

**Political Campaign Messages on Facebook: A Study of Public Engagement, Social Presence Strategies, and the 2018 U.S. Senate Elections**

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### **Abstract**

Scholars have investigated the use of social presence strategies in various research contexts. However, we have limited knowledge about the use of social presence strategies in political campaigns. This study addressed this gap by investigating the relationships between social presence strategies, vividness, and engagement. Facebook data of Democratic and Republican Senate candidates were downloaded for this study. Content analysis of 1,500 posts revealed the significant predictors of engagement on Facebook. The results of Negative Binomial regression analyses illuminated that social presence strategies are strong determinants of engagement on Facebook. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Social presence, Engagement, Facebook, Senate elections, Vividness

## **Introduction**

Scholars have argued that Facebook is a critical component of political campaigning in the U.S. (Bene, 2017; Borah, 2016). A recent report showed that political candidates invested 59.4% of their digital communication budget on Facebook, and such a trend is expected to continue in coming election cycles (Grothaus, 2020). The primacy of Facebook for digital campaigning has been largely attributed to the massive user base and its reach to an older demographic. Facebook has 2.5 billion monthly active users, which are an increase of 8% year-over-year (Facebook, 2020). It is reported that 69% of American adults use Facebook, and 74% of such users visit the site at least once a day (Gramlich, 2019). Though the younger audience prefers Instagram and Snapchat, Facebook is popular among people 30 and older (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). Political campaigns compete to connect with this older audience to secure desired political outcomes because this key demographic segment remains highest in voter turnout (Wattenberg, 2019). Thus, campaigns use Facebook to stay visible, spread their messages, and connect with their target audience.

Political public relations professionals understand that visibility on Facebook is often linked to content that could trigger public engagement. Public engagement also demonstrates the efficacy of political public relations messages and strengthens the reach of political campaigns. However, the organic reach (the unpaid distribution of messages) of messages on Facebook is extremely low; thus, it poses a challenge to political campaigns (Mazid, 2020). Also, more than 60 million organizational pages are constantly vying for user attention (Charello, 2019). Therefore, to ensure the visibility of political public relations messages on Facebook, campaigns are often focused on crafting content that could engage users to maximize their reach and influence potential voters.

Scholars have argued that social presence strategies could be a gateway to public engagement on social platforms. The use of social presence fosters interactive conversations, empathy, group commitment, and mutuality, thus helping political candidates cultivate relationships on social media (Mazid, 2020; Men, Tsai, Chen, & Ji, 2018). However, social presence strategies received limited scholarly attention from political public relations scholarship. Previous studies mainly focused on agenda building, framing, election results, social media strategy, and user engagement (Bronstein, Aharony, & Bar-Ilan, 2018; Choy, 2018; Fountaine, 2017; LaMarre & Suzuki-Lambrech, 2013; Lee & Xu, 2018; Sweetser, Golan, & Wanta, 2008). The use of social presence strategies in political public relations on Facebook remains underexplored. This study addressed the gap by examining the use of social presence strategies on Facebook by U.S. Senate candidates.

This study has four main objectives. First, it investigated the use of social presence strategies by U.S. Senate candidates. Second, gender and political party affiliation were tested to determine the use of social presence strategies. Third, the study examined vividness strategies on Facebook messages. Fourth, the research investigated the connection between social presence strategies, vividness strategies, and engagement. Facebook posts of U.S. Senate candidates were collected from January 2018 to November 2018. Content analysis was conducted to examine social presence strategies, vividness strategies, and engagement on Facebook. Negative Binomial regression analyses revealed that social presence strategies are significant determinants of engagement on Facebook.

Public relations scholars, political campaign managers, and political actors could develop a solid understanding of social presence theory and political campaigning on Facebook by examining the results of this study. This study extends our scholarly knowledge of social presence theory by examining the use of the theory in a new communication context: Senate election campaigns. This study tested two independent variables—gender and political party affiliation in determining the use of social presence strategies by political candidates. Therefore, the findings of this study extend the scope of social presence theory by integrating theoretically relevant independent variables (DeAndrea & Holbert, 2017; Slater & Gleason, 2012).

## **Literature Review**

### **Social Presence Theory**

Biocca, Harms, and Burgoon (2003) argued that social presence theory is interested in how technological interface shapes and influences our "sense of being with another" in the computer-mediated communication (CMC) environment (p. 456). Social presence theory received immediate and widespread recognition from communication scholars. Studies employed social presence theory to investigate internet-based collaborations (Bente, Ru'ggenberg, Kra'mer, & Eschenburg, 2008), social T.V. experience (Hwang & Lim, 2015; Kim, Song, & Lee, 2017), academic weblogs (Luzo'n, 2011), e-commerce (Hassanein & Head, 2007), and human-robot interactions (Lee, Peng, Jin, & Yan, 2006). Public relations scholars have embraced social presence theory to understand the ways communicators use social media to engage with the publics.

Public relations scholarship (Mazid, 2019, 2020; Men, Tsai, Chen, & Ji, 2018) posited that scholarly literature on social presence has shifted from investigations about the nature of media to the role of communicators in projecting organic and real personalities to build relationships. Therefore, social presence theory ushered a new stream of public relations research (Mazid, 2019, 2020; Men et al., 2018) that investigated the role of social presence in building relationships between organizations and their publics. Men et al. (2018) argued that communicators who project their real personality by injecting values, feelings, vulnerabilities, two-way conversations, and conveying a sense of community reflect a commitment to dialogic communication that is critical for building relationships (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Montague, 2012; Men et al., 2018; Yang, Kang, & Cha, 2015). Public relations scholars equate social presence as the "social dimension of dialogue" (Men et al., 2018; p. 84) that emphasizes interactive conversations, empathy, group commitment, and mutuality by leveraging the 'sociality' aspects of social media to foster relationships. Social media moderators for organizations now strive to strategically project a sense of true, organic, and real selves to initiate and manage interactions with the publics, and often reflect an intent to dialogic communication (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Men et al., 2018).

Scholars developed and tested three strategies of social presence: affective, interactive, and cohesive (Mazid, 2019, 2020; Men et al., 2018; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer's, 1999). The affective strategy focuses on emotional expression, sharing an opinion, and even expressing a sense of vulnerability (Men et al., 2018). Social media moderators for organizations could articulate their emotional expression by posting emojis, sharing humorous content, using all-cap, posting repetitious punctuation, and circulating opinions and feelings (Men et al., 2018). In this way, organizations could use social media to show emotion to build relationships with the

publics. Men et al. (2018) argued that affective strategy is a critical component of social presence that reflects a sense of compassion and humility. The interactive strategy emphasizes relational, interpersonal, and mutual aspects of relationships between organizations and their publics (Men et al., 2018). The interactive strategy is anchored in user interactions on social platforms. Social media moderators for organizations can actively seek to connect with others, engage in conversations, refer to others' content, compliment others, and ask a question (Men et al., 2018). The cohesive strategy seeks to develop a sense of online community and nurture group commitment (Men et al., 2018). Such a strategy highlights a sense of sociality between organizations and their publics. Scholars argued that cohesive strategy could be expressed through phatic communication, use of vocatives, and salutations (Men et al., 2018; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer's, 1999). Social media moderators for organizations often refer to publics by name, use greetings, and address the publics by using inclusive pronouns (Men et al., 2018). Social presence strategies provide a rigorous and pragmatic approach to communication that political candidates could use to connect with people, build relationships, and maximize user engagement. Political candidates could project a sense of real personality and foster genuine conversions by employing social presence strategies on social media.

However, scholarly investigations about political public relations messaging on digital and social media mostly focused on agenda building, framing, election results, social media strategy, and user engagement. Lee and Xu (2018) analyzed Trump's and Clinton's tweets to examine the agenda-setting role of Twitter. The study found that Trump successfully garnered public attention to policy issues by using Twitter. In another study, scholars found candidate blogs influenced the media agenda for the 2004 presidential election (Sweetser, Golan, & Wanta, 2008). Fountaine (2017) analyzed social media posts to understand how women politicians use social media for self-framing. The study reported that candidates mostly employed the likability frame in their messages. Choy (2018) used Carbaugh's cultural discourse analysis approach to analyze Facebook posts and online comments of the 2016 Hong Kong lawmakers' election. The study found that posts and comments were useful to engage people in election canvassing. LaMarre and Suzuki-Lambrecht (2013) reported that the use of social media significantly increases the odds of winning elections for congressional candidates. Borah (2016) investigated Facebook posts of U.S. Presidential candidates during the 2008 and 2012 elections. The study revealed candidates' Facebook campaign strategies by analyzing the purpose, focus, and emotional appeals of campaign messages. Bronstein, Aharony, and Bar-Ilan (2018) examined the Israeli election and analyzed social media posts to reveal user engagement. The literature review revealed a diverse array of research that enriched our understanding of social media in political public relations messaging. However, there is a gap in our knowledge base regarding the use of social presence strategies in political public relations practices. This study addressed the research gap by formulating the following research question:

RQ1: What types of social presence strategies do U.S. Senate candidates use on Facebook?

### ***Gender and Political Party***

Social presence theory could be a fertile scholarly space to investigate the role of gender and party orientations in political campaigns on social media. Scholars argued that candidates' gender plays a critical role in political campaigns (Winfrey & Schnoebelen, 2019). Studies revealed that female candidates are often challenged to adopt instrumental leadership traits like confidence, decisiveness, and toughness while carefully balancing these traits with portrayals of compassion, warmth, and expressiveness through messaging (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Garcia-

Retamero & Lopez-Zafara, 2006; Winfrey & Schnoebelen, 2019). Such a double bind influences the communication strategy of female candidates. However, male candidates often enjoy a sense of 'role congruity' (Eagly & Karau, 2002) that highlights how stereotypical social ideas about leadership work in favor of men. Duerst-Lahti (2006) argued that the office of the American presidency is coded as a masculine space that puts male candidates in a more advantageous position than women. Social presence strategies that highlight interactive conversations, empathy, group commitment, and mutuality, which are often perceived as feminine communication styles (Meeks, 2016), could be a novel theoretical scaffold to understand the role of gender in political messaging. Scholars could examine the association between gender and the use of social presence strategies in the Senate elections to understand the dynamics of political public relations practices on Facebook. Based on previous studies, the researcher hypothesized that gender is associated with the use of social presence strategies on Facebook. Therefore, this study posed the following hypothesis:

H1: The use of social presence strategies on Facebook is associated with gender.

Political party orientations often influence campaign strategies. Party affiliation is linked not only to policy issues emphasized by the candidates but also their messaging strategy. Jones, Noorbaloochi, Jost, Bonneau, Nagler, and Tucker (2018) found that Republican legislators used Twitter to emphasize national security, tradition, and conformity. Democratic legislators highlighted social/economic security, universalism, and benevolence. Online conservative posts tend to focus on 'past' whereas liberal posts appeal to 'future' (Robinson, Cassidy, Boyd, Fetterman, 2015). Ryoo and Bendle (2017) analyzed Facebook and Twitter posts for the 2016 U.S. Presidential candidates and revealed that Republican and Democratic primary candidates sharply differ in terms of their social media strategy. Based on previous research, the researcher hypothesized that political party affiliation is associated with the use of social presence strategies on Facebook. Therefore, the study posed the following hypothesis:

H2: The use of social presence strategies on Facebook is associated with party affiliation.

### **Vividness**

The rich-media affordances of social media opened new avenues for political campaigns to employ vividness strategies for political public relations practices. Vividness refers to "the degree to which information addresses various senses" (Schultz, 2017, p. 24). The message characteristics on social media can evoke different types of sensory feelings and responses from publics. For example, a text message that only stimulates visual sense is less vivid than video content that stimulates both audio and visual senses. The concept of vividness received scholarly attention from new media scholars to examine brand message strategy on social media (de Vries et al., 2012; Luarn et al., 2015; Pletikosa Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013). Studies found that vividness impacts user engagement on social media (de Vries et al., 2012; Luarn et al., 2015; Pletikosa Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013). In the context of political campaigns, Bronstein, Aharony, and Bar-Ilan (2018) employed vividness to analyze the message strategies of Israeli politicians. The literature review suggests a diverse scholarship that investigated messaging on social media. However, political public relations scholarship had not paid much attention to vividness strategies employed by U.S. Senate candidates. This study addressed the gap by formulating the following research question:

RQ2: What types of vividness strategies do U.S. Senate candidates use on Facebook?

### **Social Media and Public Engagement**

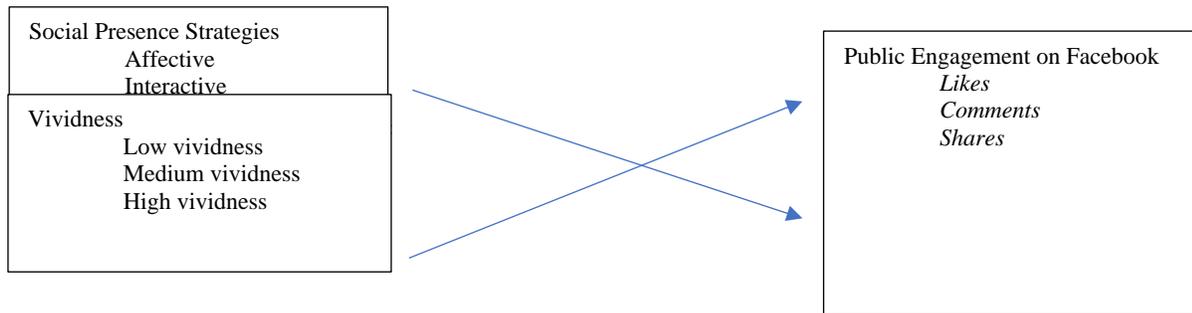


Figure 1: Predictors of public engagement on Facebook

The technological affordances of Facebook provide mainly three distinct routes for public engagement: Likes, Comments, and Shares. For example, Facebook users often share content on their social networks and such content forwarding behavior could significantly increase the reach of organizational messages. Facebook provides metrics like the number of Shares to show the volume of message sharing. Facebook users could register their emotional responses by liking content. Furthermore, Facebook users could actively craft Comments to engage in conversations. Bruce and Shelley (2010) defined engagement as interactions between organizations and their publics. Cho, Schweickart, and Haase (2014) identified public engagement with Facebook messages as Likes, Comments, and Shares. Similarly, scholars interested in public engagement on social media (Men, Tsai, Chen, & Ji, 2018; Rus & Cameron, 2016) widely employed behavioral metrics Likes, Comment, and Share as engagement. Such conceptualization of public engagement assisted researchers in capturing public interactions with organizational messages on Facebook. Consistent with prior social media research, this study considered the number of Facebook Likes, Comments, and Shares as metrics to measure public engagement.

Scholars invested considerable attention to comprehending the message and communication characteristics on social media that could trigger public engagement. Scholars often consider public engagement an indicator of content popularity and effectiveness on social media (Jain, Zaher, & Mazid, 2020; Mazid, 2020; Saxton & Waters, 2014). Studies revealed that emotional messages trigger engagement on social media (Akpinar & Berger, 2017; Berger & Milkman, 2012; Heath, Bell, & Sternberg 2001; Rim'e 2009). Alhabash, Hagerstrom, Quilliam, Rifon, and Richards (2013) conducted an experiment that revealed emotional tone influences engagement. Another study discovered that informational utility, content familiarity, exemplification, and positive sentiment triggered engagement (Kim, 2015). Lee and Xu (2018) found that political attack messages on Twitter generated engagement. Bene (2016) analyzed structural features (text, pictures, videos, memes, or emoticons), emotional tone (positive or negative), and content character (information, mobilization, engagement, personalization, humor) to investigate engagement on Facebook. The study showed that the use of memes, videos, negative content, and content that solicits sharing generated engagement. Men et al. (2018) found positive relationships between social presence strategy and user interactions on social media. Based on a previous study (Men et al., 2018), the researcher hypothesized that if political candidates use social presence strategies on Facebook, then such messages would

perform better compared to messages that did not use social presence in terms of generating engagement. Therefore, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H3: Messages that employed social presence strategies would generate more engagement than the messages that did not use social presence.

Furthermore, in the context of political campaigns, the relationships between vividness strategies and engagement received limited scholarly attention. Therefore, this study addressed the research gap by proposing the following research question:

RQ3: What is the connection between vividness strategies and engagement on Facebook?

### **Research Method**

The researcher employed content analysis to analyze Facebook posts of the 2018 Senate candidates. Content analysis is considered a systematic and rigorous method for social scientific research (Babbie, 2017; Krippendorff, 2019; Neuendorf, 2017). Scholars argued that content analysis is an appropriate research method to analyze online content (Kim, Chun, Kwak, & Nam, 2014; Mazid, 2020; Krippendorff, 2019; Neuendorf, 2017). The use of content analysis provides a rigorous and robust analysis of social media content to reveal the trends and patterns of digital audience behaviors. Therefore, the researcher considered content analysis an appropriate research method for this study.

The focus of this study is the 2018 U.S. Senate election. This study conducted a content analysis of Facebook posts by the 2018 U.S. Senate candidates. Only Republican and Democratic Senate candidates were included in this study. The rationale for including Republican and Democratic candidates is that the U.S. is a two-party political system with a few independent candidates. These two parties control the House and Senate branches of the legislature. In 2018, candidates contested for 33 regular senate seats and 2 special elections seats. Republican and Democratic candidates for the 35 senate seats were initially included in this study. The researcher was not able to collect Facebook data of 4 candidates (Matthew Corey, Jenny Wilson, Leah Vukmir, and Mike Espy); thus, excluded those candidates from the study. The Facebook pages of the above-mentioned candidates posed privacy restrictions that hindered data collection from the pages. For this study, Facebook data of 66 Senate candidates were finally included for analysis.

#### **Data Collection**

Facebook posts of 66 Senate candidates (Republican and Democratic) were collected using NodeXL, social network analysis and visualization software (for detail check Hansen, Shneiderman, Smith, & Himelboim, 2019. Note: I want to mention that NodeXL has discontinued collecting Facebook data). For each post, information about the date and time of post creation, post URL, number of Likes, number of Comments, and number of Shares were collected using NodeXL. Social media scholars widely use NodeXL to collect data, analyze social network information, and create network graphs (Himmelboim, Gleave, & Smith, 2009; Ahmed & Lugovic, 2019). Data were collected from January 1, 2018 to November 6, 2018. This time period provided ample opportunities for the researcher to capture diverse strategies political candidates used for campaigns. Furthermore, the time frame for data collection is consistent with prior social media studies (Cho, Schweickart, & Haase, 2014; Kim & Yang, 2017; Saxton & Waters, 2014). A total of 27,998 Facebook posts were collected. Then, the researcher randomly selected 1,500 Facebook posts for content analysis. Social media scholars used a similar sample

size for content analysis in previous studies (Huang, Lin, & Saxton, 2016; Saxton & Waters, 2014).

### **Coding Procedures and Reliability**

For this study, codes for social presence strategies were adapted from social presence theory literature (Men et al., 2018; Rourke et al., 1999). This study employed four codes to investigate social presence strategies on Facebook. The codes for vividness strategies were borrowed from scholarly research on social media messages (Bronstein, Aharony, & Bar-Ilan, 2018). The researcher used three codes that reflect the construct of vividness on Facebook. A total of seven codes were used for content analysis. Please check Appendix-1 for the definitions and examples of codes.

For this study, the four codes for social presence strategies: affective, interactive, cohesive, and no use of social presence were considered as independent variables. These variables were nominal level variables. This study defined affective strategy as a post that focuses on emotional expression, opinion, and even a sense of vulnerability. The interactive strategy was defined as a post that references others' post or comment, shares others' post or comment, provides compliment, uses appreciation, asks a question, and expresses agreement. The cohesive strategy was defined as a post that seeks to develop a sense of online community and nurture group commitment by referring to the publics by name, using an inclusive pronoun, and engaging social communication. The no use of social presence was defined as a post that does not use any social presence strategies.

As mentioned earlier, the researcher used three codes for vividness strategies: high vividness, medium vividness, and low vividness. These three codes were considered as independent variables and were nominal level variables. Please check Appendix-1 for the definition of variables. This study operationalized engagement in terms of Likes, Comments, and Shares. The dependent variables for this study were three measures of engagement: Likes, Comments, and Shares. The dependent variables are ratio-level count data. Negative Binomial regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between social presence strategies, vividness strategies, and engagement. Negative Binomial regression is suitable for this study for two reasons. First, the dependent variables are ratio level count data. Second, the dispersion of the count data (number of Likes, Comments, and Shares) is greater than a Poisson distribution (Saxton & Waters, 2014). It means the data are over-dispersed (variance exceed the means); therefore, it is appropriate to use Negative Binomial regression that uses Gamma distribution to tackle overdispersion (Wang, Xie, & Fisher, 2011).

The researcher considered a unique Facebook post as a unit of analysis. The researcher and a public relations scholar coded Facebook posts for content analysis. We used a standardized codebook for content analysis. First, both the researcher and the public relations scholar participated in several hour-long training sessions. Then, we separately coded 200 randomly selected posts. After the first round of coding, the coders identified discrepancies and updated the coding rule. The coders noted that discrepancies arose when messages matched with more than one of the codes. For example, the codes for social presence strategies were mutually exclusive. Each post was assigned a single code. However, we noticed that a Facebook message could use multiple social presence strategies. We revised the coding rule to tackle the challenge. The updated coding rule focused on the primary purpose of a post to assign a code (Guo & Saxton, 2014; Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015; Wagner, Baccarella, & Voigt, 2017). Next, the second round of coding was conducted. Both coders separately coded 200 randomly selected posts. After the

second round of coding, the coders achieved a good inter-coder reliability agreement. Cohen's kappa result of the inter-coder reliability score for ten codes ranged from .81 to 1. Please see Appendix-1 for the inter-coder reliability score. For this study, the two coders coded a total of 1,500 Facebook posts for analysis. The 400 posts that were used for inter-coder reliability assessment were excluded from the dataset.

## **Results**

This study employed descriptive statistics to answer RQ1. The results showed that the most widely used social presence strategy was affective strategy (40.9%), followed by interactive (25.3%) and cohesive (23.1%) strategies. Hypothesis 1 postulated that there is an association between gender and the use of social presence strategies on Facebook. A chi-square test of independence was conducted to test the hypothesis. The result for this test was significant:  $\chi^2(3, N=1500) = 13.66, p < .001$ . The hypothesis was supported, which means gender is associated with the use of social presence strategies on Facebook. The researcher found that female candidates employed more social presence strategies than male candidates. Hypothesis 2 proposed that party affiliation is associated with the use of social presence strategies on Facebook. A chi-square test of independence was conducted to test the hypothesis. The result revealed a statistically significant relationship between party affiliation and the use of social presence strategies:  $\chi^2(3, N=1500) = 12.15, p < .001$ . The H2 was supported that highlighted the association between party affiliation and the use of social presence strategy. The researcher found that Republican candidates employed more social presence strategies than Democratic candidates.

RQ2 asked vividness strategies employed by the U.S. Senate candidates. The result revealed that the most widely used message vividness category was medium or image-based (44.5%), followed by low or text-based (30.1%), and high or video-based (25.4).

This study employed Negative Binomial regression analyses to test H3 and answer RQ3. H3 postulated that social presence strategies would generate more engagement than messages that did not use social presence. Three regression models were constructed to investigate the relationships between social presence strategies and engagement. A series of dummy variables were created that reflect social presence strategies. The independent variables were affective, interactive, and cohesive strategies. The dependent variables were three measures of engagement: Likes, Comments, and Shares. Facebook followers of the campaign pages were considered as the offset variable in these models. The offset variable or the exposure variable in the Negative Binomial regression accounted for the number of times an event could have happened. It is the natural log of the exposure. In the current research context, the number of Facebook followers could potentially play a role in triggering engagement (number of Likes, Comments, and Shares) of Facebook messages. For example, a message sent by a Facebook page that has 100,000 followers may reach a larger audience than a Facebook page with 1,000 followers. Thus, the researcher considered Facebook followers as the offset variable to tackle the exposure of messages. The three models were statistically significant (Likes:  $\chi^2 = 122.71, p < .001$ ; Comments:  $\chi^2 = 193.67, p < .001$ ; Shares:  $\chi^2 = 139.51, p < .001$ ). The results of the regression analyses revealed that affective strategy, interactive strategy, and cohesive strategy significantly predicted more engagement (Likes, Comments, and Shares) compared to messages

that did not employ social presence strategies. Please check table 1 for  $\beta$ , S.E., and Incident Rate Ratio (IRR) of Negative Binomial regression results.

Table 1: Negative Binomial regression and associated metrics of engagement —likes, comments, and shares									
	Likes			Comments			Shares		
	$\beta$	SE	IRR	$\beta$	SE	IRR	$\beta$	SE	IRR
<b>Social Presence Strategies</b>									
Affective	1.03*	.09	2.80	1.28*	.09	3.59	.77*	.09	2.17
Interactive	1.15*	.09	3.16	1.52*	.10	4.60	1.14*	.10	3.15
Cohesive	.92*	.09	2.50	1.43*	.10	4.18	1.15*	.10	3.17
<b>Vividness</b>									
Medium Vividness	.41*	.06	1.51	-.04**	.06	.95	-.04**	.07	.95
High Vividness	.03**	.07	1.03	.43*	.07	1.54	.11**	.07	1.12
Note: * $p < .001$ , **Not statistically significant									

Three regression models tested the relationships between message vividness and engagement. A series of dummy variables were created that reflect vividness. The independent variables were medium and high vividness. The dependent variables were Likes, Comments, and Shares. Facebook followers of the campaign pages were considered as the offset variable in these models. Regarding engagement, these three models were statistically significant (Likes:  $\chi^2=58.46, p < .001$ ; Comments:  $\chi^2=62.77, p < .001$ ; Shares:  $\chi^2=6.04, p < .001$ ). Please check table 1 for  $\beta$ , S.E., and IRR of Negative Binomial regression results. The results of the three tests revealed that high vividness messages significantly predicted message Comments compared to low vividness messages. The results of the medium vividness messages indicated that vividness significantly predicted message Likes compared to low vividness messages.

Scholars often use the Incident Rate Ratio (IRR) to interpret the results of Negative Binomial models. Such interpretation highlights the practical implications of the study. Saxton and Waters (2014) argued that IRR reflects "the factor change in the dependent variable for a one-unit change in the independent variable" (p. 292). In the context of the current study, affective strategy has an IRR of 2.8 for Likes, 3.59 for Comments, and 2.17 for Shares; this means an affective strategy message can be expected to receive 2.8 times the number of Likes, 3.59 times the number of Comments, and 2.17 times the number of Shares than a message that did not use social presence strategy; holding all other variables constant.

### **Discussion**

This study offers significant theoretical and practical contributions. This research extends our understanding of social presence theory mainly in two ways. First, this study tested two independent variables (gender and political party affiliation) in determining political candidates' use of social presence strategies. Second, this study tested the connection between the use of social presence strategies and public engagement on Facebook. Furthermore, the results of this study are beneficial for political public relations professionals and political actors because they

highlight the connection between social presence strategies, vividness strategies, and public engagement on Facebook.

Scholars examined personality, a sense of community, and other variables in testing social presence theory (Kim, Song, & Lee, 2017; Tseng, Huang, & Teng, 2015). This study extends our knowledge of social presence theory by incorporating and testing two new variables: gender and party affiliation in determining the use of social presence strategy. It is evident that gender and party affiliation often dictate political campaigning. However, previous literature on political public relations provided limited scrutiny of the connection between gender, party, and the use of social presence strategy. The current study highlights that gender and party affiliation were associated with the use of social presence strategies on Facebook. Such findings could ignite new scholarly investigations about gender, party, and the use of social presence strategy.

The researcher found female candidates employed more social presence strategies than male candidates. The findings indicate that female politicians used Facebook to foster dialogue and project genuine personalities to build relationships. It is illuminating because such practices highlight that female political candidates could effectively engage people through their messages and generate momentum for campaigns. Such communicative behaviors could potentially remove barriers for women participating in the political decision-making process. Women could bypass the traditional media and directly communicate their political public relations messages to publics and nurture online communities. Furthermore, social media could be powerful vehicles to raise marginalized voices, promote social change, and speak to power. It is evident from the current political climate that female politicians garnered mass political support and created a considerable follower base using social media. Many female politicians use social media to gain public attention and steer the political conversations to achieve policy goals. Such changes in the political landscape helped more female politicians to join Congress and the Senate. If this trend continues, we will be closer to a more inclusive and diverse legislative body that will represent the changing demographic in the US.

Scholars examined social presence strategies in multiple research contexts. This study is one of the first studies that examined the connection between social presence strategies and public engagement on Facebook in the context of political public relations messaging. The results demonstrated that social presence strategies could play a role in triggering engagement. Such findings are vital for both public relations scholars and professionals. The results could spark a new interest for political public relations scholars who can test the role of social presence strategies on different social media platforms and various election campaigns. In this way, we could have a robust understanding of social presence strategies in political public relations. Furthermore, public relations professionals could apply the insights of this research to formulate political public relations messages on Facebook. Political campaigns could use social presence strategies to strengthen the reach of messages. The results of this study demonstrated that social presence strategies could help campaigns to achieve their objectives.

This study revealed that political candidates actively employed social presence strategies for political campaigns. Compared to previous studies (Mazid, 2019; Men et al., 2018), this study reported that Senate campaigns predominately used affective strategy (40.9%) on Facebook. It is evident that politicians tend to use emotion to trigger certain responses from voters (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Garry, 2014). However, Men et al. (2018) highlighted that the CEO's mainly employed cohesive strategy (54.5%) on Facebook. Mazid (2019) revealed that LGBTQ+ organizations also mostly used cohesive strategy on Facebook.

The difference in findings may be anchored in the context of the research. This study investigated political campaigns, and Men et al. (2018) analyzed Facebook posts of CEOs, and Mazid (2019) examined nonprofit organizations. Therefore, scholars may investigate the role of social presence strategies in diverse communication contexts.

This study has significant practical implications. This research showed that high vividness or video content is efficient in generating Comments and the medium vividness messages significantly predicted Likes. However, this result is different from previous studies, where they documented the efficacy of video messages (Jain, Zaher, & Mazid, 2020). This study revealed that video messages were not very useful in generating Likes and Shares on Facebook compared to low-vividness messages. The recent prominence of IGTV, YouTube, and Facebook stories indicates that social media users are more interested in video content, and there will be an increase in such content. Then, we may ask, why video content posted by political candidates is not useful in generating engagement. The answer may be the content of the videos. Political campaign managers may give some attention to testing the efficacy of video content before they post such content online.

However, we need to be cautious about Facebook algorithms that could play a crucial role in content visibility to the broader audience. A critical examination of how Facebook algorithms function could reveal a sophisticated picture of the content popularity matrix. But it is challenging for social scientists to examine algorithms because such information is proprietary (Kitchin, 2016). Furthermore, Bucher (2017) argued that Facebook users often developed 'algorithmic imaginary', a sense of how algorithms function, that helped them to take advantage of the system by tagging, liking, and commenting on content (Trottier & Lyon, 2012). Such collective behavior could increase the popularity of social media content. The researcher did not have any access to Facebook algorithms and could not measure the social media sophistication levels of the Senate campaign teams; thus, it poses a limitation on the findings of the current study.

Overall, political candidates could leverage the sociality of social media platforms and employ social presence strategies to maximize reach, build relationships, and enhance political deliberation. Such strategic planning could help establish politicians and new candidates to create momentum and garner visibility.

This study has a few limitations. The study did not investigate the role of age, political experience, funding, and political race competitiveness in determining the use of social presence strategies. Future research may delve into such variables and their relationships with the use of social presence strategies. This research did not examine the relationships between engagement and election outcomes. The ultimate goal of a political campaign is to get a candidate elected for public office. In future studies, we may seek to find out the connection between engagement and election outcomes. Also, future research could focus on the content of campaign videos and their role in the number of views. This study investigated the connection between social presence, vividness strategies, and engagement. However, the metrics of engagement do not inform us much about people's attitudes and political behavioral intentions. Future research can delve into such ideas to provide a robust understanding of the role of political campaigns in political decision-making.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigated the use of social presence and campaign message strategies by the 2018 U.S. Senate candidates. The results showed that candidates mostly used affective strategy, followed by interactive and cohesive strategies. On Facebook, candidates used image-based messages much more extensively than video-based content. Furthermore, this study investigated the relationships between social presence strategies, vividness strategies, and engagement. The results demonstrated that social presence strategies are significant predictors of engagement on Facebook. Campaign managers could focus on such messages that trigger engagement and use a variety of content strategies to maximize reach.

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**Appendix 1:** Social presence strategies and vividness strategies (Bronstein, Aharony, & Bar-Ilan, 2018; Men et al., 2018; Rourke et al., 1999)

Code	Definition	Frequency	Intercoder reliability score
<b>Social presence strategies</b>			
Affective	Post that focuses on emotional expression, opinion, and even a sense of vulnerability. <i>Example: Excited to be in Parkersburg this morning! Get out and vote!</i>	614	.87
Interactive	Post that provides a reference to others' post or comment, share others' post or comment, compliment, appreciation, ask a question, and express agreement. <i>Example: "Bob Menendez understands the individual's need to have health care coverage. He fully supports the ACA, and the need to protect Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security."</i> <i>- Ann Twomey, HPAE - Health Professionals &amp; Allied Employees Founder and President</i>	379	.81
Cohesive	Post that seeks to develop a sense of online community and nurture a sense of group commitment by referring to the publics by name, using an inclusive pronoun, and engaging social communication <i>Mike Braun supports the lawsuit that would take away coverage for pre-existing conditions. Hoosiers can't trust him to have our backs in Washington.</i>	346	.85

No use of social presence	Post that does not use any social presence strategies.	161	.82
Vividness strategies			
Low vividness	Post that only uses text	451	1
Medium vividness	Post with photographs and (optional) text	667	1
High vividness	Post with videos and (optional) text	382	1