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Framing and Credibility in Political Influencer Discourse: The Minnesota Childcare Controversy

Over the past decade, social media has become a major platform for political discourse and sharing public opinion. According to the Pew Research Center, about 76% of U.S. adults under 30 say they get at least some of their news from social media (Pew Research Center).

Unlike traditional journalism with editorial oversight and editing standards, social media allows any individual to publish and share content instantly to large audiences. As Thorson and Wells put it, “There is no one dominant pattern of content 'flow'; there are competing patterns based on individual interests, social networks, and the infrastructures of digital communication” (Thorson and Wells 310). This form of news has changed how information spreads, especially for controversial political events.

One recent event is the controversy surrounding the Minnesota childcare facilities, which was a trending topic on Instagram Reels before reaching the mainstream media. The controversy started with a viral video that circulated across platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok and led to many online discussions and a quick government response. The original video received over 3.9 million views (as of 02/15/26) and spread all over social media before Minnesota government agencies responded publicly. Social media coverage of the issue focused on the alleged childcare fraud and questioned the state government, while traditional media outlets like Fox News reported later that there were “no findings of fraud” after local authorities inspected the childcare facilities (FOX 9, 2025-12-29). In the following days, state officials said the facilities were “operating as expected” after conducting additional inspections and compliance checks (CBS Minnesota, 2026-01-02).

This controversy shows an underlying issue that scholars have been studying for years: The rise of political influencers and political communication on social media. Scholars have examined how political influencers frame information for engagement (von Sikorski et al.; Riedl et al.), how emotional framing increases audience interaction and visibility (Humprecht et al.; Harff et al.), and how social media environments reshape credibility and trust through engagement and algorithms instead of traditional media standards (Thorson and Wells; Scheufele and Nisbet). While scholars have examined influencer rhetoric, algorithmic incentives, and digital credibility, little research has focused specifically on how these rhetorical strategies shape discourse surrounding the Minnesota childcare facilities controversy. How do political creators on Instagram Reels rhetorically frame allegations surrounding Minnesota childcare facilities, and what appeals to emotion, authority, and credibility are most prominent in this discourse community? How does that compare to traditional journalism?

### **Influencer Rhetoric and Emotional Framing on Social Media**

Scholars in the field of political communication and media studies have examined how social media influencers engage in political discourse, particularly through emotionally charged, entertaining, and algorithm-driven means (von Sikorski et al.; Riedl et al.; Harff et al.; Gonzalez et al.; Gandini et al.; Harris et al.; Lewis; Sehl et al.; Schmuck et al.; Tang). In “The Political Role of Social Media Influencers: Strategies, Types, and Implications for Democracy - An Introduction,” Christian von Sikorski and his colleagues argue that these influencers are more than just casual political commentators reporting the news. They suggest that they “should be seen as strategic providers of political content, raising important questions about their role in shaping public discourse and democratic engagement” (von Sikorski et al. 1). The writers also explain that, unlike journalists, influencers are not constrained by traditional journalistic norms

or fact-checking standards (von Sikorski et al. 5). They suggest that the rhetoric of political influencers prioritizes persuasion and engagement over accountability. Similarly, Martin J. Riedl and his colleagues define political influencers as “content creators that endorse a political position, social cause, or candidate through media that they produce and/or share on a given social media platform” (Riedl et al. 2), emphasizing that they are driven not only by politics, but also by platform and market incentives, such as views, likes, comments, and monetization. Anaëlle Gonzalez et al. write about how influencers employed a “human impact” frame, emphasizing personal and emotional consequences over factual accuracy (Gonzalez et al. 1605). This research suggests that political content created by influencers frequently simplifies issues and optimizes for the algorithm and engagement using emotional framing. Riedl et al., drawing on Abdin and Cotter, explain that “platforms are infrastructures that influencers use to engage with their audiences. Two platforms particularly popular with influencers – and more broadly associated with influencer culture – are TikTok and Instagram” (qtd. in Riedl et al. 3).

Political influencers are not as focused on producing factual, unbiased news as traditional media. Their goal is to engage with their audience using emotionally charged rhetoric. Their influence is not independent of the platform itself but is tethered to the platform’s incentives. In other words, their influence “is captured through platforms’ proprietary metrics and on terms put forth by platforms.” (Riedl et al. 4). Because their visibility and success are determined by these platform metrics, influencers must adapt their rhetorical strategies to the platform’s logic. As von Sikorski et al. framed it, “digital environments like social media allow strategic curators like politicians – but also [social media influencers] – to convey information to social media users out of strategic motives like maximizing followers or financial gain (von Sikorski et al. 5). As Thorson and Wells argue, in the digital environment, “individuals are at the center of personal

information networks embedded in multiple, intersecting content flows curated by various actors in varying proportions” (Thorson and Wells 310). This suggests that emotional framing is not a style preference, but a structural adaptation to the algorithm’s incentives.

Scholars also argue that political influencers typically stick to moral binaries when constructing arguments. Riedl et al. note that modern political discourse (especially on social media platforms) focuses on right and wrong instead of agreeing on some shared beliefs and disagreeing on others (Riedl et al. 3). In this environment, political influencers present issues as battles between sides and align themselves and their followers against the opposing side that they portray as wrong and immoral. This framing simplified political disagreements into a moral conflict in which one side is deemed correct and the other is portrayed as uninformed or dangerous. Political influencers choose this kind of framing because it increases engagement by creating group identity and emotional investment.

Research also shows that emotional framing directly affects the audience response. According to Humprecht et al., “Emotional social media posts attract attention and provoke emotional user reactions” (Humprecht et al. 4). Similarly, Fischer et al. found that “partisan mockery” videos on YouTube – another platform with a large amount of political discourse – are “particularly likely to attract viewers.” (Fischer et al. 259-268). Rather than showing political issues as complicated issues with multiple factors, influencers often gloss over details to increase entertainment value and maintain audience attention. As Scheufele and Nisbet explain, online news environments are increasingly shaped by “media-centric” and “audience-centric” filters that prioritize content based on popularity, algorithmic reinforcement, and user preference, rather than what is more factually complete or correct. (Scheufele and Nisbet 47-48).

Gonzalez et al. further support this pattern by noting that political content on Instagram often emphasizes “the human impact frame” (Gonzalez et al. 1605). Instead of focusing on government procedures or policy details, influencers focus on how certain issues affect individuals and communities, as viewers are more likely to connect with issues that directly affect them. Since influencers are “often considered role models for their (young) audiences” (Gonzalez et al. 1606), their influence relies more on authenticity and likeability over credibility.

Overall, these scholars suggest that influencer rhetoric is shaped by platform incentives, moral framing, and emotional impact. Influencers are not simply sharing political information. They are formulating their arguments and information in ways that entertain viewers, increase engagement, and feed algorithmic incentives. While this research explains how influencer rhetoric functions on social media platforms, less research has been conducted on how these approaches adapt to short-form content on platforms such as Instagram Reels.

### **Credibility and Authority in Digital Political Discourse**

Scholars in the field of political communication and media studies have also examined how credibility and authority are established in digital political communication, particularly on platforms where anyone can become a political influencer (**multisource citation**). On online platforms, authority and trustworthiness are not automatically assumed by association with large media outlets (Ex, John Doe from the Daily Post). In contrast to mass media, on social media, “processes of curation are also undertaken by actors such as friends and social contacts, computer algorithms, and individual media users themselves” (Thorson and Wells 310). It is earned through repeated visibility, relatability, and likeability. According to Gonzalez et al., celebrities, athletes, and social media influencers all fit common leadership traits: “(1) they represent certain values..., (2)

they display high interest or (self-acquired) knowledge about the topics they share...and (3) they have large amounts of followers” (qtd. in Gonzalez 4). Unlike traditional journalists and media outlets, “they appeal to young and non-politically interested audiences, without holding formal positions of power” (qtd. in Gonzalez 4). Their influence is especially powerful because these celebrities and influencers are reaching people who are not already engaged and well-informed in politics. They often times are communicating to people who do not stay up to date on policy changes, political debates, and traditional news sources. Influencers are not just participating in political discourse; they control how politics is introduced to some audiences, especially young people, for the first time.

As a result, the way political influencers present political content matters a lot. Influencers do not deliver political information in the same detailed, fact-checked, and reviewed way traditional journalists do. Instead, digital political rhetoric is carefully curated and formatted to prioritize view engagement and platform incentives. Unlike traditional news platforms, influencers have to compete with entertainment, meme, and lifestyle content, forcing them to make their content interesting, relatable, concise, and engaging to be pushed by the algorithm. By keeping their content concise and entertaining, influencers have to sacrifice depth, detailed context, and inclusion of all the relevant facts. There is not enough time for influencers to give detailed explanations, compare multiple perspectives, or explain how certain processes work, forcing viewers to accept the influencer's conclusion without a chance to evaluate it on their own. While this tradeoff is necessary for influencers to push their content, traditional journalism is the opposite. Viewers and readers expect detailed reporting, careful verification, and transparency about sources. For traditional media, comprehensive coverage is a requirement.

Ultimately, this contrast highlights how credibility functions differently across two political environments. In traditional journalism, authority is earned by rigorous fact-checking, detailed evaluations, and editorial oversight. For political influencers on social media, authority is earned by visibility, audience connection, and relatability. Because influencers produce political content for viewers who have not previously shown interest in or knowledge of politics, the opinions of political influencers significantly shape these viewers' thoughts and opinions. When political issues are simplified, personalized, or emotionally charged, that version becomes viewers' only point of reference for that political issue. Understanding the difference between traditional journalists and social media influencers is essential for evaluating how political content differs on both platforms.

## **Conclusion**

Scholars in political communication, media studies, and rhetoric have established several insightful findings about digital political discourse. Studies have shown that social media influencers act as strategic providers of political content, whose rhetoric is shaped by platform incentives, emotional framing, and algorithmic visibility (von Sikorski et al.; Riedl et al.; Harff et al.). Previous research also shows that influencers frequently rely on moral binaries, human impact framing, and emotionally charged narratives to increase engagement and audience alignment (Gonzalez et al.; Humprecht et al.; Fischer et al.). At the same time, scholars examining credibility and authority in digital environments argue that trust on social media is constructed through visibility, reliability, and personal connection rather than traditional fact-checking standards and editorial oversight (Thorson and Wells; Schmuck et al.). Overall, this research establishes that influencer rhetoric differs from traditional journalism and that these differences significantly shape political discourse on social media.

However, while scholars have extensively examined influencer rhetoric, moral framing, and credibility across social media discourse, less attention has been given to how these rhetorical strategies are used within short-form video content, such as Instagram Reels. More specifically, little research has been conducted on the controversy and online rhetoric surrounding the Minnesota childcare facilities. How do political creators on Instagram Reels rhetorically frame allegations surrounding Minnesota childcare facilities, and what appeals to emotion, authority, and credibility are most prominent in this discourse community? How does that compare to traditional journalism?

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## Appendix A: AI Transparency Statement

I used ChatGPT (GPT-5.2, OpenAI) to generate the title of this research paper and to assist with MLA formatting of citations. I also used Grammarly to review spelling and grammar. No AI-generated sentences appear in the body of this essay. All analysis and written content was developed by me.

AI Tool(s): ChatGPT (GPT-5.2, OpenAI); Grammarly

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URL: <https://chat.openai.com/>