

Who They Are and What They Say: The Impact of Identity and Content of Politicians on Audience Engagement

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Abstract

Politicians have personal brands, and they increasingly use social media to communicate with and influence their audiences on key societal issues. While prior literature has examined how content characteristics shape user engagement, little is known about how a politician's identity influences engagement with their content. To address this question, we adopt a data-driven theory generation approach and analyze tweets from all senators in the 116th U.S. Congress. Drawing on social role and social dominance theories, we examine how politicians' identities (i.e., race, gender, and party affiliation) and message characteristics (i.e., morality and religiosity) jointly influence audience engagement. Findings reveal several counterintuitive yet explainable effects of a politician's identity and content on user engagement. Based on the findings, we propose four tenets of an emerging theory of identity biases on social media and discuss how they extend the social role and dominance theories.

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