From memes to message to Mario Kart: An analysis of the reach of social media content related to Kamala Harris

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Introduction

Social media platforms have personalized political narratives in how individuals share, debate, and document their experiences of political issues (Farkas & Bene, 2021; McGregor, 2018; Metz et al., 2020). Memes represent one approach through which such personalization occurs. Biologist Richard Dawkins (Dawkins, 1989) first coined the term, meme, to describe a living structure that reproduces by imitation. Later, communication scholars (e.g., Shifman, 2013) defined memes as cultural information that spreads, reproduces among individuals and yet gradually scales into a shared social phenomenon or trivial elements of popular culture. Online

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memes can take the form of a visual, phrase, or hashtag (Beskow et al., 2020). With humor as a major constituent of political memes, self-generated political memes on social media have evolved into a hallmark of digital political participatory culture characterized by civic engagement (Kirner-Ludwig, 2020; Bülow & Johann, 2023; Dynel & Poppi, 2023). Particularly, viral political memes on digital platforms can organically capture individuals' attention and awareness on the target issues (López-Paredes & Carrillo-Andrade, 2022).

A daunting challenge in political engagement lies in connecting with the younger demographics who are the digital natives (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). According to the [Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement](#), the 18-24 age group has some of the lowest turnout rates amongst eligible voters. After her sudden ascendence to be the presumptive presidential candidate for the Democrat Party, a tidal wave of meme posts, largely from young Americans, playfully associated Kamala Harris with coconut tree. The reference to coconut trees originated from Harris' speech in May 2023 to advocate opportunities for Hispanic Americans. During the speech, Harris stressed the importance of considering the context, such as the needs of students' families, teachers, and communities by stating: "Everything is in context. My mother…would say to us, 'I don't know what's wrong with you young people. You think you just fell out of a coconut tree?" (Schapiti & Treisman, 2024).

These coconut-themed memes ignited an unprecedented surge of energy and engagement among young voters on social media platforms, which provides an ideal context to examine their reactions toward these memes in light of a high-stake presidential election. This study therefore seeks to explore the following research question:

RQ: How did young voters react toward the coconut tree memes about Kamala Harris on social media?

Method

To examine the above proposed research question on young voters' reactions toward the coconut-themed memes related to Kamala Harris, this study utilized artificial intelligence (AI)-drive social media analytics tool, Brandwatch, to collect and analyze social conversations. As this study intended to target specifically young voters in the U.S., we built a search query on Brandwatch to retrieve social discussions by young voters related to the coconut tree memes. For examples, search terms such as "@KamalaHarris," "#kamalaharris," "Kamala," "younger voters," "Gen Z," "youth vote," "coconut tree," "coconut tree meme," "coconut," and "coconut mall."

The data set includes social conversations on various social media platforms (e.g., X, Facebook, Reddit, YouTube, Tumblr, blogs, etc.) over seven days, from July 18 to July 24, 2024. During this observation period, approximately 265K social posts were harvested, representing a striking **1818%** increase of social conversations pertaining to the coconut tree memes than the previous week. Analytics data from TikTok's Creative Center were also examined to review users' reactions about coconut memes on TikTok.

Findings

Positive Sentiment Dominated on Social Media among Young Voters

Positive sentiment witnessed a staggering **973%** increase from July 18 to July 24, 2024. Joy currently stands as the dominant sentiment over other negative sentiments on social media. A

sense of sadness, fear, disgust, and anger was overridden by hope, optimism, and confidence

regarding Kamala's prospect of beating Trump. Young voters feel "very excited," "energized,"

and "proud" of Kamala Harris. The coconut-themed emojis, memes, and short reels were deemed

as a fun and authentic approach to connect with young voters. Such joyful sentiment seemed to

be driven by a feeling of hope, anticipation of participating in the VP's campaign activities, and a

sense of emotional connection among younger demographic groups. Notedly, young voters

attributed such emotional connection to the VP's savviness in connecting with them through pop

culture (e.g., meme culture, music, celebrity endorsement, etc.) and projecting an *authentic* self.

This ongoing uptick in positive sentiment represents a stark contrast to the prevailing negative

sentiment over President Joe Biden's chance of being re-elected.
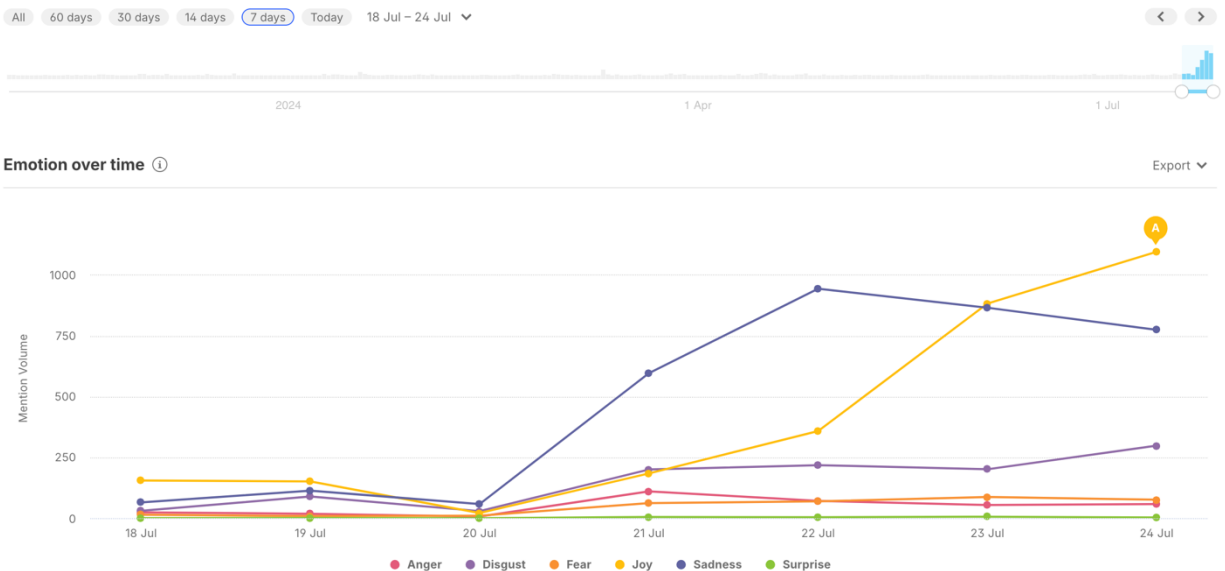
Engagement from Broader Demographics

Embracing Gen Z-friendly memes (e.g., coconut tree) and terms (e.g., brat) seemed to have broadened the demographic reach for Harris, even to the traditionally hard-to-access young voters. Data from Brandwatch indicated that the number of female contributors (i.e., 53%) of online discussions (e.g., from platforms such as X, Reddit, Facebook, Tumblr, YouTube, blogs, forums, and online news) related to memes of coconut tree and the VP outnumbered their male counterparts. This gender division reflected a distinct departure from the conventional male dominance over political discourses (e.g., Bode, 2017; Hut et al., 2023).

According to the data provided by TikTok Creative Center, #KamalaHarris became the #1 most trending hashtag on TikTok on July 24, 2024 and garnered an overall 147 million views with over half of the audience from the age group of 18 -24.

kamalaharris2024

♡ Apparel & Accessories   ⬭ Copy Link

Insights   Last 7 days ⌄   United States ⌄

| Posts		Views	
5K	**12K**	**42M**	**147M**
Last 7 days, United States	Overall	Last 7 days, United States	Overall

This audience landscape on TikTok shows that embracing pop meme culture has enabled Harris to connect with traditionally difficult-to-reach younger demographics, a political audience relevant to Harris' campaign. Specifically, Joe Biden's candidacy in 2024 was failing to inspire significant enthusiasm from younger voters with 62% having a negative opinion of Biden

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Audience insights ⓘ

Age range ⓘ

20%
25-34

22%
35+

58%
18-24
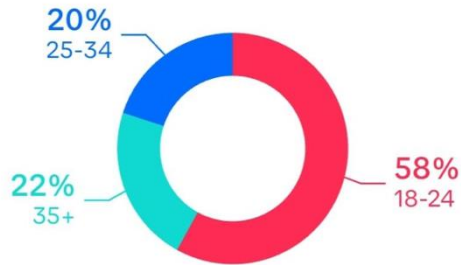
(Montanaro, 2024). While the persuasiveness of memetic content including things as absurd as a superhero Italian plumber racing game has not been established, the content is reaching precisely the demographic that had concerns about the Biden campaign, with over half of viewers under the age of 24.

Coconut-Themed Memes Won the Hearts and Mind of Young Voters

"When you just fall out of a coconut tree."

The emergence of Kamala Harris as a presumptive Democratic nominee for the 2024 presidential election has instantly sparked a viral trend of coconut-themed memes and emojis among young voters on social media. To electrify these conventionally hard-to-access demographics, Harris' campaign embraced the Gen Z-craved meme culture and quickly transformed their digital platforms (e.g., X, Web site, etc.) to be Gen Z friendly, such as rebranding using green shade, comic-style block letters, adopting meme-inspired slogans, and referencing to brat summer to provide a fresh, modern look. These digital engagement strategies unsurprisingly did not go unnoticed by young voters who responded feverishly to create, circulate, and comment on various memes, emojis, and short mashups mixed with trendy songs (e.g., Taylor Swift's shake it off) associating the VP with coconut-themed subjects. Gen Z became *coconuts* for Harris. These memes and emojis have become a distinct symbol of support and admiration for Harris among younger generations. Social media users found that such a

funny, quirky association of the VP with coconut showcased her unique persona and resonated with diverse audiences.

It is remarkable to note that the VP's rise as a presumptive presidential nominee sparked a surge in meme culture (e.g., the coconut tree reference), a social media cultural staple among the younger demographics. Harris originally used coconut trees to humorously question societal norms. The symbolic meaning of being rebellious and self-deprecative style of coconut tree resonated well with younger voters' (e.g., Gen Z) quirky and anti-convention spirit (Roytburg, 2024). For example, supporters of the VP proclaimed their unwavering love for her in posts such as "You thank you just fell out of a coconut tree? You didn't, we are ride or die with Kamala Harris as the nominee 🥥 🌴 #KamalaHarris," "next American anthem!!! Coconut Tree…#MALA #KamalaHarris," or "It's a brat summer. We exist in the context of all that came before us. We didn't just fall out of a coconut tree. And we're ready to elect @KamalaHarris!" Indicated from the social discussions collected in this study, the "coconut tree" memes and reference surrounding Kamala Harris has evolved into a defining attribute of her presence on social media. The wide adoption of these memes on social media manifests the intersection of identity, humor, and digital culture in shaping contemporary political discourse on social media. such coconut-themed memes not only attracted the attention of young voters on social media but also has contributed to Harris' rising popularity and Gen Z and Gen Alpha demographics.

"Coconut Tree" Memes and Mario Kart Created A Firestorm on TikTok

A key dimension of internet content that reaches virality status is the concept of invitational remix. The ability of users to act as creators by combining disparate content often

defines the extent to which viral content attains a level of cultural currency. This is especially

true in spaces like TikTok and in how Gen Z's orientation to incongruous meme creation is

applied to their presentation of politics (Zeng & Abidin, 2021).

In the case of the emergent "coconut meme" in relation to Kamala Harris, a range of

disparate presentations have been juxtaposed with niche music, obscure films, and old television

programs. This has been important to drive traction in relation to the meme on TikTok, which

has resulted in Harris' content dominating the trending charts on TikTok including holding the

top two trending spots and netting a 4900% increase interest (#kamalaharris Trending Hashtag

on TikTok, see #kamalaharris analytics, 2024).

Interest over time ⓘ
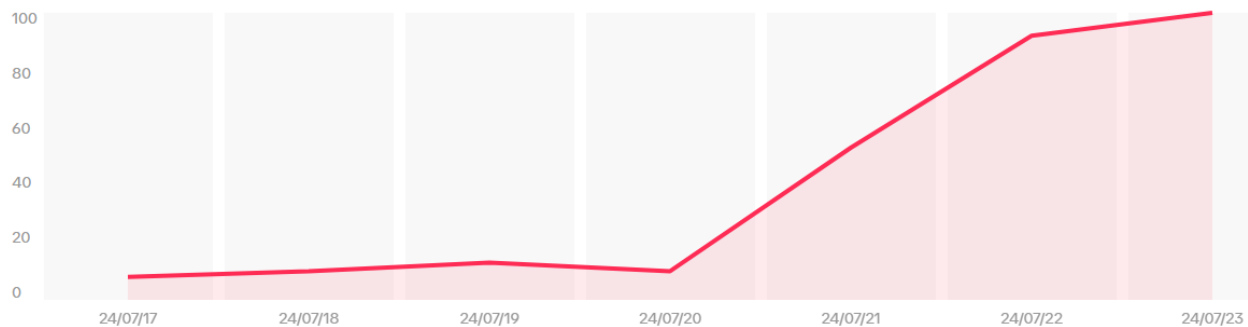
This increase has resulted in a staggering **574 million** views in an unprecedentedly short period

of time in the U.S. An example of a driver of this interest is an edit done on the "coconut meme"

that places Harris' words over the theme song for the Mario Kart racecourse "Coconut Mall."

Coconut Mall is a notorious track in the Mario Kart series as the music has become a variation of

the 2008 Rick Roll meme (VanHooker, 2020) with links appearing online that take unsuspecting

viewers to a non sequitur presentation of Coconut Mall music (Coconut Malled, 2021). Given

the virality of the "coconut tree meme" and general interest in Kamala Harris content, the synergy between these themes immediately became apparent. With that in mind, TikTok creator ranvision_official created a mashup of Harris and the infamous music from Mario Kart on July 23, 2024. The video rapidly amassed 880,000 views making it among the fastest rising mashups of any "coconut tree" memetic content on TikTok (ranvision_official, 2024). Reposts and additional remixes of the content have continued on the platform with the Mario Kart juxtaposition on the "coconut meme" continuing to drive other creative presentations of Harris' statement.

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The positive sentiment toward "coconut mall" is not confined to TikTok. On X (formerly

Twitter), positive sentiment about the Mario Kart track "Coconut Mall" suddenly spiked as

related memes and edits made their way beyond TikTok. This increase appears to be ongoing

since the initial posting of ranvision_official's remix.
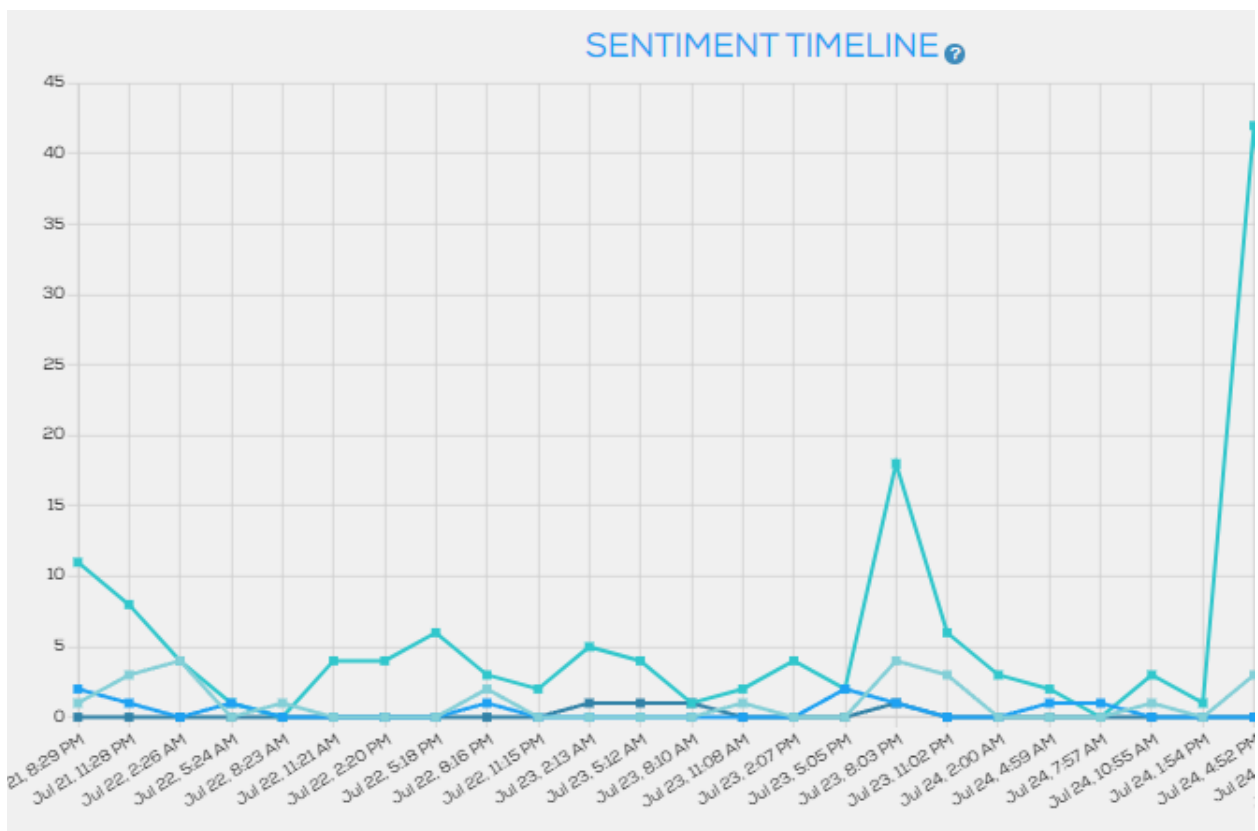
Internet search behavior has been found to correlate to broader online and social media

activity (Arora et al., 2019; Nghiem et al., 2016; Silva et al., 2019). In this case, online search

activity related to "Coconut Mall" appears to have similarly increased in relation to the arrival of

the mixes between Harris and the Mario Kart track.

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GOOGLE SEARCH ACTIVITY: Coconut Mall (United States)
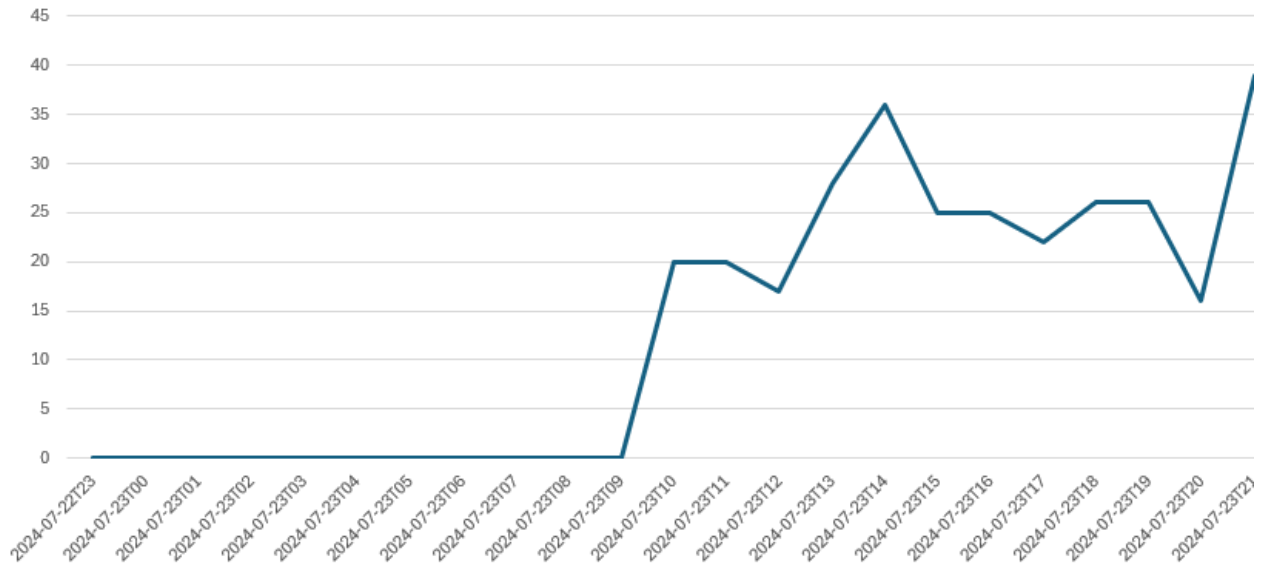
There are numerous other examples of such playful and creative collages between Harris' brief aside about "falling out of the coconut tree" and a range of popular culture issues. The use of Mario Kart in this context appears to have resulted in a combination that those online (particularly younger audiences) have found especially compelling.

Conclusion

The coconut tree memes and remixes surrounding Kamala Harris have evolved into a cultural phenomenon, with young voters and online communities embracing it through various creative edits and interpretations. Such funny, creative content has not only appeared to be entertaining but also sparked active discussions about Harris and her political image on social media. Impressively, the coconut-themed memes featuring the Vice President have transcended conventional political discourses, resonating with diverse audiences. The viral adoption of these memes and online trends seemed to have played a pivotal role in shaping the narratives around

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the Vice President. The intersection of pop culture and political messaging appeared to have

helped Harris reach younger demographics, as indicated by the remarkable levels of energy and

enthusiasm demonstrated by young voters across social media platforms. Nevertheless, the

political implications of a memetic launch to a presidential campaign remain opaque. However,

the youth interest in a major political event could potentially throw a "blue shell" at assumptions

that seemed fixed just a few weeks ago.

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