

YOUTH DIGITAL ATTITUDE AND ENGAGEMENT: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE U.S. AND LEBANON (2022-2025)

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Abstract. *This study explores the impact of presidential mandates on youth attitudes towards governance and online civic engagement in the United States and Lebanon—two democracies facing different challenges. The Israeli-Hezbollah war in 2024, alongside Lebanon’s presidential vacancy from October 2022 to January 2025, deepened the institutional gridlock and public distrust. The election of former Chief of Army General Joseph Aoun marked a turning point for narratives of sovereignty and youth responsibility in the public sphere. In contrast, Donald Trump’s 2025 reelection as US president reignited the “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) agenda, intensifying polarization and altering the digital civic sphere. The main objective of our study is to gauge the impact on young people’s views toward governance and their involvement in online civic speech in both countries.*

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, with a cross-national survey to measure youth trust and an archival analysis of youth-initiated digital campaigns on Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook. It investigates the correlation between these mandates and shifting youth attitudes within both countries’ contexts of institutional crisis. By comparing a case of governance breakdown and rebirth with one of democratic erosion and populist revival, this research highlights the multifaceted relationship between presidential leadership, youth resilience, and how digital platforms foster civic engagement during upheaval.

Keywords: *Presidential mandates, digital platforms, youth, governance, civic engagement.*

Introduction. Topic and Context

The intersection between presidential leadership, youth political attitudes, and civic engagement represents one of the defining challenges of democratic life in the twenty-first century. Political authority is no longer confined to traditional institutions such as parliaments or state bureaucracies, nor is presidential legitimacy built exclusively through speeches, rallies, and televised appearances. Instead, presidents increas-

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ingly rely on digital platforms to construct their image, frame their agendas, and directly communicate with citizens. Social media, streaming platforms, and online news outlets have blurred the line between official political discourse and everyday digital interaction, creating a communicative environment where political authority is both amplified and contested in real time.

This transformation is especially visible in the context of presidential mandates. A presidential term is not only a constitutional mandate but also a symbolic period during which narratives of governance, national identity, and public legitimacy are articulated. When filtered through digital platforms, these narratives reach youth audiences who are both active consumers and producers of political content. Young citizens interpret presidential discourse, respond with their own digital practices, and reshape civic debates through memes, campaigns, and viral commentary. In this sense, the study of presidential mandates today is inseparable from the study of digital culture, because it is in the online sphere that many of the struggles for legitimacy, influence, and civic voice are played out.

The cases of Lebanon and the United States provide particularly illuminating grounds for such an inquiry. Both countries identify as democracies but face radically different challenges. Lebanon has endured decades of political instability marked by sectarian power-sharing, foreign interventions, and recurrent institutional breakdowns. The prolonged presidential vacancy between October 2022 and January 2025 exemplified the fragility of the state and the deep distrust among citizens, particularly the youth, toward governing institutions. The election of General Joseph Aoun (former Chief of Army) to the presidency in 2025 was therefore more than a routine transfer of power: it represented a turning point, a moment of potential renewal and redefinition of sovereignty. His mandate was framed as a test of whether the state could rebuild trust and reassert authority in the aftermath of conflict and paralysis.

The United States, by contrast, represents an established democracy with robust institutions but faces a different type of crisis: democratic erosion fueled by populist polarization. Donald Trump's return to power in 2025 symbolized the resurgence of the "Make America Great Again" movement, reigniting debates about national identity, governance, and the limits of presidential power. His communicative style—direct, confrontational, and reliant on social media—had already redefined the relationship between political leaders and their publics during his earlier presidency. His reelection raised urgent questions about the resilience of democratic norms, the role of presidential rhetoric in deepening polarization, and the capacity of digital platforms to mediate or exacerbate divisions among youth.

Together, these two cases illustrate contrasting yet connected dynamics: one country attempting to emerge from institutional breakdown through a narrative of renewal, and another experiencing intensified polarization through populist revival. Both rely heavily on presidential discourse mediated through digital platforms and AI tools. Both directly affect how young people interpret governance, trust institutions, and engage in civic practices. It is within this complex and turbulent context that this study situates itself.

1.2. Focus and Relevance of the Study

The focus of this study is on how presidential mandates influence the perceptions and practices of youth civic engagement online. The emphasis on youth is not incidental.

In both Lebanon and the United States, younger generations represent a decisive force in the political landscape. They are digital natives, immersed in environments where political communication, entertainment, and social interaction are interwoven. Unlike older generations, their primary encounter with presidential authority often takes place not through television or newspapers but through social media feeds, online videos, and interactive campaigns. This makes them a crucial audience but also a powerful agent of reinterpretation and resistance.

In Lebanon, youth activism has long been a driver of political change. The 2015 “You Stink” movement, the 2019 uprisings, and the protests following the Beirut port explosion in 2020 were spearheaded largely by young people using digital tools to organize, communicate, and express dissent. Their distrust of political elites has been matched by a willingness to experiment with new forms of civic engagement, from online petitions to digitally coordinated street protests. In this context, Joseph Aoun’s election created a unique moment in which youth expectations for reform collided with the realities of entrenched governance structures. Understanding how his presidential mandate is perceived online is therefore key to assessing the potential for institutional renewal.

In the United States, youth engagement has taken different but equally significant forms. Young Americans are among the most active social media users, and their political engagement often manifests through digital activism, humor, and creative forms of expression. The Trump presidency, both past and present, has been a catalyst for youth participation online, sparking everything from nationwide campaigns like the Women’s March to viral TikTok movements aimed at disrupting Trump rallies. His populist style has provoked strong reactions, polarizing youth between enthusiastic supporters and vehement critics. Examining how his renewed mandate is interpreted within youth digital culture sheds light on the broader transformations of civic discourse in a highly polarized democracy.

The relevance of this study therefore extends beyond the two national cases. By comparing Lebanon and the United States, the research highlights how similar communication tools—tweets, videos, online posts—can serve very different purposes depending on the institutional context. In Lebanon, they may be used to project stability and sovereignty in a fragile state. In the United States, they may be wielded to disrupt, polarize, and energize a populist base. In both cases, youth responses are crucial indicators of whether presidential communication fosters trust, participation, and civic resilience, or whether it deepens cynicism, division, and disengagement.

This comparative approach also addresses broader questions about the role of digital platforms in contemporary governance. Social media are not neutral channels; they are structured by algorithms that shape visibility, amplify certain voices, and suppress others. By studying how youth engage with presidential discourse within these algorithmic environments, the research sheds light on the intersection between technology, politics, and citizenship.

1.3. Statement, Central Questions, Hypotheses

The central statement of this research is that presidential mandates, when communicated through digital platforms and AI tools, exert a significant influence on youth attitudes toward governance and their practices of civic engagement.

From this statement arises the central research question: How do the presidential mandates of Donald Trump in the United States and Joseph Aoun in Lebanon shape youth attitudes toward governance and online civic engagement?

To answer this question, the study pursues three sub-questions. First, how do the two presidents use social media platforms such as X and YouTube to construct narratives of legitimacy, governance, and leadership? Second, how do young citizens in the United States and Lebanon respond to these presidential narratives in their online practices, including comments, campaigns, and forms of digital activism? Third, what differences and similarities emerge between a polarized established democracy and a fragile state with respect to the interaction between presidential communication and youth engagement?

Three hypotheses guide the investigation. The first hypothesis is that presidential communication affects youth trust in governance differently depending on institutional context, with Aoun's rhetoric fostering cautious optimism in Lebanon and Trump's rhetoric deepening polarization in the United States. The second hypothesis is that the communicative style of each president—populist and confrontational in Trump's case, institutional and sovereignty-centered in Aoun's case—shapes the forms of youth engagement online, ranging from mobilization to satire. The third hypothesis is that despite national differences, digital platforms enable transnational patterns of reinterpretation and resistance, suggesting that online civic engagement among youth is increasingly globalized.

1.4. Structure Overview

In light of the contemporary significance of presidential mandates and youth digital engagement, this study positions itself within a growing body of literature on political communication, democratic resilience, and civic participation online. It acknowledges that the legitimacy of presidential leadership in the twenty-first century depends not only on institutions but also on visible digital interactions. By focusing on the United States and Lebanon, the research compares two contrasting democratic contexts: one facing institutional fragility, the other grappling with populist disruption and polarization.

The next chapter will review the relevant literature, tracing the evolution of political marketing, presidential communication strategies, and digital civic engagement as a field of inquiry. This review will contextualize the study and highlight gaps, particularly the lack of comparative research on the influence of presidential mandates on youth perceptions in fragile and established democracies.

Following the literature review, the dissertation presents the theoretical framework drawing on agenda-setting theory, selective filtering, and interactive media engagement to analyze how presidential discourse is constructed and received online. The methodological framework will then outline the comparative case study design, data sources, and analytical strategies employed to investigate the research questions.

Subsequent chapters present findings on the communication styles of Trump and Aoun, youth responses, and the implications for governance and civic participation. The final chapter will synthesize these findings, discuss implications, and suggest avenues for further research on the evolving relationship between leadership, youth, and digital democracy.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Marketing in the Political Sphere*

The intellectual foundations of applying marketing to the public and political spheres can be traced to Kotler and Levy's "*Broadening the Concept of Marketing*" (1969). This landmark article argued that marketing should not be confined to private enterprises but could also be applied to individuals, organizations, and ideas. Kotler (1972, 1975) expanded this view by suggesting that public institutions, much like private companies, must be understood through the lens of customers and the services they provide. This opened the door for applying marketing and communication strategies to government, politics, and presidential leadership. During the 1980s, scholars such as Laufer and Paradeise (1982) began to articulate the concept of *public marketing*, which included the communication practices of public administration and politics. This period saw the first recognition that governments needed to actively manage their legitimacy through communication. Olivier-Yaniv (1997) further emphasized the role of strategic communication in constructing institutional images, which were seen as vital for the survival of public organizations, including governments. In parallel, political communication research, especially in the U.S., highlighted the increasing mediatization of politics. Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) pointed to the growing influence of television and mass media, noting how presidents adapted their communication styles to meet the logic of media coverage. The 2000s marked the emergence of digital communication and e-governance as significant research areas. Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) examined how online tools facilitated citizen engagement and allowed governments to personalize communication. Lamarche (2000) argued that adapting marketing strategies to the public sector was central to restoring legitimacy, as institutions had to balance individual demands with the collective good. At a broader level, Castells (2007) analyzed how *networked communication* reshaped power structures, with media visibility becoming increasingly necessary for political legitimacy. This perspective foreshadowed the centrality of digital platforms in presidential mandates. The 2010s introduced a dramatic shift with the rise of social media as a dominant arena for political communication. Chadwick (2013) described this as a *hybrid media system*, where traditional and digital media interact to shape political discourse. Enli (2017) noted how leaders strategically used social media to project authenticity and immediacy, aligning with trends in political personalization.

Donald Trump's presidency (2016–2020) epitomized this transformation. Ott (2017) characterized Trump's Twitter use as a form of "digital spectacle," allowing him to bypass traditional gatekeepers and directly engage with the public. Kreiss and McGregor (2018) further demonstrated how Trump's campaign strategically exploited social media platforms' algorithms and advertising systems to maintain political influence. In Lebanon, the election of Joseph Aoun as president in 2025 reflects a new moment for political communication in a region marked by complex sociopolitical dynamics. While Lebanon's media environment is more constrained than that of the U.S., regional scholarship (Kraidy, 2016; Dajani, 2019) shows that Arab leaders have increasingly relied on digital platforms to reinforce authority and manage legitimacy. Aoun's mandate illustrates how Middle Eastern presidencies adopt digital tools not only to communicate with citizens but also to maintain credibility in times of political and economic instabil-

ity. More recent studies have focused on nation branding, trust, and digital legitimacy in governance. Martin and Tellier (2022) argue that public marketing now functions both as a managerial practice and as a communicative tool for reinforcing institutional trust. The COVID-19 crisis accelerated this trend globally, with Mergel (2021) and Stier et al. (2020) showing that leaders' digital presence became central to their evaluation by citizens. In this context, presidential mandates are increasingly defined by their ability to manage communication in a digital ecosystem. For Trump, this meant deploying populist and provocative messaging to dominate the media agenda. For Joseph Aoun, the challenge lies in leveraging digital communication to project stability, transparency, and institutional renewal in a fragile political landscape.

Despite significant progress in understanding public and political marketing, comparative studies across political systems remain limited. The juxtaposition of Trump's U.S. presidency and Aoun's Lebanese presidency offers a unique opportunity to analyze how institutional context, media freedom, and citizen expectations shape leaders' use of communication and social media. Future research could deepen empirical insights into how these contrasting strategies impact legitimacy, trust, and political branding across different governance models.

2.2. E-governance at the State Level

E-governance emerged from administrative reform and ICT diffusion (ICTs). Early definitional work positioned ICTs as catalysts for redesigning services and state–citizen relations. UNDESA's work in the early 2000s outlined digital interactions—government–government, government–business, and government–citizen—framing e-government as a comprehensive ecosystem rather than a set of isolated tools.

Around the same time, Brown conceptualized e-government as the migration of core governmental activities online for exchange, transactions, and services. These perspectives collectively pushed the field beyond technology adoption toward institutional change, linking ICTs to democratic values such as responsiveness and accountability. Meijer, Curtin, and Hillebrandt further emphasized that genuine e-governance must expand citizen access to information and influence over decision processes, placing transparency and participation at the heart of digital reform.

The Web 1.0 era of the mid-1990s to mid-2000s focused on digitization and access. With the Web's advent in 1994, public authorities launched portals for forms, regulations, and basic transactions. Research from this period characterizes these portals as predominantly unidirectional. They improved convenience and efficiency but offered few opportunities for interaction, deliberation, or co-creation. The emphasis was on making government legible on the web rather than making it dialogic. Studies in this phase highlighted the limits of static sites, noting that absent feedback limited potential trust and legitimacy gains.

The transition to Web 2.0 in the mid-2000s marked a decisive turn toward interactivity, user-generated content, and networked collaboration. O'Reilly's account of Web 2.0 emphasized platform logics emphasizing participation, remix, and iteration. Public administration scholarship quickly translated these logics to governance. Social platforms, blogs, wikis, and interactive portals enabled two-way exchange, crowdsourcing, and co-production. Mergel's typology became influential in clarifying practice: representation

foregrounded one-to-many messaging for visibility; engagement emphasized reciprocal communication and problem-solving; networking focused on listening, relationship-building, and reaching hard-to-access constituencies. In this period, e-governance matured from an online brochure model to a suite of practices that integrated feedback loops and public voice into policy communication and service design.

As digital channels stabilized, open government gained prominence as an overarching paradigm. The literature began to link information availability, interaction quality, and service performance to citizen trust. Studies connecting transparency to trust argued that data must be usable: intelligible formats, clear provenance, and relevance to citizens' concerns were shown to shape perceptions of governmental honesty and accountability. Research on participatory designs suggested that reciprocal exchanges and visible follow-through strengthen perceptions of responsiveness and competence. Service-centric studies, especially during crisis periods, showed how reliable, easy, and timely services build satisfaction and institutional confidence. At the same time, findings remained mixed. Some scholars presented social media as a vehicle for rebuilding trust and social capital, while others underscored the fragility and multidimensionality of trust, pointing to the roles of individual risk perceptions, platform attributes, and government behavior. There is also evidence that, for certain groups, heavy online exposure can decrease feelings of security and dampen trust, underscoring that e-governance effects are contingent rather than automatic.

The rise of social media in the 2010s reconfigured executive communication and the dynamics of presidential mandates. Chadwick's hybrid media system captures how presidential messaging circulates across broadcast, digital, and platform channels, each shaping agenda-setting. Scholarship on political personalization shows that leader-level content often leverages immediacy, intimacy, and informal tone to cultivate identification and attention, strategies that have become integral to mandate narratives, particularly in moments of crisis. Direct platform use enables disintermediation from traditional gatekeepers, creating opportunities for speed and reach but also risks connected to polarization, misinformation, and the erosion of shared informational baselines. Work from the pandemic era highlighted that citizens increasingly evaluate executive leadership on clarity, timeliness, and evidence-based guidance delivered across web, mobile, and social channels, with analytics and feedback loops shaping message targeting and iterative communication.

Recent contributions translate these insights into capabilities that characterize effective presidential e-governance. Service-centric design integrates government-to-citizen transactions with transparent status updates and plain-language guidance. Open-by-default practices couple data publication with explanations of decisions and trade-offs. Authentic engagement relies on scheduled briefings, structured Q&A, and mechanisms that document what input changed policy. Crisis-ready communication coordinates web, SMS, and social messaging, provides rumor-control resources, and ensures multilingual, accessible formats. Trust and risk governance incorporate privacy-by-design, content provenance, and clear moderation norms that counter harassment and misinformation while protecting legitimate dissent. Inclusion strategies address the digital divide through mobile-first interfaces, offline alternatives, and targeted outreach to underserved

groups. These capabilities are increasingly treated not as optional enhancements but as constitutive features of contemporary executive leadership.

Persistent challenges run through the literature. The “trust paradox” notes that more data does not guarantee more trust; information can overwhelm, confuse, or be perceived as strategic spin if not curated and contextualized. Measurement remains difficult, as many studies rely on cross-sectional surveys rather than behavioral or longitudinal evidence, particularly outside OECD contexts. Platform dependency raises questions about archival integrity, algorithmic opacity, and equitable reach, all of which bear directly on accountability in presidential communication. Finally, there is a shortage of systematic comparative research linking different media regimes and institutional settings to outcomes such as public approval, policy support, and durable legitimacy across presidential terms.

Synthesizing four decades of work, e-governance has evolved from digitized information in the Web 1.0 period to interactive, data-rich, and participatory ecosystems in the Web 2.0 era and beyond. At the presidential level, this evolution recasts communication as governance infrastructure shaping agenda-setting, legitimacy, and crisis management. The consensus is conditional: e-governance strengthens trust when transparency, participation, and services are strong. Mixed findings show that digital government is not a panacea; the effects on democratic legitimacy depend on design quality, institutional context, and measurable performance over time.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study draws upon three key perspectives in media and communication research, carefully chosen for their capacity to illuminate the mechanisms through which citizens form perceptions of presidential leadership in the digital era. The three theories are: the Agenda-Setting Theory developed by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, the Selective Filtering Theory introduced by Elihu Katz in the mid-twentieth century, and Sundar’s Interactive Media Engagement Theory (2008). Together, these frameworks provide a robust conceptual foundation for understanding the relationship between presidential communication, media systems, and citizen trust in the age of social media. They allow us to capture both the top-down processes of agenda construction and the bottom-up dynamics of selective reception and interactive participation that define the contemporary digital environment.

The Agenda-Setting Theory remains one of the most influential contributions to communication research. Formulated by McCombs and Shaw in their seminal 1972 study on the U.S. presidential election, it originally emphasized how mass media shape public priorities by directing attention to certain issues over others. Over the decades, the theory evolved alongside changes in the media environment. In the 1980s and 1990s, its scope widened to include television and print, with scholars such as Altheide and Snow exploring how different media ecosystems reinforced particular frames of attention. With the rise of the Internet and, later, social media, scholars like Hermida and Murthy incorporated new dimensions such as virality, algorithmic curation, and the participatory role of users. More recent scholarship, including the work of Papacharissi, Kreiss, and Benkler, demonstrates that agenda-setting in the digital era is not solely the result of traditional media elites but rather emerges from a complex interplay of platforms,

algorithms, and user activity. Applied to presidential leadership, this theory suggests that presidents not only rely on media to highlight their priorities but also face the challenge of competing with decentralized³³ sources of agenda influence. The viral amplification of particular posts or speeches, for instance, can propel issues into prominence overnight, reshaping public perceptions of presidential priorities and legitimacy.

Selective Filtering Theory helps explain how individuals engage with those issues. Developed by Katz during the 1950s and 1960s, the theory emphasizes that media audiences are not passive but instead selectively expose themselves to information that aligns with their existing beliefs and predispositions. Originally applied to radio listening and early television habits, the theory has gained renewed relevance in the fragmented and personalized media landscape of the twenty-first century. On platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, users are not only exposed to presidential communication but also filter that content through their political preferences, prior experiences, and ideological orientations. The filtering process is further reinforced by algorithmic recommendation systems that prioritize content congruent with past behaviors. In the context of presidential communication, this means that citizens' perceptions of the president are rarely shaped by unmediated exposure to official content. Instead, they are refracted through selective engagement, echo chambers, and partisan communities that reinforce supportive interpretations or amplify distrust. Applying Selective Filtering to presidential leadership in Lebanon or the United States thus provides insight into how citizens' political identities mediate their responses to presidential messages and shape broader narratives of trust and legitimacy.

Complementing these perspectives, Sundar's Interactive Media Engagement Theory offers a more contemporary lens for understanding how digital interaction itself reshapes perceptions of authority. Developed in 2008, this theory stresses that communication in digital environments is not defined solely by exposure but by active engagement—liking, commenting, sharing, and remixing content. These interactive behaviors transform media consumption into a participatory process in which users contribute to the meaning-making of political communication. For presidents, this means that legitimacy and trust are not only projected through official statements but also co-constructed in digital dialogues with citizens. The volume and tone of comments, the circulation of presidential posts across networks, and the affective reactions of users all feed into the broader image of the presidency. Engagement thus becomes both a metric of visibility and a substantive component of political legitimacy. In societies facing polarization, this engagement may deepen divides by amplifying critical voices, while in other contexts it may foster greater transparency and responsiveness if coupled with authentic dialogue.

By focusing on these perspectives, the framework accounts for both structural and individual dimensions of perception, offering a comprehensive analytical tool to understand how presidential communication strategies succeed or fail in contemporary digital ecosystems.

³³ In both the U.S. and Lebanese contexts, this includes various media outlets that are directly linked to political parties, which act as influential, non-neutral actors in the agenda-setting process.

Chapter Three: Methodological Framework

This research methodological framework is designed to examine how the two presidents deploy digital platforms to shape narratives of governance and how young citizens respond to those narratives through online civic engagement. By focusing on presidential communication across platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube, as well as on the digital reactions of audiences, the study adopts a qualitative, comparative, and multi-layered methodological approach.

The aim is not to test universal theories of digital communication but rather to situate presidential mandates within their specific institutional and cultural environments while drawing broader insights about youth attitudes toward governance.

Research Design

The study adopts a comparative case study methodology. The case of Joseph Aoun represents a moment of institutional renewal in Lebanon, following years of vacancy in the presidency and deepened distrust in governance during the 2024 Israeli–Hezbollah war. His digital communication, particularly around themes of sovereignty and regional diplomacy, offers insight into how leaders in fragile states deploy digital platforms to restore legitimacy. In contrast, Donald Trump’s 2025 reelection marks a continuation of populist disruption. His digital presence, grounded in direct and often polarizing communication, provides a counterpoint for examining how presidents in polarized democracies leverage platforms to reinforce their political agendas.

Comparing these two presidents allows the study to highlight how similar tools, such as social media posts, video addresses, and online statements, function differently depending on political culture, institutional context, and audience expectations.

Data Collection

Archival sources form the primary data of the study. These include the first presidential posts on X, such as Trump’s 2025 posts promoting the MAGA agenda and Joseph Aoun’s official presidency posts highlighting governance priorities and diplomatic encounters. Examples include a random post by each president in spring 2025, which illustrates their rhetorical style, and posts covering Arab diplomatic visits, which reveal how each leader frames international relations. Second, YouTube videos, both long-form and short clips using AI tools from diverse accounts, which provide insights into visual rhetoric, tone, and performative style. Third, youth audience interactions, including comments, likes, retweets, posts and other forms of engagement, which are treated as secondary data offering evidence of reception and sentiment.

All data is archived systematically, with screenshots and metadata such as date, platform, and engagement metrics preserved to allow for reproducibility. Only public materials are used, in accordance with ethical standards for digital research.

The temporal scope of the study is from January to September 2025. This period coincides with the first months of Joseph Aoun’s presidency and Donald Trump’s second term, capturing the initial phase of presidential mandates when leaders attempt to set agendas and youth reactions are most likely to crystallize.

Analytical Tools

The first layer of analysis is qualitative content analysis of presidential posts and videos. Each artifact is coded according to themes such as governance, sovereignty,

nationalism, reform, populism, diplomacy, and crisis management. Tone is identified as conciliatory, assertive, polarizing, or institutional. Building on this, critical discourse analysis is employed to uncover the deeper ideological underpinnings of presidential rhetoric. This approach highlights how language constructs authority, shapes narratives of legitimacy, and positions youth as either active participants in governance or passive recipients of leadership.

The second layer involves systematic comparison between the two presidents. This comparison is not limited to textual content but also includes multimodal features such as video aesthetics (camera angle, background symbols, delivery style) and digital affordances (hashtags, links, tagging). The comparative dimension highlights differences in communication culture: Trump's reliance on provocative slogans and emotional appeals versus Aoun's emphasis on institutional recovery and diplomacy.

The third layer focuses on audience reactions. Engagement metrics such as likes, retweets, shares, and views provide quantitative indicators of resonance. Beyond this, sentiment analysis of user comments identifies whether responses are supportive, critical, or ambivalent. Comparing audience responses to similar types of posts, such as those about diplomatic visits, makes it possible to assess whether Aoun's communication fosters unity or skepticism and whether Trump's rhetoric reinforces polarization among youth audiences.

The final layer is digital ethnography, which traces how young people appropriate, remix, or resist presidential communication. Hashtags, memes, and youth-led threads on platforms like TikTok or Instagram are examined for evidence of civic engagement. This layer shifts the focus from presidential output to youth input, revealing how mandates are refracted in the digital public sphere.

Methodological Rational and Limitations

The multi-layered approach is chosen for three main reasons. First, presidential communication is multimodal, combining text, visuals, performance, and digital interactivity. A single method would not capture this complexity. Second, the comparative design acknowledges that presidential communication is context-dependent. Third, by focusing on both top-down communication (presidential messages) and bottom-up reception (youth engagement and digital campaigns), the framework captures the relational nature of digital politics. Presidents no longer speak to a silent public but engage in an ongoing dialogue where youth actively reinterpret, contest, or amplify messages.

The framework faces several limitations that must be acknowledged. One of the most significant is platform bias. By relying primarily on X and YouTube, the study privileges platforms that are highly visible but excludes more private or ephemeral forms of communication, such as WhatsApp groups or Snapchat stories, where young people often engage politically. These spaces may contain meaningful interactions that remain beyond the scope of this research.

Another limitation lies in the interpretation of engagement metrics. Quantitative indicators such as likes, retweets, or shares capture visibility but do not necessarily reflect the depth of conviction or the quality of civic engagement. A viral post can generate considerable attention while failing to foster genuine participation or meaningful dialogue among youth.

Comparability across cases also presents challenges. The cultural, linguistic, and institutional differences between Lebanon and the United States complicate direct comparison. Finally, archival fragility poses an additional difficulty. Social media platforms are unstable repositories; they frequently delete, suspend, or alter content. This makes long-term preservation of presidential posts and audience reactions essential but also challenging, as important material could disappear unexpectedly.

Despite these constraints, the triangulation of multiple methods provides a way to strengthen validity. By combining content and discourse analysis, audience reception studies, and digital ethnography, the research ensures that no single limitation undermines the findings. This layered approach allows for a more comprehensive and reliable examination of how presidential mandates shape youth attitudes toward governance and civic engagement in two very different political contexts.

Conclusion

The ethical rationale is equally important to the conclusion of the methodology. Only public data is used, personal identifiers are anonymized, and interpretations are contextualized to avoid inflaming political divisions. Both US and Lebanese cases demand particular caution, given the sensitivity of recent context.

Chapter Four: Results And Discussion

The findings of this study support the initial hypothesis and provide a clear understanding of how presidential communication strategies on digital platforms influence youth engagement, trust, and civic engagement. The comparative analysis between Donald Trump and Joseph Aoun reveals not only differences in style and impact but also underlying patterns that help explain how young people interact with political leaders in the digital age.

The first hypothesis suggested that presidential communication affects youth trust in governance differently depending on the institutional context. This is clearly supported by the results. In Lebanon, President Aoun's official, formal, and institutionally focused communication generated limited communication and negative reactions. Young people expressed skepticism, frustration, and a sense of detachment. This aligns with the hypothesis that Aoun's rhetoric would foster cautious optimism at best, but more often it reinforced existing distrust toward state institutions. The low levels of interaction and critical comments indicate that formal communication from the presidency fails to resonate with Lebanese youth. These findings align with Norri's (2011) concept of a "democratic deficit," where formal institutions fail to bridge the gap with the citizens, and with Stroker, who worked on how political disenchantment is often a response to a perceived disconnect from traditional, hierarchical governance. Furthermore, the Lebanese case resonates with what Dahlgren (2009) described as a block on "civic culture," where institutional communication does not facilitate the cultural practices necessary for engagement. The deep-seated skepticism aligns with Muxel's (2010) research on young people's "distanced proximity" to politics in contexts of institutional fragility.

In contrast, Donald Trump's highly personal, emotional, and provocative style led to huge participation and both positive and negative reactions. His ability to make viral content and polarizing debates confirms the hypothesis that his communication deep-

ens polarization in the United States. While his supporters expressed strong loyalty and admiration, critics reacted with equal intensity. This division reflects a broader trend in which personalized populist communication strengthens group loyalty but also amplifies political divisions. This dynamic is explained by Bennett and Livingston's theory of "institutional disinformation," where affective polarization becomes a key outcome of personalized media strategies. The intensification of in-group/out-group identities echoes Mason's (2018) work on how political identity becomes "sorted" and fused with resentment. The emotional resonance of Trump's communication aligns with Wahl Jorgensen's (2019) analysis of the center of role of emotions particularly anger and affection, in mediatized politics. Finally, the creation of a loyal community through personalized address confirms the mechanisms of "connected nationalism" as described by Papacharisi (2015).

The second hypothesis is that the communicative style of each president shapes the forms of youth engagement online. Again, the results provide evidence. Trump's informal, meme-friendly, and emotional approach encouraged high levels of interaction, including parody and passionate comments. Youth did not just consume his content, but they remixed it, mocked it and used it for broader online debates. This reflects a culture of active participation where young people engage through humor, criticism, and creative reactions. This type of engagement is an example of what Jenkins et al. (2016) term "participatory culture," where audiences actively shape media flow. The remixing and parody align with Milner's (2016) concept of "networked ludic publics," where political discourse is advanced through play and humor. The creative reappropriation of political messages is a fundamental principle of "convergence culture" (Jenkins, 2006), and the emotional, informal style effectively lowers the barriers to entry for this kind of participation, a point emphasized by Theocharis (2015) in his study of "personalized expressive actions" as low-threshold political engagement.

On the other hand, Aoun's institutional tone led to more limited and serious forms of engagement. When Lebanese people did interact, it was often through critical comments or, as seen in the AI-generated video for example, attempts to simulate a more responsive leadership. However, these efforts did not achieve the same viral reach as in the U.S. This suggests that when presidential communication is overly formal and distant, it discourages interaction and limits the ways in which young people can creatively engage with politics. This constrained engagement supports Coleman's (2005) argument that traditional, one-way "authoritative communication" from the state fails to create a space for public conversation. It also reflects what Couldry (2010) identifies as the "hidden injuries of media power," where official discourse reinforces a symbolic hierarchy that people feel powerless to challenge directly, leading to either silence or critical responses. The failure of the AI video traction illustrates the limitations of tactical media interventions when the overarching "media logic" (Altheide and Snow, 1979) of the political environment remains rigidly formal and unresponsive.

The third hypothesis predicted that, despite national differences, digital platforms enable transnational patterns of reinterpretation and resistance among youth. The study supports this view. In both countries, youth used digital tools, AI-generated videos or memes to reinterpret official messages and create alternative narratives. In Lebanon, AI

was used to imagine a more assertive presidency, while in the U.S., memes were used to question authenticity and authority. Although the and the scale of engagement differed. The want to challenge, mock, or reimagine leadership was present in both contexts. This pattern confirms the existence of a “global protest repertoire” as identified by Tarrow (2005), which is now amplified by digital tools. The use of similar digital tactics for political critique aligns with Tufekci’s (2017) analysis of how social media facilitates “networked publics” that share tactics and narratives across borders. The act of reimagining leadership through AI and memes exemplifies what Castells (2012) describes as „counterpower,” the capacity of networked social actors to challenge dominant messages in the communication space. This globalized practice of symbolic resistance is a key feature of what Juris (2008) termed “cultural political resistance” within transnational activist networks.

All this points to a globalization of youth civic engagement practices. Digital platforms provide a common space where young people from different political views use similar tools to voice their opinions. This doesn’t mean that national contexts are irrelevant, but it shows that online platforms create shared strategies for political participation that cross borders.

However, the results show important limitations. While Trump’s strategy successfully mobilized youth, Aoun’s approach failed to inspire meaningful engagement. This suggests that in fragile states like Lebanon, where trust in institutions is already low, formal presidential communication may further distance young citizens rather than win their support. Meanwhile, in established but polarized democracies like the U.S., personalized communication can energize young people to engage but at the cost of deepening societal divisions.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that presidential communication in the digital age is not just about conveying messages but also about building connections, triggering emotions, and receiving interactions. The effectiveness of these strategies depends heavily on style, context, and the willingness to speak the language of digital natives. Leaders who embrace informality, emotion, and cultural relevance are more likely to capture youth attention, even if that attention is critical or satirical, and those who remain formal and distant risk being ignored.

These findings have important implications for political leaders and public figures; they must recognize that digital communication is a two-way process. Youth are active participants who will reshape, mock, and respond to official messages. Understanding this dynamic is essential for any government hoping to engage younger citizens.

The research confirms that the way presidents communicate online matters. It influences how young people see their leaders, their government, and their own role as citizens. Whether through memes, comments, social media posts, or AI-generated content, young people are finding creative ways to make their voices heard.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This comparative study set out to investigate how the presidential mandates of both Donald Trump in the United States and Joseph Aoun in Lebanon communicate through digital platforms, how they shape youth attitudes toward governance, and the ensuing online civic engagement. The findings confirm the central thesis that presidential com-

munication in the digital era is an influential yet deeply context-dependent tool that directly shapes youth perceptions and engagement. The contrast between both cases highlights the profound impact of institutional setting and communicative style between digital citizens and their respective government.

The study revealed a fundamental power shift in the fashioning of presidential image. Traditionally, political marketing managed by professionals aimed to mold a controlled leader persona. The findings demonstrated that in the digital era, this image is being actively challenged and changed by the growing involvement of the youth in digital civic life. The mandates of both presidents are not merely communicated to the public; the comparison between both cases demonstrates that regardless of a nation's political stability, the youth are now active co-authors of presidential narratives, often bypassing centralized platforms.

With the era of the controlled, professionally marketed leader persona fading, and in its place a creative and collaborative process where a viral “meme” or satirical post can instantly and controversially alter a president's public image, a critical re-evaluation of political communication is needed.

This leads to the unresolved question this research uncovers: to what extent can AI-generated content fundamentally reconfigure and subvert political authority? The emergence of such content, as seen in the Lebanese context, hints at a future where official imagery must compete with synthetic doubles created by the public. This is no longer just about spreading information but about generating and spreading alternative realities and raising critical questions for democratic representation: when officials' likeness can be easily appropriated, what becomes of authenticity, accountability, and trust? In conclusion, the ability to shape a president's public image is reallocated, with increasing power being held by the people—and the new sophisticated digital tools at their disposal. The main challenge for leadership in the age of information and AI is no longer just sending a message but maneuvering a reality where that message will be indefinitely challenged, remixed, and rewritten by the public it seeks to lead.

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