

"Psychopolitics on Social Media: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Emotion, Authority, and Online Mobilization"

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze how emotional narratives on social media are strategically used to legitimize authority and mobilize political action, through the interdisciplinary lens of psychopolitics. Integrating theories from political science, psychology, and digital media studies, the research employs qualitative content analysis and digital ethnography to examine emotionally charged political content on Twitter and Instagram from 2022 to 2024. Data were drawn from 30 high-engagement political accounts and analyzed using thematic coding and discourse analysis. The findings reveal that emotions—especially anger, hope, and fear—serve as key drivers in shaping political narratives and enhancing user engagement. Emotional content not only increases virality but also constructs digital authority through perceived authenticity and symbolic language. These insights suggest a shift in political influence toward affective resonance rather than factual argumentation. The study highlights the urgent need for critical media literacy and interdisciplinary frameworks to address the democratic challenges posed by emotional manipulation in digital environments.

Keywords: *Psychopolitics; emotional influence; digital authority; online mobilization; social media; affective politics*

INTRODUCTION

The advent of social media has fundamentally transformed political communication, enabling unprecedented levels of interaction between political actors and the public (Enli, 2017; Jungherr, 2016). Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have become arenas where political narratives are constructed, disseminated, and contested (Chadwick, 2013; Kreiss, 2016). This shift has given rise to new modalities of power that operate through emotional engagement and algorithmic amplification (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014).

Central to this transformation is the concept of psychopolitics, which examines how psychological mechanisms are employed to exert control and influence within digital spaces (Han, 2017). Byung-Chul Han posits that in the neoliberal era, power is exercised not through overt coercion but through subtle forms of psychological manipulation that exploit individual freedoms (Han, 2017). Social media platforms, with their emphasis on personalization and engagement, are prime venues for such psychopolitical strategies (Zuboff, 2019; Fuchs, 2017).

Emotions play a pivotal role in this landscape. Studies have shown that emotionally charged content, particularly that which evokes anger or fear, is more likely to be shared and to influence political behavior (Brady et al., 2017; Lelkes et al., 2017; Geise, Panke, & Heck, 2024). This emotionalization of political discourse can lead to increased polarization and the

formation of echo chambers, where users are exposed predominantly to information that reinforces their existing beliefs (Sunstein, 2018; Tucker et al., 2018).

The urgency of studying psychopolitics in social media is underscored by recent events where misinformation and emotionally manipulative content have influenced electoral outcomes and public opinion (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Young, 2023). For instance, the proliferation of fake political content on social media platforms has raised concerns about the integrity of democratic processes (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Understanding the mechanisms by which emotions are harnessed for political ends is thus critical for safeguarding democratic discourse.

Previous research has explored various facets of political communication in digital environments, including the role of social media in mobilization and the impact of emotional appeals on political engagement (Papacharissi, 2015; SpringerLink, 2023). However, there remains a gap in the literature concerning the integrated analysis of emotion, authority, and mobilization from a psychopolitical perspective. This study seeks to fill this gap by adopting an interdisciplinary approach that combines insights from political theory, psychology, and media studies.

Recent studies have shown that digital political communication increasingly relies on emotional appeals to generate engagement and shape public discourse. Chadwick et al. (2021) found that emotional reactions—especially anger and enthusiasm—amplify elite political messaging through online networks. Similarly, Kretschmer & Dohle (2020) demonstrated that emotional framing significantly influences public attitudes toward climate policies. Meanwhile, Wodak (2021) emphasized the rise of far-right populism driven by fear-based narratives spread through social media.

Despite these contributions, existing literature often isolates emotional impact from the construction of digital authority or treats mobilization as a separate phenomenon. This creates a research gap in understanding how emotion, authority, and mobilization are systematically intertwined within the same psychopolitical framework. In particular, few studies explore how emotional content not only engages but legitimizes symbolic authority and drives collective digital action (Gerbaudo, 2018).

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the interplay between emotional narratives, the construction of authority, and the mobilization of individuals in digital spaces. By examining how emotional appeals are used to legitimize authority and encourage online mobilization, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the subtle mechanisms of control in contemporary political communication.

The objective of this study is to analyze the strategies employed in social media to evoke emotional responses that reinforce authority and facilitate political mobilization. Through qualitative content analysis and digital ethnography, the research will investigate the ways in which emotional content is crafted and disseminated to achieve political objectives. The findings aim to inform strategies for promoting critical media literacy and fostering more resilient democratic societies. The benefit of this study is twofold: (1) it provides conceptual insight for scholars in understanding psychopolitical mechanisms in digital spaces, and (2) it

offers practical implications for promoting critical digital literacy and safeguarding democratic dialogue against affective manipulation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative interdisciplinary approach that integrates concepts from political science, psychology, and media studies to explore how emotions, authority, and online mobilization operate on social media platforms. The research is designed to provide an in-depth understanding of the affective and symbolic mechanisms involved in political discourse within digital spaces. The analysis focuses on content published on Twitter and Instagram between 2022 and 2024, with particular attention to emotionally charged posts that have triggered significant public engagement.

The study population consists of social media users who are actively engaged in political conversations. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 30 political accounts, including politicians, political influencers, and grassroots organizations, chosen based on the intensity of their emotional appeals, level of engagement, and frequency of political content. Data were gathered using a coding sheet to analyze emotional tone and rhetorical strategies, along with a digital ethnographic observation guide to document user behavior and interaction patterns. Posts, comments, and associated metadata were archived using digital tools to ensure reliability and reproducibility.

The research followed a structured procedure: first, the identification of viral political content; second, the manual coding of emotional and rhetorical dimensions; third, ethnographic observation of user responses in the comment sections; and fourth, the thematic and discourse analysis using NVivo software. Thematic analysis was applied to uncover dominant emotional narratives, while critical discourse analysis was used to interpret the construction of digital authority and ideological framing. This approach ensures a detailed and layered analysis of psychopolitical dynamics in online environments.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study found that emotional content in political social media posts plays a significant role in generating public engagement. Among the 30 accounts analyzed, posts containing anger or moral outrage reached the highest levels of interaction (likes, shares, and comments). Posts that conveyed hope or solidarity also performed well, but their effect was more evident in the formation of supportive comment threads rather than virality. In contrast, fear-based content tended to polarize users, triggering divided comment sections and high emotional conflict.

Table 1. Engagement Level Based on Dominant Emotion

Source : Researcher

No	Dominant Emotion	Percentage Range (P)	Category
1	Anger	76% – 100%	Excellent
2	Hope	51% – 75%	Good
3	Fear	26% – 50%	Pretty good
4	Neutral/Informative	0% – 25%	Not good

These results align with theories of affective politics, which suggest that anger and hope are particularly effective for mobilizing collective action and fostering digital communities (Papacharissi, 2015; Wodak, 2021; Dean, 2009). Emotional intensity, when paired with symbolic authority—such as nationalistic language, religious references, or activist slogans—builds trust and perceived legitimacy among followers. This pattern was observed across all sample accounts, confirming the emotional-symbolic synergy in digital political messaging.

Compared to earlier studies (e.g., Krämer, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2018), which emphasized the role of structure and message frequency, this research highlights the quality and emotional tone of the message as equally, if not more, critical. In particular, our findings suggest that viral engagement does not necessarily stem from informational accuracy, but from emotional resonance and rhetorical performance. Thus, psychopolitical dynamics in digital space are shaped less by facts and more by how users feel about those facts—and by who delivers them.

CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that the digital sphere—especially social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram—has become a fertile ground for the operation of psychopolitics. Emotions, far from being secondary, serve as primary tools in shaping political narratives, constructing digital authority, and mobilizing collective action. The findings show that posts which evoke strong emotional responses—particularly anger, hope, and fear—are consistently more effective in generating engagement and mobilization. Anger, often directed at injustice or corruption, emerged as the most mobilizing emotion, followed closely by hopeful content that encourages solidarity and collective optimism. Moreover, the study reveals that authority in online spaces is no longer solely dependent on formal credentials or institutional power. Instead, it is increasingly constructed through symbolic performance, emotional consistency, and perceived authenticity. Political actors who present themselves as emotionally relatable and ideologically stable are more likely to be trusted, shared, and followed. These digital figures often use language rich in moral or nationalistic symbolism, crafting a narrative that resonates with the affective identities of their audience. This illustrates the performative and affective nature of authority in the digital age—an insight that extends traditional theories of political legitimacy. The study also highlights the mechanisms of online mobilization. Effective mobilization strategies were found to rely heavily on emotionally charged content accompanied by digital tools such as hashtags, visual symbols, and succinct calls to action. These strategies work best when synchronized with public sentiment and reinforced by a sense of urgency. Interestingly, the viral spread of political messages was found to be more closely linked to emotional and symbolic resonance than to factual content or rational argumentation.

This suggests a shifting landscape in political communication where emotional logic increasingly overrides epistemic logic. In comparison with previous studies, this research offers an updated framework that situates emotional dynamics at the center of political behavior in digital contexts. While past literature has addressed digital activism and political

engagement, this study adds depth by integrating the concept of psychopolitics to explain how emotions function not only as expressions but as instruments of control, persuasion, and resistance. It bridges affect theory, discourse analysis, and digital media studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of how political power is enacted and experienced online. Finally, this study affirms the urgent need for interdisciplinary approaches in analyzing digital politics. As algorithms amplify emotional content and blur the line between information and affect, scholars must consider the psychological, sociological, and technological forces that co-produce political meaning. Future research should further explore the ethical and democratic implications of affective manipulation in online spaces, as well as the role of digital literacy in mitigating its more harmful effects.

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