it comes to women's rights, education, the economy and energy policy (Hemphill et al., 2013). Hemphill et al. (2013) posit that media frames can change an individual's own frames in ways such as repetition, causing the idea to be more 'readily available in memory' (ppp. 6). They also mention that 'frames used quickly, frequently, and by many people are most effective at influencing the public' (2013, ppp. 6).

Framing theory has recently been described as:

> 'communicational frames as social/cultural conventions of discourse units that are established/negotiated for the time being by users and that define relationships and actions of social actors in means of social/political/morale responsibilities.' (Güran and Özarslan, 2022).

In the context of this article, framing theory is crucial in helping to explain how politicians and media outlets strategically highlight or downplay aspects of issues to influence public opinion (Brugman et al., 2017). Sahly et al. (2019) argue: 'Message framing is an important part of campaign strategy, and social media campaigns are no exception.' (p. 1).

Understanding framing is essential for analysing how political messages are crafted and how they resonate with different audiences, especially in the digital age where social media allow for more targeted and tailored framing strategies (Güran and Özarslan, 2022). Framing theory provides this solid framework, making it highly relevant for any study focused on political communication, particularly in the context of new media and social media's role in shaping political discourse.

In his 1974 book Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience, Goffman introduced the concept of framing to understand how individuals perceive and make sense of their social world. Goffman (1974) argued that frames are the 'schemata of interpretation' that individuals use to make sense of reality. Goffman (1974) focuses on the social construction of reality, where frames are shaped by social norms, cultural influences and collective understandings. He depicts this by positing: 'The definition of the situation, in turn, influences the behaviour of individuals, and the individual takes on the role suggested by the definition of the situation' (p. 24).

While Goffman introduced the concept of frames, Entman extended this framework to examine how media, political elites and other communicators shape public perception through framing. Entman's (1993) work does not contradict Goffman's theory but builds upon it. According to Entman (1993), frames are not merely about the content presented, but how certain aspects are emphasised or downplayed to influence how the audience understands an issue. Entman argues that media play a crucial role in shaping public opinion by framing issues in particular ways. He acknowledges that media frames are influenced by both the media's own organisational needs, such as deadlines, and by political elites who seek to influence public opinion through framing. Entman's framing theory also emphasises the power of media in reinforcing or challenging dominant ideologies. He highlights how the media can contribute to political agendas, reinforce power structures or create narratives that align with political interests. This focus on the strategic use of framing in mass media represents a shift from Goffman's more individual-focused framing theory to a collective, mediated and politically driven interpretation of how frames shape public discourse.

More recent studies have been conducted on how framing theory applies within the context of social media platforms. Matthes and Kohring (2008) proposed a more comprehensive way to identify frames in communication by looking beyond just language and considering the broader context in which messages are conveyed. This facilitates analysis of framing on social media posts consisting of few words. Political communication researchers have been paying more attention to how personal frames, or individual perspectives, are used as media frames on social media platforms (Güran and Özarslan, 2022). This shift highlights the growing influence of personal narratives in shaping media coverage and public opinion in the digital age. The rise of daily mass media has expanded the power to define and frame issues, allowing media outlets to significantly influence public perceptions of social and political matters. This increased power can sometimes lead to the monopolisation of certain frames, presenting a dominant perspective that shapes a unified view of reality. However, this power can also lead to division within society, as media outlets may present issues in ways that cater to specific social groups or classes (2022, p. 452).

Iyengar (1991), a key figure in framing research known for his work on how media frames issues in political communication, introduced two main types of frames used in political messaging: episodic frames and thematic frames. Boydstun et al. (2013) posit that by employing comprehensive frameworks like Iyengar's, researchers can analyse and interpret the ways political messages are crafted, shared and received.

Iyengar (1991) asserts that episodic frames focus on specific events or individual cases, presenting an issue as a series of isolated incidents or personal stories rather than a broader trend or context. For example, a news report about poverty might focus on one homeless individual rather

than discussing the larger systemic causes of poverty. The aim of this type of frame is to highlight personal or specific cases, making the issue more relatable, but often at the expense of understanding the bigger picture.

Thematic frames, focus on the broader context and trends. They look at issues from a larger societal perspective and discuss patterns, causes and implications. For instance, a news report on poverty might focus on the overall increase in unemployment rates or social inequality, providing a wider context rather than individual cases.

Boydstun et al. (2013) describe people who engage with episodically-framed news as blaming societal problems on 'individual failings', and people who engage with thematically-framed news as viewing societal issues as being out of an individual's control or as a government fault (ppp. 3). Iyengar's research suggests that the way an issue is framed can influence public attitudes and perceptions.

Scholars highlight basic patterns commonly applied in political messages, called generic frames, which help categorise and analyse the way issues are presented and understood (Sahly et al., 2019; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Sahly et al. (2019) explain four generic frames that politicians use on social media, which will be used in this research.

Conflict frames focus on portraying issues as a struggle between opposing forces or parties, emphasising competition, disagreement or even confrontation. Van dDer Goot et al. (2025) assert that conflict frames are key in politics, despite their advantages and disadvantages; they can make politics more captivating and easier to follow but, on the other hand, can promote distrust in government, intergroup animosity and heightened ideological divisions.

The morality frame refers to framing an issue based on moral or ethical arguments, often highlighting right versus wrong, good versus bad. This frame emphasises the ethical implications of a policy or situation. Mucciaroni et al. (2018) found that a politician is more likely to use morality frames if their opponent is also using them, meaning that frequently, they are used in a calculated way.

The third generic frame Sahly et al. (2019) describe is the attribution of responsibility frame. This frame focuses on identifying who is responsible for a problem or situation, and it often influences how the public assigns blame or credit. SoRelle (2021) contends that attribution of responsibility frames are used to align new policy issues with people's pre-existing views on government intervention. This can enhance the public's motivation to participate in political actions supporting those policies.

Sahly et al. (2019) argue the significance of emotional frames that evoke fear, excitement, enthusiasm and anger through the strategic use of emotional language. Sahly et al. (2019)'s study discovered that emotional frames boost public engagement on politicians' posts. They also highlight two types of emotional frames politicians use on social media: positive and negative emotional frames. Positive emotional frames evoke uplifting emotions such as hope, pride, joy or admiration, often used to highlight achievements, express solidarity or promote a sense of community. Conversely, negative emotional frames elicit emotions such as anger, fear, sadness or frustration. They are typically employed to draw attention to problems, injustices or threats, thereby motivating action or change. Sahly et al. (2019) suggest that both positive and negative emotional frames can be effective in engaging audiences on social media. The choice between them depends on the communicator's objectives, whether to inspire and unite or to alert and mobilise.

For this study, framing theory provides insight into how each politician might highlight different aspects of their campaigns based on the advantages of the platform they use. For example, one politician might focus on visual, emotive messaging on TikTok to appeal to younger voters (Cervi and Marín-Lladó, 2021), while another might emphasise policy details on X to engage with a more politically active audience (Enjolras, 2014).

The existing literature highlights the importance of examining how framing techniques reflect the strategic use of social media by Irish politicians and their potential influence on voter perception and engagement. However, limited research has explored how Irish politicians utilise newer platforms such as TikTok in comparison with established platforms such as X. This study addresses this gap by analysing the ways in which framing strategies are employed across these differing social media environments.

Methodology

The research approach was designed to address the aims and objectives of this study by examining how Irish politicians Mary Lou McDonald and Simon Harris framed themselves on social media during the 2024 general election. A framing analysis of the politicians' social media accounts was employed to provide insight into how political messages were constructed, presented, and interpreted within digital campaign environments.

Ethical approval was granted from the Ethics Review Committee at Dublin City University (DCU). Best practices in digital research ethics were followed, including respect for privacy by only analysing publicly available content and no direct examination of individuals' political views, deeming interviews and surveys unsuitable for this study.

When conducting the literature review for this article, it was discovered that social media platforms X and Facebook have been heavily studied and compared to each other in relation to this topic (Stier, et al., 2018; Suiter, 2015; Enjolras, 2014; Hong, 2013; Enli and Skogerbø, 2013). The inclusion of one of these platforms was informed by its recognised advantages for politicians during election campaigns. Suiter (2015) posits that many Irish politicians did not have public Facebook accounts or did not use their Facebook accounts often. This suggests that X is the more relevant of the two, despite the fall in engagement levels since Elon Musk's takeover in 2022 (Binder, 2024). Suiter also argues X's (formerly known as Twitter) significance in Irish elections by stating that '[i]n general, it would appear that social media– Twitter in particular– have a modest effect on the number of preference votes a candidate receives when they are used.' (2015, p. 308).

As many comparisons of X and Facebook have already been carried out (Stier et al., 2018; Effing et al., 2011), this project compares X with a newer platform: TikTok. Cervi et al. (2023) highlight TikTok's significance by positing 'TikTok is without any doubt the most popular social media among Gen Zers.' (p. 1). Tirado-Espín et al. (2022) also underline TikTok's benefit for political campaigns by identifying it as 'one of the key platforms for diversifying digital content and proposing electoral campaign strategies that involve breaking with conventional repertoires of political-electoral action' (p. 232).

The analysis used a coding process consisting of several steps. Firstly, all posts were exported manually into a spreadsheet, noting the number of 'likes' the post got. Then, each post was categorised into one of six thematic groups based on the content to help understand the intent and context of the message before dissecting how it is framed. Framing theory examines how something is communicated, but before analysing 'how' the post is framed, this thematic coding will help answer 'what' is being framed. These six groups included humorous and trend-based content, personal

branding and leadership, public engagement and voter interaction, national and cultural identity, campaigning and party/policy promotion, and lastly, attack and opposition criticism.

A structured coding manual was developed in advance, defining each frame with reference to the definitions established in the literature review, to ensure consistent and systematic categorisation across all posts. Frames were applied using Sahly et al.'s (2019) definitions of conflict, morality, attribution of responsibility, and emotional frames, given their suitability for the analysis of content posted by politicians. If any of the social media posts fell under more than one frame, the dominant frame was used. Finally, these posts were deemed either episodic or thematically framed according to Iyengar's (1991) classifications. This model allows for a deeper understanding of how political messaging on TikTok and X shapes public perception and assigns responsibility. Definitions of each frame established in the literature review guided decisions on frames chosen for each post.

Posts were collected manually using platform search functions. The selection criteria included all posts currently available on McDonald's and Harris' public X and TikTok accounts within the election campaign period (8-29th of November 2024).

This study employed a combined qualitative and quantitative content analysis of the chosen politicians' social media accounts. Content analysis is a research method used to study and measure elements that appear in text, images, videos or other media. It helps researchers find patterns by counting how often certain words, themes or visuals appear in materials such as articles, advertisements, TV shows or social media posts (Walliman, 2011). As this study seeks to identify recurring themes and frames across social media content, a content analysis methodology was deemed most appropriate. The quantitative dimension of the research involves systematically recording the number of posts published and the corresponding number of 'likes' on the politicians' accounts. This numerical data provides an indication of posting frequency and audience engagement. Complementing this, a qualitative thematic analysis is employed to categorise and interpret the dominant themes and frames evident within the posts. Through this approach, patterns in messaging, emphasis, and narrative construction can be identified and examined in depth. Following the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, a comparative analysis is conducted in the discussion below. This stage evaluates similarities and differences in communication strategies between the subjects of the study. The dataset comprises social media posts published on X and TikTok by Mary Lou McDonald and Simon Harris between 8 November 2024 and 29 November 2024 (inclusive), corresponding to the official general election campaign period (Sipo.ie, 2024).

The selection of politicians for analysis was based on the leaders of Ireland's three largest political parties: Micheál Martin (Fianna Fáil), Mary Lou McDonald (Sinn Féin) and Simon Harris (Fine Gael) (O'Shea, 2024). For this article, Mary Lou McDonald and Simon Harris were deemed the best candidates. Simon Harris had the most social media followers out of all other politicians in this election and was named the 'TikTok Taoiseach' by the media, making him the perfect candidate due to his success on social media (Kent, 2024; Cox, 2024). As Sahly, Shao and Kwon (2019) argue, it is beneficial for a comparative analysis to pick two candidates with opposing political views. Given Fine Gael's coalition with Fianna Fáil and rejection surrounding ideas of a coalition with Sinn Féin due to significant contrasts in their political approach (Sharkey, 2024), Sinn Féin's party leader Mary Lou McDonald was the second ideal candidate for this analysis.

While this study provides valuable insight into how Irish politicians frame themselves on social media, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the study is limited to a specific timeframe; the official general election campaign period in November 2024. This means that long-term trends in political framing are not examined, and the findings may not fully capture shifts in messaging strategies outside this period. Secondly, the study relies on only two politicians and may not fully

reflect Irish politics as a whole. Thirdly, the coding process involves subjective interpretation. Although a structured coding manual was used to enhance reliability, some degree of interpretive bias or inconsistency in classification may remain. Lastly, this study combines qualitative and quantitative content analysis to examine how Irish politicians construct and present frames on social media, with a focus on political communication strategies rather than their direct effects on voter behaviour. While assessing audience responses falls beyond the scope of this study, future research could incorporate audience analysis or survey methods to explore how different frames influence public perception and political attitudes.

Results

The findings examine the framing strategies employed by Irish politicians across social media platforms in relation to the overarching research questions: (Do politicians with opposing political stances employ different framing strategies? And, do politicians adapt their messaging to suit the affordances and audience expectations of different platforms?).

Both leaders primarily used emotional frames, and McDonald significantly employed conflict and attribution of responsibility frames to attack her opposition as one of her main strategies, while Harris instead framed himself as a peaceful leader. They both used a combination of episodic and thematic frames in their campaigns.

A comparison of X and TikTok accounts revealed that X includes reposts within the same section as posts, whereas TikTok does not. To make this comparison equal and not to falsely inflate the number of posts on X, reposts will not be included. It also became apparent when conducting this analysis that X rounds its likes to the nearest 100 once it has surpassed 1,000 likes. For this study, TikTok likes will also be rounded to the nearest hundred if the post has surpassed 1,000 likes to keep the analysis equal.

McDonald posted more on X than on TikTok. She posted 118 times on X and 67 times on TikTok. Harris posted more on TikTok than on X, and posted more on TikTok than McDonald. He posted 82 times on TikTok and only 18 times on X. TikTok was by far the most effective platform for both in terms of engagement. Out of all posts by Harris and McDonald on both platforms, McDonald's post, a video themed around voter interaction and campaigning, received the most likes: 37,000 likes. McDonald also gained the second most liked post on TikTok, which blended humour with personal branding, earning 30,500 likes. A TikTok post from Harris, also humorous and focused on personal branding, received 21,700 likes and was the third most liked post overall. In contrast, all of Harris's X posts and the majority of McDonald's remained under one thousand likes. Figure 3 depicts the average number of likes received by each candidate on each platform. McDonald had an average of 4,695 likes on TikTok, while Harris had an average of 1,315 likes. McDonald had an average of 947 likes on X while Harris' average was 252. This shows that McDonald gained more attention on her social media than Harris in the 2024 general election period.

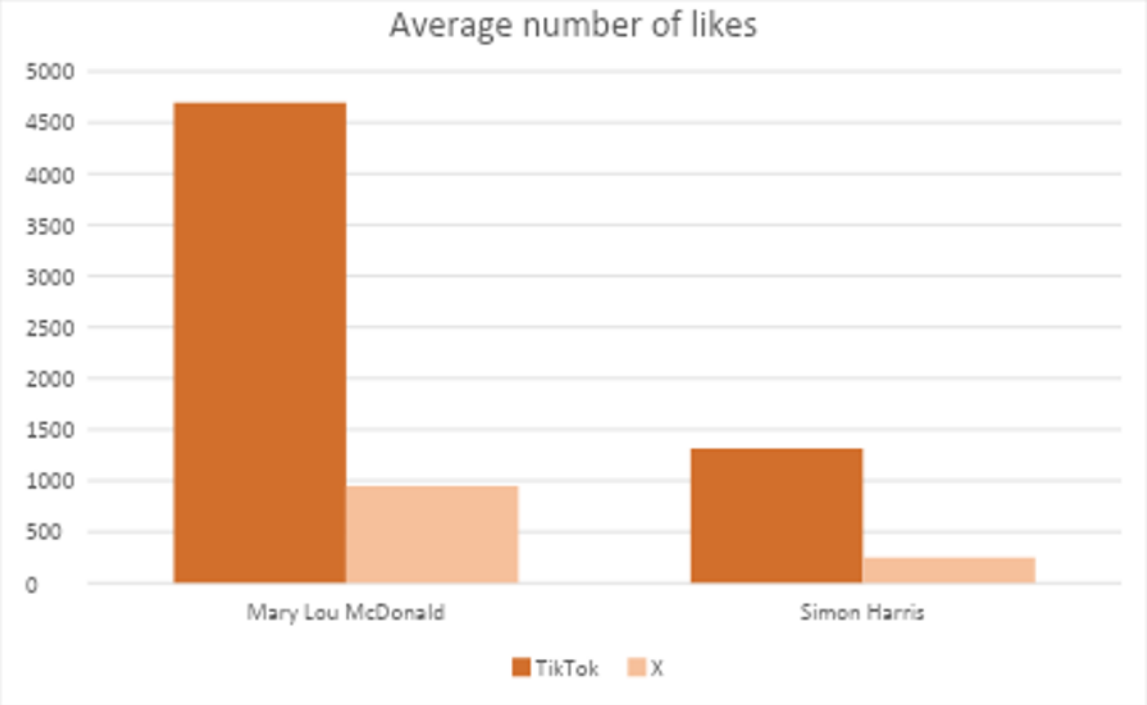


Figure 3: Average number of likes. Source: Author.

Do politicians with opposing political stances employ different framing strategies?

While both leaders predominantly used emotional frames, their framing strategies differed. McDonald used Sahly et al.'s (2019) negative emotional frames and Harris used positive emotional frames. McDonald consistently employed emotional and episodic framing to centre public engagement and voter interaction, where this content made up most of her posts (33 times as a primary theme on TikTok, 43 times as a primary theme on X), often presenting direct conversations with citizens. Her platforms also featured a significant number of campaign and policy promotion posts (15 times as a primary theme on TikTok, 45 times as a primary theme on X), framed through morality. She frequently employed attack content (9 times as a primary theme on TikTok, 9 times as a primary theme on X), where she used mainly conflict framing, with some attribution of responsibility framing, across both platforms to critique opponents.

In contrast, Harris made minimal use of attack and opposition criticism themes and adopted a more neutral campaign presence. Harris also notably engaged in public interaction and campaign promotion, but unlike McDonald, he relied on morality and emotional frames in a way that did not promote division between parties. Harris also used attribution of responsibility framing, but instead of putting the responsibility on his opposition, he took responsibility to share public service announcements and to inform his audience. The last notable difference is that one of McDonald's main strategies across her social media was using emotional, episodic frames to introduce her viewers to members of the public seeking better help from the government (student nurses, carers, etc.), Harris did not do this. Instead, he used more humorous and trend-based themes for these types of videos. Overall, while both leaders used emotional framing extensively, McDonald's content was more oppositional and policy-driven, whereas Harris adopted a more reserved, culturally rich and leadership-focused tone. This reveals a clear divergence in how both leaders chose to frame themselves to the public through their social media during the 2024 general election campaign period.

Do politicians adapt their messaging to suit the affordances and audience expectations of different platforms?

The leaders framed themselves significantly differently on both platforms examined. Harris's TikTok activity leaned more into personal branding and light-hearted engagement, with emotional and

episodic framing used across humorous content (4 times as a primary theme) and leadership-themed posts (14 times as a primary theme). However, his X account showed a notable shift in tone, avoiding both humour and confrontation altogether. Instead, Harris focused on national identity (7 times as a primary theme) and leadership (4 times as a primary theme), using emotional and thematic framing. Harris did not use X as a platform to campaign on and heavily relied on TikTok. He posted 64 more times on TikTok than X. 14 of Harris' 18 posts on X did not relate to the general election and instead consisted of him sharing condolences for deaths that had occurred, weather warnings and issues regarding other countries. In comparison, McDonald used X more in her campaigning strategy than TikTok. McDonald posted on TikTok 67 times. She posted on X 118 times, 51 more times than she did on TikTok and exactly 100 more posts than Harris on X. Like Harris, McDonald did not post any humorous and trend-based content on X and kept that strictly on TikTok. McDonald posted mainly campaigning and policy + party promotion-themed videos on X, which were mainly framed in a thematic and moral way. In summary, both leaders strategically adapted their framing techniques to the unique environments of TikTok and X.

In sum, McDonald posted more content on X while Harris posted more on TikTok. Both leaders' TikTok pages received the most engagement over X, and McDonald received the most engagement overall. While the leaders used some similar strategies, such as the heavy use of public interaction-themed posts and emotional frames with a mix of thematic and episodic frames, they framed themselves differently. McDonald relied significantly more on conflict frames and attacking her opposition while Harris remained peaceful. In essence, the research discovered that both leaders altered what they posted on each platform to suit its specific functions, such as only posting humorous and trend-based posts on TikTok and leaving it out completely on X.

Discussion

This study set out to analyse how two Irish politicians, Mary Lou McDonald and Simon Harris, framed themselves on TikTok and X during the 2024 general election campaign period. Answering the two central questions revealed several differences and similarities in framing strategies and greater insight into how they adapted their messaging to suit audience expectations and affordances of different platforms. Harris relied on TikTok while McDonald utilised X more; McDonald significantly used conflict and attribution of responsibility frames in attack and opposition criticism-themed posts to bring down her opponents, while Harris did not. They both switched between episodic and thematic frames, and emotional frames were both leaders' most recurring frame, although Harris portrayed his emotional frames in a positive way, while McDonald employed more negative emotional frames (Sahly et al., 2019). This section examines these findings in depth and draws conclusions regarding their meaning.

Frame Type	Definition	McDonald Example	Harris Example
Emotional	Using positive or negative emotional language to evoke reactions & influence audience sentiment or engagement.	Video of McDonald meeting a full-time carer in Ballymun explaining her struggles in not getting enough money from the government for her disabled son.	Harris talked about the inspiration he felt from his brother's struggle to secure supports as an autistic child as the reason he got into politics.

Conflict	Highlighting disagreements, disputes or tensions between people, groups, institutions, organisations, governments or countries to demonstrate conflict between them.	McDonald used confrontational language like describing Fine Gael as a party that 'sides with the rich & wastes your money' & dismissive language such as calling her opponents 'tweedle-dum & tweedle-dee.'	Harris completely avoided conflict in his posts.
Attribution of Responsibility	Attributing responsibility or blame for an event or issue to people, groups, institutions, organisations, governments or countries.	McDonald frequently blamed the government for the public's struggles, particularly in relation to healthcare & housing.	Only used subtly, such as in weather warnings where Harris advised public caution. He mainly used social media to demonstrate leadership rather than to assign blame.
Morality	Using moral or immoral values, behaviours or policies to highlight ethical standards or call out actions that are against moral standards.	McDonald positioned Sinn Féin as fighting for 'the many, not the few,' & promoting €10-a-day childcare or affordable housing to evoke a sense of ethical duty & contrasting her party with the perceived greed & negligence of her opponents.	Harris addressed international issues such as calls for ceasefires, support for UN peacekeeping or responses to humanitarian crises.

Figure 4: Framing Summary of Sahly et al's (2019) generic frames. Source: Author.

Mary Lou McDonald's framing approach

McDonald's campaign strategy during the general election reveals a deliberate and diverse approach to political communication, with a strong emphasis on emotional frames and a mix of thematic and episodic framing to humanise her leadership and connect with a broad demographic (Sahly et al., 2019; Iyengar, 1991). Arijeniwa and Nwaoboli (2023) claim that politicians place great emphasis on their social media presence, and McDonald has proved this to be true. Not one day went by during the 2024 general election campaign period that she did not post at least once to both her TikTok and X accounts. Sahly et al. (2019) mention four generic frames: morality, emotional, attribution of responsibility and conflict. Out of these four frames, McDonald utilised emotional framing the most.

This approach resonates with Sahly et al.'s (2019) findings that emotional frames can enhance audience engagement on social media platforms. McDonald primarily utilised negative emotional frames in her campaign communications (Sahly et al., 2019). Her messaging often centred on societal challenges, injustices and criticisms of opposing parties. By highlighting issues like economic disparities or governmental faults, McDonald aimed to create feelings of anger or urgency, assembling support through shared grievances. This approach positioned her as a leader for change, directly addressing the concerns and frustrations of her constituents. On both platforms, she emphasised public engagement and voter interaction, with 33 primary posts and 9 secondary posts on TikTok and 43 primary posts and 10 secondary posts on X categorised under this theme, all employing emotional and episodic framing.

Using episodic frames allowed McDonald to turn abstract policies into real-life issues (Iyengar, 1991). Additionally, her use of attack and opposition criticism themes was notable, with nine primary and six secondary posts on TikTok and nine primary and 15 secondary posts on X, all framed thematically under conflict. This approach aligns with previous research suggesting that opposition leaders often adopt confrontational strategies to challenge incumbents, turn the public against the government and keep voters engaged (van der Goot et al., 2025). McDonald evoked sympathy through her consistent effort to introduce individuals on her platform and give them space to tell their stories, such as a woman McDonald met in Ballymun struggling with not getting enough money from the government as a full-time carer for her disabled son. According to Iyengar (1991), these posts are episodic as an individual's story is being presented. This allows McDonald to create a sense of shared experience among her viewers. Although the main theme here is emotional, an underlying attribution of responsibility frame is present in these posts, as the failures of the current government are framed as the root of these individuals' problems. This is a recurring theme in McDonald's social media content to blame the current government for the public's struggles. As McDonald is sharing an individual's personal story, while also highlighting broader implications such as government failures, both episodic framing and subtle thematic framing are present to persuade voters. McDonald also uses conflict framing significantly.

Sahly et al. (2019) describe conflict frames as framing an issue as a clash between two sides, with Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil frequently cast as villains in long-standing systemic failures. McDonald used confrontational language, such as describing Fine Gael as a party that 'sides with the rich and wastes your money' and dismissive language, such as calling her opposition 'tweedle-dum and tweedle-dee,' thereby assigning blame and highlighting the need for change. She posted 6 (5 primary and 1 secondary) humorous and trend-based posts to TikTok, which are particularly appealing to younger and disengaged audiences (Marquart et al., 2020) but predominantly stuck with political content. On X, McDonald posted no humorous and trend-based posts, instead keeping her X image strictly political, which supports past literature regarding a more serious political approach on X than TikTok (Tirado-Espín et al., 2022; Cervi and Marín-Lladó, 2021; Enjolras, 2014).

McDonald's leadership is conveyed not just through slogans, but through emotionally intimate moments such as hugging supporters or speaking with carers. While policy and campaigning content is prominent, it is often interwoven with personal storytelling, using emotional appeals to highlight Sinn Féin's values. McDonald also drew on the morality frame, particularly in campaign and policy-focused posts where she positioned Sinn Féin as fighting for 'the many, not the few,' appealing to fairness, justice and national values. Posts promoting €10-a-day childcare or affordable housing are thematically framed but use moral language to evoke a sense of ethical duty and contrast her party with the perceived greed and negligence of her opponents (Sahly et al., 2019). While episodic framing dominated her emotionally framed content, McDonald used thematic framing alongside morality-framed posts to emphasise long-term solutions. Posts outlining Sinn Féin's economic plans or healthcare plans are framed as systemic responses to national problems, aligning with Iyengar's (1991) definition of thematic framing as government failings rather than personal wrongdoings. Through these framing strategies, McDonald effectively positioned herself as a compassionate and credible leader, engaging diverse demographics across social media platforms.

Simon Harris' framing approach

Harris's TikTok campaign during the 2024 general election exemplified a strategic use of framing to connect with voters. Harris, like his political peer McDonald, mainly used emotional frames (Sahly et al., 2019). Predominantly, he combined emotional and episodic frames, aligning with Sahly et al.'s (2019) identification of emotional framing as a tool to enhance audience engagement and Iyengar's (1991) idea of episodic frames humanising political issues. Harris predominantly employed Sahly et al.'s (2019) notion of positive emotional frames across his TikTok and X platforms. His content

displayed moments of joy, national pride and personal anecdotes, such as celebrating Irish achievements or sharing his experiences related to disability care. These narratives aimed to improve his political persona, evoking relatability and warmth among viewers (Sahly et al., 2019). Sharing relatable, light-hearted content, such as dancing with students or interacting with community members, allowed Harris to personalise his political content, forming connections with viewers.

However, Harris, like McDonald, also integrated thematic and moral frames in posts addressing policy issues, such as student fees or support for small businesses. These posts provided context and appealed to collective values, reflecting Iyengar's (1991) thematic framing, which presents issues within a broader societal context to encourage public discourse and understanding. He also posted a comparable amount of humorous and trend-based content to McDonald (four primary and three secondary posts compared to McDonald's five primary and one secondary), portraying that he also aimed to connect with a younger audience and portray politics in an easier-to-grasp way than traditional media would (Marquart et al., 2020, Manning et al., 2016). His posts often showcased spontaneous moments with the public, reinforcing an emotional connection with users.

Much like McDonald, Harris leans heavily on episodic frames that showcase humour, warmth and approachability. Harris' episodic frames highlight his own journey through politics, which began with him campaigning for the rights of autistic people, inspired by his own brother's story. According to Iyengar (1991), these episodic frames allow Harris to appear more relatable to the public than a thematic frame would. This supports Manning et al. (2016) and Stanyer's (2013) view that politicians often post personal stories on social media to create a feeling of shared experience among the public. McDonald did not utilise this anecdote tactic, but gave light to members of the public's struggles instead as her way to gain relatability, evoke sympathy and show she cares for the public. According to existing literature (Arijeniwa and Nwaoboli, 2023; Marquart et al., 2020; Manning et al., 2016), young people predominantly get their news from social media, and they appreciate informality among politicians. Marquart et al., (2020) find that politicians conform to this and take to social media to share politics in a simpler way. Harris' posts that depict politics in an easy-to-understand, casual way, such as a scripted video of him explaining his agenda for education to young kids, proves this literature to be true.

Unlike McDonald, Harris did not use conflict framing at all on his social media. Instead, he stuck with emotional, morality and attribution of responsibility framing to peacefully get his points across without engaging in disputes. Harris did not gain as much engagement as McDonald and perhaps the lack of conflict frames, which Sahly et al. (2019) believe engages audiences, was the cause. While attribution of responsibility appeared subtly, such as in weather warnings where Harris advised public caution, it was largely used to demonstrate leadership rather than to assign blame. This is unlike McDonald's political communication on social media of using attribution of responsibility and conflict frames to blame her opposition. Harris also employed the morality frame, particularly when addressing international issues such as calls for ceasefires, support for UN peacekeeping or responses to humanitarian crises.

These posts were thematically framed, presenting Harris and Fine Gael as morally grounded and globally aware. His limited direct campaign messaging on X also leaned on this frame, highlighting justice, cooperation and peace as central values, rather than aggressively promoting policy or attacking opponents. Harris' focus on episodic and emotional framing continues across the numerous videos where he interacts directly with the public. Laughter, candidness and spontaneity are the focus in these interactions, reinforcing an emotional bond with the viewer. These moments of joy and humour, distinctly episodic in nature, enable Harris to appear authentic and approachable, a leader who is part of the public (Sahly et al., 2019; Iyengar 1991). Harris's online presence during the campaign period effectively combined emotional resonance with strategic framing. By using both

episodic and thematic approaches to engage a diverse electorate, Harris could present himself as a compassionate, relatable and in-touch leader.

Platform-specific framing differences

After conducting this analysis, it became clear that stark differences exist between how politicians use TikTok and how they use X. TikTok's algorithm-driven function pushes content to go viral more than other platforms such as X, encouraging visual, humorous and highly engaging formats. In contrast, X is more follower-based and text-heavy, favouring policy-focused, timely content aimed at politically engaged audiences (Tirado-Espín et al., 2022; Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2021). TikTok's younger, less politically committed users are more responsive to emotional and episodic frames (Sahly et al., 2019; Iyengar, 1991), while X's more informed users may be more receptive to thematic frames that contextualise policy and demonstrate leadership or moral authority. Manning et al. (2016) and Marquart et al. (2020) argue social media's ability to keep young people engaged in politics by making it easier to access and understand.

Both Harris and McDonald included children and teenagers in their content, in videos either dancing to trending songs with them or appearing to be casually chatting. This confirms Manning et al.'s (2016) and Marquart et al.'s (2020) point, as Harris and McDonald utilised this advantage and posted these trend-based videos to attract a younger audience that takes part in these trends. Although both candidates were involved in humorous and trend-based content, it was strictly on TikTok. Both candidates kept this theme completely off X and posted content that aligned with X's more professional tone. Harris used X to project a composed and empathetic image, with strategic use of emotional and thematic frames that emphasised leadership, national identity and moral clarity over confrontation or disputes. This framing approach was tailored to an audience that values seriousness, stability and less personalisation in political discourse (Iyengar, 1991).

McDonald's average likes on TikTok were 4,695 whereas her average likes on X were only 947 in comparison. The same can be seen with Harris' likes where on TikTok his average was 1,315 but on X only 252. McDonald's most liked post on X was 3,900 likes whereas on TikTok it was 37,000 likes. Harris' most liked post on TikTok gained 21,700 likes compared to his most liked post on X totalling 873 likes. Molony (2014) highlights an incident where an Irish politician was forced to resign after another Irish politician brought light back to his past wrongdoings through a post on X. This influence seen on X could be a reason McDonald used conflict and attribution of responsibility frames for nine primary and 15 secondary posts on the platform with a theme of attack and opposition criticism on X. Tirado-Espín et al. (2022) also found that candidates favoured TikTok over X, this was found to be true on Harris' behalf but not on McDonald's.

Harris did not rely on X as part of his campaign strategy, but heavily used TikTok. McDonald utilised both platforms but favoured X, posting one hundred more times on X than Harris. This depicts Harris' aim for his content to spread to a wider, younger audience while McDonald aimed to use X's agenda-setting role to have a political impact on viewers and attract individuals already interested in politics (Tirado-Espín et al., 2022; Cervi and Marín-Lladó, 2021; Enjolras, 2014). Harris' X use conforms with Bisbee and Munger's (2024) study that revealed verified accounts tendency to reduce posting on X but continue reposting. Harris' X account during the 2024 campaign period consisted heavily of reposts from accounts such as the official Fine Gael X page, confirming this statement. It is believed that if a candidate changes their content to suit the specific social media platform they are using, they will have greater benefits in the election (Tirado-Espín et al., 2022). Both Harris and McDonald exploit this advantage and did tailored their content depending on the platform. Harris reserved thematic and moral framing for X, emphasising professionalism and public values, while McDonald applied negative emotional and attribution of responsibility frames more strongly there, using the platform's agenda-setting power to critique opposition. Harris and McDonald's differentiated use of TikTok and X stresses

the strategic importance of platform-specific communication. Their approaches suggest a clear understanding that maximising political reach and resonance requires aligning both content and framing with platform norms, audience expectations and perceived credibility.

Integration with existing literature

The findings of this study largely align with the existing literature on this topic, with few points contradicting it. This study observes a notable shift with the integration of newer platforms such as TikTok, where politicians employ more visually driven and emotional content to connect with younger demographics. This evolution supports the assertions of Cervi and Marín-Lladó (2021), who highlight the strategic use of emotional messaging on TikTok to appeal to younger voters. Bronstein et al. (2018) found that when politicians' posts contain emotional themes, the public forms connections with the politician and is inspired to participate in politics. Both candidates used emotional frames a significant amount, confirming this point.

Xue (2014) expressed worry that the rise of social media for political campaigns takes the focus away from serious political discussions and leads to politicians simply promoting themselves instead. Although unpolitical posts can be seen on both politicians' platforms, serious conversations also remain, and both political and unpolitical posts gained high engagement. For example, McDonald's most liked post is a more serious campaigning post, while her second most liked post is a humorous and trend-based post. Although Harris' top two most liked posts were both humorous and trend-based, meaning Harris' TikTok audience may be less politically driven. Mucciaroni et al. (2018) discovered that if a politician is framing an issue as a morality frame, their opponents are likely to copy. This was found to be true as both McDonald and Harris framed their campaigning-themed posts through morality frames. 'Political personalisation' or the 'presidentialisation of politics' is a notion discovered in the literature review where politicians are seen as celebrities and focus from the public is on them, not their party (Rahat and Sheafer, 2007; Poguntke and Webb, 2005).

Personal branding is prevalent on both McDonald and Harris' X and TikTok platforms, but campaigning and policy + party promotion outweighed it. Suiter's (2015) analysis of the 2013 Meath East by-election revealed that Irish candidates predominantly used social media platforms like X for broadcasting campaign messages rather than engaging interactively with voters, focusing more on marketing and mobilisation than on engaging in dialogue. This study sees an evolution from this, as public engagement was the most common theme on both candidates' TikTok pages and on Harris' X. McDonald had a similar amount of campaigning posts and public engagement posts on X, posting just two more primary-themed campaigning posts than public engagement.

Conclusion

This study examined how Irish politicians Mary Lou McDonald and Simon Harris constructed their public personas through X and TikTok during the 2024 general election campaign period, focusing on whether politicians with opposing ideologies frame themselves differently and whether their communication strategies are adapted to the functions of specific platforms. The findings demonstrate that political actors strategically employ framing techniques across digital environments, reflecting both ideological positioning and the distinct affordances of different platforms.

This research contributes to the field of digital political communication by extending framing analysis into the Irish context, where research remains comparatively limited relative to the broader international literature. By examining how politicians construct and present political identities across multiple platforms, this study provides insight into the evolving relationship between social media, political strategy and democratic communication.

Building upon the findings of this study, several opportunities for future research emerge to deepen understanding of political communication in digital environments. Expanding analysis beyond two prominent Irish politicians to include a broader range of political figures, parties and regions would provide a more comprehensive understanding of social media strategies and their effectiveness, while comparative studies examining geographical differences could explore how contextual factors influence political communication practices.

Further research could also incorporate additional social media platforms and examine changes in framing strategies, engagement patterns and platform preferences across multiple election cycles to better understand the evolution of digital campaigning. Incorporating audience reception methods, such as surveys or audience analysis, would provide greater insight into how different segments of the electorate interpret political frames and whether specific strategies influence public opinion, political attitudes or participation.

Given the use of morality frames identified in this study, future research could further investigate their role in shaping policy support and voter perceptions, while examining the shift from traditional broadcasting approaches towards interactive digital engagement may reveal how changing media environments influence political trust and candidate evaluation. Additionally, exploring the relationship between personal branding and party promotion could contribute to wider discussions surrounding the individualisation and presidentialisation of contemporary politics, while further enhancing understanding of how political actors construct identities within evolving digital communication environments.

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