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FIRE SIDE CHATS TO TIKTOK INFLUENCER TAGS: THE EVOLUTION OF WHITE HOUSE COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION TO YOUNGSTERS

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Fire Side Chats to TikTok Influencer Tags: The Evolution of White House Computer-Mediated Communication to Youngsters

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"I've learned that people will forget what you said; people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." – Maya Angelou

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"You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think."

– Winnie the Pooh

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Abstract

This study aimed to analyze how young people understood emerging changes in White House communication, specifically that which utilized the collaboration of social media influencers. Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants at an American college. A total of 111 students participated in the study that showed two different videos of social media influencers at the White House, followed by questions that measured credibility, accommodation, and effects of messaging. The videos featured different levels of formality, as well as different aesthetics. Results revealed that these collaborative videos did not produce high levels of credibility, accommodation or gateway effects, but the less informal video prompted greater credibility, accommodation, and gateway effects than the more informal video. Collectively, these results indicate that White House and social media influencer collaborations in their current form as not incredibility persuasive and future research is needed to better understand if and how these collaborations can be altered to be more effective at reaching and influencing young adults.

Keywords: White House communication; social media influencer; CMC; credibility; accommodation; gateway effect

Fire Side Chats to TikTok Influencer Tags: The Evolution of White House Computer-Mediated Communication to Youngsters

In 2004, one of my first memories in kindergarten was going to the newly added computer lab in the library at my rural school. The librarian had kindergarteners pick a computer to use, a feeling that was novel and thrilling at the time, as most students had never even seen a computer, let alone used one. We sat down and she mirrored the image from her computer to the whole class. The librarian explored a site called Whitehousekids.gov. Here, the class discovered pictures from events and current happenings at the White House. The most exciting part of this site was an area called "Pets", and even an extension to the site called Barney.gov, a website all its own that featured pictures and information on the president's dogs, cats, and even President Bush's Longhorn, Ofelia, whose favorite food was grass. As the librarian went through these sites, I remember feeling in awe of what I was seeing on my screen and thinking to myself "I have a dog at home too, just like the president!" The site included games, polls for students, facts about the White House, past presidents, and more. It was so exciting for me to see the president and his family, a family that reflected my own, on my small-town computer screen. This feeling was unforgettable to me, and I know now that the way we make connections to establishments that are not readily accessible or tangible to us, last deep in our minds, leading us down the path to perception creation that influences our attitudes and beliefs. I felt this same marvel and connection as an adult in 2021, when I saw a video of my favorite social media influencer at the White House, as he made jokes and assumed a comedic character in the Oval Office. Despite already being interested in politics, when I saw this video, it sparked a new sense of connection as it brought together seemingly disparate parts of my life.

According to Scacco and Coe (2021), "presidential communication is, to a considerable degree, a product of the socio-technological environment in which it emerges" (p. 14). Therefore, presidents and the White House not only need to utilize emerging technology to communicate to the public, they also need to keep in mind the social dynamics of the time and how that may create different affordances of different mediated communication. Therefore, it is not surprising that the way the White House connects with the American public has evolved into an altered state that no longer reflects how Americans might have previously expected their "house" to transmit messaging. From President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's cozy Fireside Chats to modern presidents' use of online social media, formality of messaging from the White House has transformed drastically into communications that are often more informal and personal. Meeting Americans where they are at, primarily in online spaces, has taken yet another step forward with President Joe Biden's administration working with online "actors" or social media influencers, creating yet another new mode of communication transmission from the White House to connect with the people.

Current research has understood White House social media use under the relevant lens of COVID-19 information and misinformation (Lee et al., 2023, Freiling et al., 2023, Yamada, 2023, Yu et al., 2023). Other research investigating White House social media in more general contexts is few and far between (Acker & Kriesberg, 2017, McKechnie, 2018). These recent applications fail to analyze how official White House social media accounts messaging is adapting to meet young people where they are at—online—and the implications of this change in messaging through a new setting. Allowing influencers into the White House and communicating on the institution's behalf shows a drastic revolution in White House communication as we know it. This transformation in communication might act as an early sign

of an American governmental institution's "transmission shift," that is notable and begs to be explored.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze how online viewers, particularly young Americas, understand the shifting White House communication style that utilizes the voice of better-known social media influencers to project White House-centric messaging. To do so, this thesis features a survey in which participants viewed two different videos set at the White House that include the use of social media Influencers, with one video being more formal in styling and similar to traditional White House transmission, and the other video being less formal. A number of outcome variables were measured, including influencer source credibility, potential gateway effects, such as White House online shareability and trust being formed between young people and the White House as they utilize influencers, perceptions of communication accommodation between the White House, social media influencers, and the intended viewer, as well as examining if the inclusion of influencers affect young people's favorability of White House communication.

The design of this survey is critical as it directly asks young people, who are presumably the target of this new type of White House messaging, what they think of this transformative communication style. This study can be insightful for general White House communication practices but also act as a guide to show how young people currently expect to be communicated to by their governing bodies. This study also hopes to gain insight on how young people react to emerging messaging adaptation with the help of social media influencers, and if this proves to be an impactful way to communicate with young Americans.

This survey relies on the following theories and concepts to understand the relationship between White House communication with influencers and young people: computer-mediated

communication, source credibility, gateway effect, and communication accommodation theory. In addition to these theories, the following section covers the historical use of technology to aid in the personalization of presidential communication, a review of social media influencers and how they create beneficial outcomes with their followers, and how the White House has changed its organizational framework to now reflect modern means of online communication.

Computer-Mediated Communication

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) found its early understandings in how people communicate to one another through an online setting. McQuail (2010) asserts that "any communication that occurs through the use of two or more electronic devices" is considered CMC (p.16). The CMC field of study is applied to this exploration as a context to better understand research findings.

This kind of communication has existed since the adoption of computers, but communication scholars first established this connection in the 1990s as they observed online interactions through the mediation of a computer. Walther (1996) is noted as the first scholar to make CMC applicable in the field of communication research. Walther states that the CMC setting enhances how we construct messages, and in turn deconstructs messages we receive through a CMC setting (Walther, 2007). Walther's scholarship made way for other researchers to analyze how complex online spaces have become, and that interactions through computers are representative of our reality, as much of our interactions today are afforded through technology. Given the rapid and prolific use of CMC, CMC now holds its own area of communication scholarship and acts as a field for researchers to understand online interactions.

CMC recognizes that communication in an online setting is different than that in a face-to-face interaction, but the field also appreciates that online interactions have in-person effects.

CMC can transcend the technological setting and can create in-person relationships (Tong & Walther, 2011), be utilized to understand mass-media implications of CMC (Metz, 1994), and is generally used to understand the reach of computers that enable communication around the world and throughout time and space. This field of communication research is applied to this thesis as a general context to understand how the White House is using an online setting—specifically online videos featuring collaborations with social media influencers—to communicate with audiences, and the potential effects of CMC usage with the public. Aspects of CMC will also be applied to this research to understand how young people use online spaces, and what that utilization means for White House communication.

Theoretical Framework

This thesis stitches together multiple theories and concepts to better understand the White House's collaboration with social media influences. These theories also act as a guide to identify and define relationships between the variables of this study.

Source Credibility

Whether the communication is CMC or face-to-face, trust and credibility are often required to make the interaction persuasive. The model known as Source Credibility was coined by Hovland and Weiss in 1952. This model was then extended by Hovland, Janis, and Kelley in 1953 as a means to understand the effects of persuasive communication and was later established as a functional theory in 1979 by Bimbaum and Stenger. Hovland and Weiss found that audiences can only be persuaded if they first find the source of the communication to be credible. In turn, it is not simply the message that matters, but who is delivering that message. According to Hovland et al. (1953):

> First, a communicator must be perceived to be a valid source of information—in other words, the source has expertise in the topic area. Second, a communicator is perceived as trustworthy—that is, he or she will communicate in an unbiased manner and without intent to deceive (p. 21).

When researchers like Hovland et al. set out to understand how credibility is formed, they used college students in their experiments to see how they would recognize information as trustworthy. They found that students would denote meaning from the message based on the source that was promoting the message. Students found credibility in sources that had scholarly ties to entities like the *New England Journal of Biology and Medicine* as opposed to a message that might come from a popular press magazine. According to this theory, institutional relativity and visibility can create trustworthiness of a message, and the inverse of this is true as well; notoriety can also lead to decreased trust of a message.

Kelman (1958) expanded on the idea of Source Credibility by finding that persuasive power is dependent on whether the communicator is deemed trustworthy, and if there are underlying opportunities of reward or punishment by the source, then their message holds more weight or incentive for listeners to endorse their message. Kelman also found that the message can only be trusted if the listener has attraction with the communicator, which can be a physical attraction or prestige, as it is understood by the listener.

Source Credibility is applied to this research to understand whether young people evaluate social media Influencers working with the White House as a credible source to speak on behalf of the institution. As discussed later, social media influencers carry varying degrees of attraction, including physical attraction, prestige and fame through amassing large followings, etc. This thesis aims to understand whether such attraction translates into source credibility.

Gateway Effect

The Gateway Effect, or the Gateway Theory, has a more recent application, as it was initially established by Kandel and Faust (1975) to understand adolescent progression and regression in drug use. Communication scholars adapted this theory to understand how this idea of a "gateway" might allow attitude change in response to specific messaging and communication (Yzer et al., 2003). This theory in communication was also adapted as the Gateway Belief Model (GBM), and served as model to understand reasoning, group consensus, and how people determine their perceptions of major societal and political issues. GBM has been used to understand perceptions on climate change (van der Linden et al., 2015), efficacy of expert opinion communication in relation to current issues (Keer & van der Linden, 2021), and even how education affects communication of political issues (van der Linden et al., 2018). Gateway Effect has been applied in a presidential context as Baum (2011) examined President Barack Obama's appearance on the Oprah Winfrey show as a way to reach "uninterested" or "inattentive" voters to connect with politics in a way that they might not have in their everyday life. Baum (2011) found that this functioned as a gateway for further civic behavior, as viewers could interact with the president in a new way, and in a way that was accessible to them.

Several other scholars have also found that exposure to entertainment programming or soft news can prompt gateway effects in audiences (e.g., Baum, 2003; Feldman & Young, 2008; Long et al., 2021; Xenos & Becker, 2009). Research on entertainment programming show that when audiences can connect to political information with the help of informality, like comedy, that this type of political transmission does in fact act as a gateway for audiences to participate in more political media. According to Long et al. (2021), when viewers interact with this type of informal communication, trust is formed in the institution, and political participation grows.

In this research, I will analyze how White House communication through social media influencers might act as an informal setting that might create a gateway for young people to seek out or participate in more online civic discourse from the White House.

Communication Accommodation Theory

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) explains how communicative modifications are made in conversational rapport as individuals create, maintain, or decrease social distance in interactions (Giles & Ogay, 2007). Barlow et al. (2023) assert:

> CAT posits that each interactant comes to an interaction with their own motivations, and initial perceptions and feelings about the other person. These perceptions are influenced by factors such as the individual's group memberships, interpersonal and intergroup history, and the social context (p. 2).

Historically, CAT has a linguistic foundation with a focus on a speaker adjusting their speech behavior, but it is a multifunctional theory that has expanded to include elements such as psychological accommodation, e.g., the speaker's motives to adjust their communication including affective or cognitive motives (Dragojevic et al., 2015; Giles & Ogay, 2007). CAT asserts that interactions have expectations and are directed with a contextual knowledge that informs interactions (Giles & Ogay, 2007). Interactions that are based on contextual knowledge could include employer-employee communication. The employee is aware that their boss holds power over them, so the employee goes into meetings with their boss with a certain understanding of the appropriate or expected communication, which directs the interaction. Accommodation is central to communication transmission, as it constructs how we interact with the world around us, especially as we interact with in-groups and those who are outside of our communities, such as communicating with different races, nationalities, genders, ages, etc.

While CAT typically is conceptualized within an in-person observation, communication through media still proves to be an important asset to CAT. Even in online settings, accommodation is still created. Scholars have begun to understand this theory in an online setting (Cardwell et al., 2023, Omori & Schwartz, 2022, van Pinxteren et al., 2023, Yan & Gong, 2023). This scholarship shows that online communication acts similarly to face-to-face communication, as users coordinate their communication so that it is successful to the receiver, no matter the setting.

This thesis extends the scholarship on online CAT by exploring the use of social media influencers as a form of accommodation. In other words, is the White House accommodating young people by employing social media Influencers? Further, is the White House accommodating a perceived audience by using audio/visual aesthetics common in social media videos, such as the pacing or editing style? When the White House utilizes new forms of informality, changes in the status quo of typical video editing and stylization of PR-related content, and even allows influencers to come to the White House and speak to their audience in a way that is typical for the influencers, but not for the White House, are these all new forms of mediated accommodation? I argue that these are a new iteration of accommodation, thus extending CAT, and I will assess young adults' perceptions of this new form of accommodation in this thesis. The White House has used several forms of technology that afforded new ways of communication accommodation to citizens over the years, as it will be covered in the following sections, but are SMIs' involvement at the White House a new communication accommodation affordance? Both interactions between influencers and White House personnel in the videos, as well as editing styles as a form of accommodation will be discussed further later, as well as tested in this thesis.

Collectively, then, this thesis brings together these theories and concepts to better understand how the White House's CMC with social media influencers acts as a form of CAT that can affect source credibility and gateway effects. This thesis aims to understand how the White House accommodates to it's assumed viewers- Gen Z. While other areas of CAT application focus on close interactions, CAT is applied in this context as a new way to understand the theory itself. As the White House used news forms of online communication with young people, the White House attempts to "speak Gen-Z" in the examples of media used in this thesis.

White House Communication and the American Public

> "Among the symbols of American democracy, like the Flag, the Liberty Bell, the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, one symbol — the White House — is an organization. Like the others, the White House is a very visible, physical representation of American ideals." (Jacques, 1999).

The White House acts as a physical embodiment for Americans to know who oversees their country, where the president lives, and the interconnected offices that fill the White House to support the president and their communication. Generally, the president acts as a representation of the American people, as presidents are elected by those who make up the United States population and is also an American citizen themselves. The president represents the United States as they interact with the world around them, maintaining international relations and making decisions on behalf of the American people. This delineation of power creates an intricate prism in which Americans relate to the president and the organization that they uphold.

There is extensive research establishing that the White House acts as an organization (Walcott & Hult, 1987; Helco, 1981; Pika, 1988; Buchanan, 1990; Cohen & Krause, 2000;

Kumar, 2007; Kalil, 2017). The treatment of the White House as an organization provides a lens to analyze the communication that comes from this entity in this research. As a central conceit of this research, it is important to understand that communication from the White House is strategic and is filtered through layers of message design by various offices as it tries to craft the most appealing message possible to maintain a positive relationship between the institution and the people it serves, Like other organizations, the president addresses their public with various parts of the organization controlling the message, how it is delivered, and who might access the message.

Organizations throughout the United States, including the White House, have undergone extensive measures to internally craft messaging that is impactful to various publics in general and especially in emerging online spaces. The Office of Digital Strategy was enacted by President Obama to address this very idea, and will be discussed in the coming sections. Just as private people and organizations have entered the online social media arena to communicate and influence, the United States government has also stepped into this new setting to connect with its public. As social media flourishes, the US government's utilization of this tool continues to progress.

Currently, there is a wide range of research regarding how the US Government uses these online platforms (Magro, 2012; Dadashzadeh, 2010; Sivarajah, 2015; Mergel, 2016), but there is little inquiry into how the American public perceives government communication via social media, and if the inclusion of influencers help or hurt White House messaging to young people in America. Understanding the perceptions of how the White House works in terms of messaging and external communication allows us to apply and investigate *why* the White House is transforming their communication to now include influencers, and what this change means to

those it is targeting. Before understanding the broad scope of social media, it is important to understand how we got to this point, and how the White House has historically communicated through modern technology to create less formal, more personable messaging. The next section provides an overview of White House communication through technological-mediated sources to create these more accommodating messages to the American people.

Mediated Communication from the White House and Illusions of Intimacy

"My friends, I want to talk to the people of the United States about banking." (Roosevelt, 1933)

Throughout history, the United States president would address the American people in different ways to connect the institution to their constituents. Before the expansion of communication technology as we know it today, presidents would transmit messages via in-person address, that would then be transmitted through newspapers. The first example of this is President George Washington's State of the Union Address in 1790, after his inauguration (Washington, 1790). In this address, Washington used his platform to discuss current events, but to also communicate hopes he had for the country; "…the advancement of agriculture, commerce, manufactures…the promotion of science and literature. Knowledge is in every country the surest basis of public happiness…" (Washington, 1790). From the onset of presidential communication, public address allowed American leaders to communicate to the masses in an indirect way and offered Americans an opportunity to characterize and personify the president and the institution they led. The *Virginia Herald* and *Fredericksburg Advertiser* aided in these efforts by commented on Washington's appearance as he "was dressed in a crow coloured suit of clothes, of American manufacture" (Washington, 1790).

Mediated communication acts as a conduit for presidential communication, and this conduit then becomes the means in which American people perceive the president, but more broadly, the president and the White House as an American institution. Despite the relative limitations of the time, even these reported speeches and descriptions helped to humanize the president and the White House. Overtime, future presidents would continue to employ the latest mediated communication platform to continue this humanizing process, as detailed in the sections that follow.

Radio

Moving from in-person addresses that were then reported via newspaper, the next wave of more personalizing technology came in the form of the radio. The first president to have four consecutive terms was the same president who spoke to American people directly in their homes, to the entire nation at once through the radio. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected in 1932 amidst the Great Depression. Immediately following his inauguration, President Roosevelt created *Fireside Chats*, where he addressed the United States through the radio during an unprecedented time of economic upheaval (Pedemonte, 2022). FDR used these chats as a platform to speak to the American people and connect with them during this trying time. Literature at this time notes that the president's choice to address the public in this manner differed from previous presidents who were more formal and controlled in their speech, adhering to scripted monolog. FDR used phrases like "my friends" and called his chats "delightful family conferences" (Pollard 1945). This manner of speaking, the phrases that were used, and the direct access Americans had with FDR proved to create a symbiotic relationship between the president and the people. This relationship and connectivity afforded by the radio also seemed to create more interrelatedness amongst Americans in general, as noted by Miller (1939):

> Radio enters the lives of people, at all hours and under all circumstances. It crosses every educational, religious, social and political line of society. Its programs reach Catholic and Protestant, educated and non-educated, Democrat and Republican, simultaneously (p. 683).

Miller's description of the radio sounds very similar to how one might paint social media today and shows how each new iteration of technology often brings the promise of collapsing divides. Though many heralded FDR's new way of approaching Americans, the public was hesitant by this new use of technology (Miller, 1939; Braden & Brandenburg, 1955). American people were worried about radio as a new form of technology, citing possibilities for children to develop sensory issues as they could hear people, but not see them, and even questioning the safety of radio waves, with concerns of it possibly harming young Americans' development (Lemmon, 1937; Wolfle, 1938). However, research then began to understand that radio was indeed safe, and it offered a new venue for media effects research, such as observing program content reactions, personality and voice inferences, and examining the effectiveness of radio advertising (Smith, 1939).

As broadcasting became commonplace, and recognized as a powerful mode of communication, this application extended to even more political uses of radio. The medium, however, required training as some lamented that "politicians have a great difficulty in using this instrument effectively**"** (Tyler, 1937, p. 120). Some adaptation to the medium was required to yield success as noted by Tyler (1937):

> Political bombast may be effective in a public meeting but it falls flat on the air. Radio requires a more subdued and intimate style, and our national leaders are finding it necessary to call in experts to teach them microphone techniques. Republican speakers

> are striving hard to develop radio personalities which can compete successfully with that of the President of the United States, who has pro "natural" on the air. Broadcasting is a powerful weapon for good or ill; its use by broadcasters is still largely unintelligent (p. 120).

It became apparent that the people wanted leaders to use radio in an effective way, as radio lent itself as a powerful way for political actors to create and establish personality and presence. The understanding of radio, and technology more generally, as a means to connect is evident in its aspired use. Further, FDR's more intimate, "natural" approach is particularly beneficial as research shows that being informal can lead to humanization, intimacy, and primarily, trust (Gunawardena, 1995; Negrón Goldbarg, R., 2009; Rüdiger & Mühleisen, 2022). Horton and Wohl (1956) noted that radio listeners create an "illusion of intimacy" toward a media figure that they come in contact with via this mediation. And when listeners return to a trusted speaker repeatedly, e.g., tuning into the radio when the president is on, credibility is formed and assumed by the listener (Savage & Spence, 2014). If presidential credibility was formed by Americans through the means of listening during FDR's presidency, then it logically follows that credibility can extend through the next technological evolution where citizens could see and hear the president at the same time, creating greater media richness.

Television

The next mediated communication advancement used by the White House was television. Like radio, Americans were cautious of this new technological advancement, citing possible issues in childhood development (Greenberg, 1965), questioning of how television might change interpersonal interactions (Anstis et al., 1969), and investigating how the incorporation of TV into everyday lives would change the nature of reality as Americans knew it (Smythe, 1954).

In its inception, television was primary used as an educational tool, with televisions becoming available and utilized in school settings (Norris, 1954), and was found to be a prolific instructional tool (Anderson & Vandermeer, 1955). This created an unexpected young audience who watched TV both at school and at home. In 1961, the average viewing audience of television was primarily teenagers from the ages of 12 to 18 years old (Summers, 1961). This meant young audiences played a role in shaping content that would be shown on the television. These audiences were impressionable, but because they were the target audience for programing, they had some impact on directing who and what should be shown on the TV. Roody (1952) pointed out that television can act as an educational tool for civic action, as news and governmental content became more accessible. TV became a powerful tool that proved to do more than simply entertain.

Much like with the radio, Scacco and Coe (2016) demonstrate that communication via television was an explicit choice for presidents, as television became the "cross section of American public" with viewers ranging in age, race, gender, socio-economic status, even citizenship status. This allowed for the president to speak directly to a wide range of diverse people, and access to the president became a necessary component of White House communications. President John F. Kennedy utilized the new medium when he hosted the first live presidential news conference broadcasted by both television and radio, on January 25th, 1961 (Sharp, 1968). This live coverage garnered 64 million viewers. In the conference, JFK discussed foreign policy, new administration changes, NATO, how he will handle U.S. nuclear testing including current missile inventory, US fiscal handlings, labor policies, and was met with questions about how his live address will proceed. This broadcast went well with the American people, and *Time Magazine* reported the following:

> The first days of a new job or new adventure never leave the mind; and the first days of a new President always remain vivid to his constituents. Few last week will forget the sight of the tense and nervous young man who stood, his white-knuckled hands clutching the sides of his lectern, to face the press and live national TV in his first presidential news conference…His performance—cool, controlled, knowledgeable—was hard to fault, as was his matter-of-fact handling of the return of imprisoned U.S. Airmen Freeman Bruce Olmstead and John McKone… Thus last week President Kennedy answered and fulfilled the mood of expectancy (*The Presidency: New Frontier's Directions*, 1961, p. 11).

The move by Kennedy to live-broadcast created a ripple effect that is seen throughout history to show the importance of utilizing technology to connect the American public to their leader. This event foraged a "a direct communications link between the president and the public" (Manheim, 1979, p. 56). Hoover (1988) notes that with this one single choice by a president and his institution, it single handedly initiated the age of technological importance from the president to the public.

More specifically, this television event allowed the president to create a new mode of communication to and with the public. Research notes that TV created a multipurpose function; as TV is used in an educational setting, it becomes an "interactive" "two-way" mode of communication (Barrington, 1965, p.19), as the *content* of television becomes subjugated by audiences, communication extends, and perceptions become ubiquitous with content. Addresses like President JFK's become an open point of dialog amongst Americans as they observed presidential communication content in an accessible manner, which lead to perception building of the White House and President.

Direct access to the president "by the people" proved to be a pivotal moment in shaping how Americans understood the institution (Hoover, 1988). With image creation, came image opinion. As President Kennedy entered the public eye in a new way, the American public had something to say about who he was, what he looked like, how he spoke, how he responded to others, and how all these social cues wove together to create an intricate framework of who John F. Kennedy *was*, according to the people and what they perceived. Suddenly, this event created the opportunity to contextualize who the president was, what his "persona" became, and how American politics came to create a three-dimensional figure of what the presidential institution is.

Further, Americans saw JFK as credible and trustworthy because technology afforded the ability to see, hear, and perceive the president. Like source credibility scholarship suggests, the source must hold attraction to further create credibility. The initial attraction was looks-based, as evident with the American public deeming JFK the most "attractive candidate" in his election (Watts, 2016). Public opinion leant the idea that the president might have similar attraction and allure like how people felt towards popular music groups like The Beatles. This attraction took on more substance as JFK guest starred in more informal settings like talk shows, breaking the mold of presidential formality, and meeting the boom of television shows that Americans watched daily. Kennedy appeared on political talk shows like *Meet the Press*, *Person to Person*, *Face the Nation*, and more. As Americans gained access to their president in a new way that had not yet been accessible, or as formal, through the availability of technology like television, trust was gained in a new and visual way, perceptions were created based off these contexts, and credibility was established with JFK that might have not been technologically afforded to previous presidents (Hart, 1996). President Kennedy's use of the television laid the groundwork

for his successors and proved to be a positive step in the direction of presidents using mediated communication to connect the White House to the People.

Sadly, some Americans' most prominent memory of JFK was his assassination that occurred in Dallas, Texas (Mayo, 1967), which was captured live for broadcast. Many also watched the funeral procession, which included the iconic image of JFK Jr. saluting his father's casket. The enormity of a presidential passing became more intimate, with the American public grieving alongside the family, and for those experiencing an "illusion of intimacy," grieving as one with the family. Both positive and negative occurrences on TV shape the use of this technology. This event also altered what people expect to see on their television sets and make determinations about what is and is not appropriate to air as unexpected instances occur.

As we move through American history, there is a notable through line of American presidents reaching their hand out to the public, through the ether of technology, hoping that the public can grasp their reach. Television became the hub for Americans and people around the world to tune in and connect. TV also became a tool for political influence and spectacle. Notable moments include President Nixon's 1972 Watergate scandal, which amassed television coverage and said coverage led to observable effects of television news exposure (Kazee, 1981). This also garnered the scientific investigation of political attitude creation through news and what media coverage meant for political efficacy (Ehman, 1980).

The "silver screen" proved to be powerful both politically and socially. In 1981, the first Hollywood movie-star-turned-politician was President Ronald Reagan. Research suggests that President Reagan altered a previous structure of presidential expectations. Presidents usually did not have an acting background, however Reagan's charm and performance knowledge created credibility in voters' eyes (Virilio, 1989). This time also gave way to understanding that the

president and their message is controlled through various parts of the presidential organization, such as their staff, cabinet, and institution at the White House (Moe, 1982). The president did not communicate on their own accord, but with others assisting in message construction. Other scholars also came to this understanding as presidential communication was analyzed:

> The most notable development in the Presidency in recent years is a change in structure rather than a growth in power… Inseparable from the modern Presidency, indeed essential to its effective operation, is a whole train of officers and offices that serve him as eyes, ears, arms, mouth, and brain (Rossiter, 1949, p. 1210).

Decision-making is not reliant on one single person; rather, decisions must flow through an intricate network of staff who supports the president (McGarity, 1986), including their communications with the public. The president is made up of two parts: both the Wizard of Oz and the people behind the curtain. Political drama/spectacle follows this idea that the president is not a two-dimensional character, but rather a complex person who relies on their action and the public evaluation of those actions, to create a contextually rich three-dimension person (Simon & Ostrom, 1989). Public support no longer relies solely on accomplishment but also on presidential performance in these mediated spaces.

Future presidents invested in this idea of performance, such as President Bill Clinton appearing on *The Arsenio Hall Show*, which aired on the MTV channel. Clinton played the saxophone to the tune of *Heartbreak Hotel*, while donning black shades on live TV. Hall introduced Clinton by saying "It's good to see a Democrat blowing something other than the election!" This event is important for two reasons. First, it included the president appearing in an informal way to the American public, in a space that was not a news channel, but rather a TV channel made for American youth. This MTV appearance by Clinton also featured a question

and answer session with the live studio audience, where questioners appeared as "giddy fans in the presence of one the program's unplugged musicians" (Hayden & Hayden, 2002, p. 8). Clinton's appearance seemed to resonate with young adults. This kind of fan appeal or cult of personality was also applied to previous presidents such as JFK.

Second, this event was a bid *from* the president, an attempt to meet specifically young voters *where they are at* (Whittington, 1997). Clinton's campaign included one particular person who would change the trajectory of presidential communication: 34-year-old Mandy Grundwald, the daughter of *Time Magazine*'s longstanding chief Henry Grundwald, opened the geyser of presidential "alternative media" (Hayden & Hayden, 2002) and created this new opportunity for presidents to showcase their interpersonal skills and reach out to young voters. Grundwald's decision is important as it shows presidential formality once again bending to accommodate contemporary notions and different audiences. It also shows a brand being created, paving the way for personality, and creating the expectation for intimacy with a president's character and image, while also showing how influential and strategic the White House can be in building an image. The president could be formal and informal at the same time, reinforcing trust through these richer forms of character development.

Internet

Personalizing and branding options grew once again with the proliferation of the internet. Bill Clinton became the first president to send an e-mail from the White House, and his administration was the first to launch a website for the White House. Clinton's presidency leaned into technology, including calling himself a "cybernaut" and becoming the first president to upload a bill to the internet, naturally that bill being the Telecommunication Act of 1996 (Aufderheide, 1999). By President Clinton utilizing the internet in an informal way, it created

accessibility to the president. In 1999, Clinton used the internet to interact with constituents in real time, answering questions through a web browser (Novak, 2016). Now, the public could reach out to the president from their home and get what may have felt like a "real" response. This fostered greater connection between the president and the people, proving to be a successful use of technology.

As presidents began to engage in informal communication with technological affordances "…presidents' public communication changed markedly, with heightened emphasis on the rhetorical aspects of the presidency altering the nature of the institution itself" (Scacco & Coe, 2016, p. 1). This change became significant and drew attention from scholars, noting that with presidential communication that is technologically-situated, the president and their institution gain the ability to craft content that can effectively influence audiences and changes perceptions of political messaging from the president to/with the people (Scacco & Coe, 2016). The White House utilized their communication in an Internet-era because the internet enabled widely accessible media exposure which became indispensable to governing (Cook, 2005).

Like Clinton, his successor George W. Bush also leaned into tech as a means to communicate and advance the White House's online activity. The internet, especially as used by the White House, created an "expectation of transparency and interactivity associated with the Internet that must be balanced against the need to protect national security and the desire to achieve political and policy goals" (Owen & Davis, 2008, p. 659). The balancing act of transparency, conducting presidential decorum, all while asserting a crafted "Presidential Image", lead to a new kind of familiarity felt by the American people to the American president.

Furthering this sense of familiarity, the Bush Administration began to lean into personification of themselves and the White House as whole, such incorporating new features

into the White House website like including President Bush's favorite subject in school, his childhood hero, his favorite sports coach, and similar information made available about First Lady Laura Bush with information about her favorite color, favorite flavor of ice cream, as well as characterizing information about Vice President Dick Cheney and his wife. These accessible bits of humanistic information made these political actors rich with personality and context for the American people and helped minimize the gap between them and their institution.

Along with this White House website development, the creation of the White House site for kids was also employed. The White House kids' website featured learning-based games, videos and photos from the White House, updates about the White House and President, as well as the aforementioned "White House Pet" site that showcased the President's dogs and their most recent achievements. The White House kids site even featured a caricature Barney the White House dog with his tail wagging in the header of the site. There was even a "Barney Cam" that followed around the White House dog, giving Americans a new, more intimate purview into the White House. This kind of user-friendly kid-orientation of the White House site was a weighted choice, since "…young people are an important and technologically savvy constituent group" (Owen & Davis, 2008, p. 670). Bush was of course not the last president to use more informal media to make overt appeals to younger Americans, though as discussed later, those appeals did become more sophisticated.

As the internet evolved and advanced, so did its usability. Americans saw the development of Web 2.0; "…an evolution of new internet applications that use the existing architecture of the Internet to create a culture of participation through the creative development of online communities, social networks, and content-sharing sites" (O'Reilly, 2005, p. 18). With the rise of web-based applications, public access to the internet, and at-home computers created

the need for White House communication that relied on new media to not only communicate with the American public in a general sense, but also in a nuanced way, peeling back the curtain to the lives of presidents so that it was accessible and understandable, even to children in rural parts of the US that might not typically interact with the White House and president in this way.

New media became a mode of presidential communication, which allowed the president and White House to communicate on their own terms (Owens & Davis, 2008). Tone became relevant in this mode of communication as well as the understanding of the new and changing audience that formed online and stayed online (Hart et al., 2013). Owen and Davis (2008) agree that this avenue of communication was an attractive selection for presidential communication. Like other new forms of technology, the White House's use of this tech was met with apprehension, but eventual usage and embracement. The internet leant itself to a more informal tone, such as seen in President Bush's inclusion of personal characteristics on the White House website. The president and White House could now more easily establish this tone on their own terms, while keeping intended audiences in mind with the early use of brand-making through online means.

Presidents like Clinton and W. Bush ushered in the new age of bringing the White House to the people with the use of the internet, but it was solidified by Bush's successor, President Barack Obama. Social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, Myspace, and Twitter became known as "social media" or "social networking services" prior to Obama's election. Obama's campaign team utilized this new and sensational format in his campaign, and later on in his presidency. Obama was the first president to send a tweet, leading the White House to also create social media accounts such as @TheWhiteHouse on Twitter, and Obama became the first president to establish the @POTUS (President of the United States) account once he was in

office. More detail about social media will be covered in the following section, but it is important to know that these sites created a way for online users to have connection with entities like the White House and president. These develops are important to this thesis because of how they relate to source credibility: Political messages by the White House and president, through the setting of social, might act as a more credible source for citizens because of its mobility, accessibility, and interactivity, as opposed to traditional press (Graf, 2008).

The internet environment became home to a specific audience: young people. From 2000 to 2015, the general age of users was between 18 to 49, and slowly, this age group came to be the dominant online user (Perrin & Duggan, 2015). In the early 2000s internet use by young people saw huge gains and even created the term "Net Generation" to explain young people's online use (Mesch & Coleman, 2007). Suddenly young people no longer participated in traditional face-to-face socializing activities, choosing instead to increasingly conduct themselves online. Researchers note this change, that younger people were consuming technology at a higher rate than previous generations, and this created a clear change in patterned behavior:

> Internet appropriation and use is beginning to move beyond the descriptive, identifying ways in which, for children and young people, the home is changing, become the site of content production as well as reception, of education and work as well as entertainment and leisure…online chat may count as civic participation… (Livingstone, 2003, p.5-6).

Young people *were* the internet audience, and this became the setting where young people gathered and sought out political and governmental information (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). The ages of users remained young, and this group was the active audience. When young people used the internet to access presidential information, accessibility to the president in this new way created trust between the two entities, forming a bond with the White House and president that

had not previously been established by younger generations and the technology they used to access the White House.

Throughout his presidency, Obama employed informal communication in popular online settings to connect with the American public. Obama appeared on the internet comedy series "Between Two Ferns" with comedian Zack Galifianakis. Obama and Galifianakis engaged in witty banter that was casual and humorous. Galifianakis asked the president "What's it like to be the last Black president?", to which Obama responds "Seriously? What's it like for this to be the last time you ever talk to a president?" (Funny or Die, 2014). This video gained 44 million views and left a lasting impression on Americans similar to that of W. Bush's use of the White House website that featured White House-dog-related content, Clinton's appearance on the Arsenio Hall show, JFK's presence on talk shows, and even FDR's language as he referred to the American people as "family". These efforts to break down formal barriers, and show personality and humility, and helped enable trust and connect with the president:

> This is [Obama's] way to show the younger voters that those processes are often outside of instant and direct presidential influence, and in that way he is allowed to participate in the joke about them, and in this way he forms a very direct and personal connection with his audience (Gomes, 2014, p. 18).

Online political discourse, especially discourse that involves humor with a political actor, like soft news and political satire, has been shown to "impact audiences' informational processing of social or political messages" (Zhang & Pinto, 2021, p. 1). A long line of research has shown that political comedy programs can prompt gateway effects, such as increasing political attention and knowledge (see Xenos & Becker, 2009). Humor allows for another dimension of presidential personification and can display communication accommodation. When

political actors can step into contextually situated settings (like Between Two Ferns) and show they can "speak the language" of that community, perceptions of accommodation are created in a way that might not have been created through previous forms of communication. Public perception is important for governmental institutions like the White House and the president to help maintain current audiences, appeal to alienated groups, and a humorous and personalizing tone in messaging can also prompt gateway effects. Therefore presidents and the White House are incentivized to employ these more informal forms of communication.

Social Media

Coined the "modern public square" by the US Supreme Court (*Packingham v. North Carolina*, 2017), social media has many important uses such as information seeking, entertainment, and communication. As social media evolved to foster more online connectivity, its usage became more widespread. As new social media platforms gained in popularity, they reached more of the American public, and as the public's use of platforms flourished, information then spread in a new way connecting the American people to their governing bodies. Following George W. Bush's presidency, his successor utilized emerging social media as a way to connect with voters and eventually the people of America.

President Obama's 2008 election became known as the "Twitter election" and "the election decided by Facebook" (Becker et al., 2011). Davis et al. (2008) found that the internet held "unparalleled organizing power" for presidential campaigns. During his campaign, Obama relied heavily on social networking sites to meet voters where they reside and communicate with them in a user-centered way. This choice by Obama to incorporate the internet and its capabilities proved to be extremely fruitful, according to the Obama Campaign: "The Internet served our campaign in unprecedented ways" (Balz & Johnson, 2009, p. 159). Research followed

this idea, proving that "…online interactions do not necessarily remove people from their offline world but may indeed be used to support relationships and keep people in contact…" (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011, p. 193).

Obama leaned into social media, specifically Twitter, and used its platform to raise 600 million dollars for his presidential campaign (Budak, 2010). Obama also used other platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and direct texting of supporters. The Obama campaigns in 2008 and 2012 also introduced "a new wave of technical innovation employing largescale data analytics and behavioral modeling" that they rolled out across their digital strategy (Bimber, 2014, p. 1). This new approach to surveying and interacting with voters prompted researchers like Bimber (2014) and Vaccari (2014) to assert that Obama's use of social created a commodification of an online communication message to the unassuming public, especially young people, who were eager to connect with presidential candidates in this way.

These new uses of technologies created a connection between Obama and young voters who navigated online spaces more frequently than other generations of voters at the time (Losh, 2012). Further, McLaughlin and Macafee (2019) note how important it is for this "story" that candidates create online to maintain personalization so that users feel closer to this figure because today's citizens "experience the political world through the eyes of political actors" (p. 585). As candidates update their followers on their goals and impressions, this creates a storyline for followers to "follow." The candidate, presidential, or White House social media account creates a storyline or timeline and, in turn

> ...creates a state where audience members cognitively and emotionally process an unfolding story from the actor's perspective, it typically leads to personal investment in seeing that actor triumph (Cohen, 2001). Thus, identification can help explain the process

through which campaign narratives cultivate citizen support. (McLaughlin & Macafee, 2019)

Other research notes how profound personalization of messaging online can be for candidates. Meeks (2016) focused on candidates' personalization on Twitter, and found that when candidates incorporate personalization, a bond and connection is formed with their followers/constituents.

> …personalized tweets triggered a stronger sense of direct conversation with the candidate, more positive evaluations, and stronger vote intention for the candidate. Ultimately, when candidates break down the divide between their public and private selves via the feminine styling of personalization, they may also be able to overcome the disconnected feeling of mediated campaigning (p. 297).

Candidate personalization has proven fruitful for candidates to maintain stakeholders, and those users can feel closer to the candidate.

Social media also afforded the public new ways of finding information and expressing their opinions. Brookhouse et al. (2021) shows that the use of social media by the White House and president gave Americans a different way to seek and consume information, as well as create the means for citizens to develop political opinion and publish that online. Social media permits the public to respond to events or prevalent issues, making their opinion known, and allowing agency to users in how they are communicated to and if they choose to interact with specific communication. Social media platforms have allowed the masses to express a political opinion and react to the ongoing brand cultivation created by governmental persons and organizations (Brookhouse et al., 2021). Such interactivity or the potential for visible expression of public opinion can lead to brand negotiation between the creator and the audience. Therefore,

politicians can craft highly strategic messaging on social media, but the affordances of these spaces do mean they relinquish some of their control. As social media has become the home for the American people to connect with political actors like the president, social media does not necessarily create a safe space for that kind of transmission. Scholars call social media the "Wild West of modern communication" (Farnsworth, 2018) in that social media platforms are also infiltrated by fake news via bots, and where online uprisings can gather and organize. However, the benefits of being in these spaces and the increasing expectation that presidents be in these spaces (Scacco & Coe, 2016), ultimately mean politicians are willing to forego some message control, as well as navigate mis/disinformation campaigns.

Following President Obama, President Donald Trump then took office in 2016. Trump used social media differently compared to his precursors. Where Obama interacted in a more informal but controlled way, Trump used his social media as a way for citizens to learn his real-time thoughts and feelings about events or news. Simply put, "Donald Trump's use of Twitter has broken the mold" (McKechnie, 2017, p. 3). Trump would go on to post inflammatory speeches on @POTUS Twitter, which then led to him being removed from the official President's Twitter handle (Crichton, 2021). The jarring shift from curated official presidential speech online, which was seen with Obama, to how President Trump conducted his online communication created a new environment for how the US public understands presidential online communication.

Trump's presidency was tumultuous, and his use of social media showed the power that White House communication holds in online spaces. Throughout Trump's four-year term, he would spread misinformation through his official account, which only grew his following

(McKechnie, 2017) who appreciated their president as being "unfiltered and uncontrolled" (Thornhill, 2022).

In November of 2020, Trump lost his reelection to Joe Biden. This upset created a Twitter-fueled deadly insurrection on the United States Capitol by Trump's supporters, who claimed he had won the election (Alshaabi et al., 2021, M. Otala et al., 2021). As Thornhill (2022) states, "Trump used his Twitter account as a weapon to repetitively vilify different racial identities… Trump created necropolitical conditions that justified violence in the United States" (p.1). Lives were lost at the insurrection, and America saw the potential of what online-fueled speech by the president can do to its public and notion of democracy.

In the wake of this in-person online-fueled disaster, Trump then became the first president to be banned from Twitter for incitement of violence (Alizadeh et al., 2021). The aftermath of this historical event showed that Americans are active online and pay attention to presidential messaging in online spaces like Twitter. While Trump may have conducted himself differently than previous presidents, credibility was still created by his behavior in online spaces, and some researchers even believe his "off the cuff online behavior" created an even deeper parasocial relationship between the president and supporters (Paravati et al., 2020, McDonnell & Wheeler, 2019, Lui, 2023).

As presidential social media use increased, research on presidential rhetoric started to evolve into what is known as the "ubiquitous presidency framework," in which presidents build a visible and almost constant presence in political and nonpolitical domains by being accessible, personal, and pluralistic (Scacco & Coe, 2021). Meeks (2022) notes that in terms of pluralism, Scacco and Coe (2021) assert that the American citizenry is diversifying, and networked technology is bringing these "disparate groups to the political fore" (Scacco & Coe, 2021, p. 17).

Obama's appearance on a nonpolitical internet comedy show as well as Trump's usage of Twitter at all moments of the day are evidence of this presidential communication shift, and how accommodating this shift can enable greater perceptions of credibility for some publics.

Major governmental bodies have also taken to social media to create new information pathways and connections, as well as to increase their visibility. Agencies like the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Federal Emergency Management Agency, and even Transportation Security Administration have a tremendous following on social media platforms (Vaara, 2017, Wang & Jones, 2017). They have cultivated online brands that facilitate the American public's awareness with essential updates, fun facts, showcasing members of that organization, and more. Governmental-related social media has also extended to crucial actors who maintain accounts with large followings. For example, in addition to President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris, First Lady Dr. Jill Biden, and the White House also have social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram—all of which supports the idea of the ubiquitous presidency and how it is an organizational effort to appear constantly present. These accounts also tether the American public to the seemingly unreachable figures of the country, as users can like, share, and comment on these accounts' content. As other presidential-related people/entities participate with users online, credibility can be established. The path to source credibility in these spaces can be more complicated than more traditional messaging spaces due to factors such as selective exposure and group polarization (Flanagin & Metzger, 2017). In the increasingly high-choice media environment, politicians and government bodies need to continue to evolve their usage to break through the clutter and connect with Americans. With this challenge, such entities have turned to other opinion leaders for help: social media influencers.

Social Media Influencers

"One second, democracy's calling!" said Cooper the Intern, as he stands on the front steps of the White House.

As social media gained in popularity, so did certain users who amassed large followings and became known as "social media influencers" (SMIs) or "content creators". Initial research asserts SMIs as a "…new type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (Freberg et al., 2011). It became generally understood that SMIs used online social capital to persuade followers as a mode of promotion and advertisement. SMIs acted as a face for their own brand, large brands who paid influencers to speak on behalf of them and direct their audience to whatever brand/organization that is promoting their messaging (Booth & Matic, 2011). While traditional use of advertising relied on paid actors in commercials or branding incorporated in other avenues of mass messaging, SMIs created a category of their own. Brands had to adapt to this new source and created communication objectives in SMI research:

> The goal is to stimulate an engaging conversation that allows us to change perception, diagnose expectations and bring clarity to the dialogue. That's the essence of developing a brand strategy – the foundation of your communication that builds authentic relationships between you and your audience. It is by defining your brand strategy that allows you to utilize Influencers in social media marketing, advertising, public relations and social media to consistently and accurately reinforce your character (Booth & Matic, 2011, p. 187).

Influencers became a "human touch" for organizations, drawing on authenticity of SMIs who did not gain popularity via modes of traditional media such as celebrities, e.g., actors, singers, and

professional athletes. The idea of what "constitutes a celebrity" goes as far back as Roman times (Gamson, 1994). Celebrity can be linked to visuality, in that visual representation creates fame. Examples of iconic representation include early painted portraits, coin faces, notable photographs, appearances on television, and now appearances in a visual context online (Barry, 2008).

Relatability is key to understanding how SMIs have come to find immense success, especially with younger followers. "Influencers appear relatable and close to youth's reality in terms of their language and relation to politics and, therefore, might have a crucial impact on young people's political attitudes" (Schmuck et al., 2022, p. 556). Today, content creators also act as "digital opinion leaders", in that they separate themselves from traditional celebrities due to self-presentation, weaving in their own personalities into their messaging which acts as a powerful asset to opinion following (De Veirman et al., 2017). SMIs also have entered the political landscape, with "influencers' interwoven political content appear[ing] casual and approachable" (Riedl et al., 2021), leaving users with the feeling that they are encountering political communication from a "peer," which can be deeply influential to young people's political attitudes (Schmuck et al., 2022). SMIs also maintain a parasocial and credibility-reliant relationship with their followers, endorsing messaging with users' trust in mind (Lookadoo & Wong, 2019). By creating personable, relatable, and seemingly authentic CMC messaging, SMIs have cultivated success.

SMIs can also achieve success with the tone of their messaging. Previous research examined how traditional political television advertisements were effective with the consideration of positive or negative tone (Meirick & Nisbett, 2011). Research now has evolved to address the tone of SMIs in political posts as "tone gives an indication of influencers' attitudes

towards brand-related issues and can affect followers' perception of politics" (Li & Feng, 2022). It is evident that influencers hold power in their communication. As seen previously with presidents who utilized informal settings to produce authenticity as a means to create credibility, influencers do the same when they promote political messaging with this more personalizing, informal tone. Influencers can promote messaging on behalf of the White House like they might do for a brand, which may help the White House gain credibility with young audiences who follow the SMI. This collaboration can also spur trust, which may lead to gateway effects and civic action by young people. This potential has not been lost on the White House as they continue to evolve their digital strategy.

The White House Digital Strategy

"I just got to meet Dr. Fauci, and I think he is incredible and an absolute legend!" – Oliva Rodrigo at the White House

Prior to Obama's final term as president, he founded the presidential Office of Digital Strategy in 2012. During Obama's presidency, the office of the digital strategy was responsible for "Content, Design, Development, Engagement, and Video" (The White House, President Obama, 2017). During Obama's presidency, "...Office [of Digital Strategy] uses digital platforms to amplify the president's message and engage with citizens around the country online" (Presidential Department Descriptions, n.d.) The office today seemingly falls under a similar guise as it was under President Obama. However, in December of 2020, soon-to-be President Biden announced his plans for the Office of Digital Strategy's appointees. These appointees hold roles that are similar to roles you might find in a PR agency (McCormick, 2020). Roles like "Director of Digital Strategy", "Digital Partnerships Manager", "Platform Manager", and

"Director of Digital Engagement" have been employed under this executive office. With this appointment, President Biden said "This team of diverse experts has a wide range of experience in digital strategy and will help connect the White House to the American people in new and innovative ways" (McCormick, 2020, para. 3).

While little scholarship has investigated this office and how it functions in terms of messaging today, Bates and Edwards (2023) state that Biden's Director of Digital Strategy (Rob Flaherty) has spoken about how important it is that Biden's messaging is a "return to normal" in the wake of Trump. Flaherty spoke about how the office will address presidential messaging, including the vice president as well:

> The things that we're obviously trying to do in a virtual space are create those opportunities for interaction, and sort of fill the void of leadership that we're seeing in Washington right now where the VP is an empathetic and competent leader in a time where people are craving both empathy and competence (Khalid & Keith, 2020, para. 8).

In this same interview, Kate Bedingfield, Biden's communications director went on to say:

> We really try to think about what is the broadest, widest array of creative programming that we can do to get him in front of people who are not necessarily dialed into politics day in and day out, but are looking at this crisis and feeling an incredible sense of uncertainty about what they're seeing from Trump (Khalid & Keith, 2020, para. 12).

It is clear that the White House, specifically under President Biden, has suited its communication to younger audiences. This is evident through their careful crafting of social media and who they employ to do so. This focus on younger voters was also evident in Biden's campaign, which included greater discussion of issues important to younger generations than Trump, ideas like forgiving student debt and pushing for restrictions to control climate change.

These ideas are important to young people, according to Parker and Igielnik (2020) in their Pew study that found that young people are more concerned about climate change, expects an activist government, supports gay marriage, and is the most educated generation to date.

To continue to reach younger voters, the Biden Administration also started working with SMI. In August of 2021, the White House press secretary Jen Psaki teamed up with popular Instagram and TikTok star Benny Drama (Benito Skinner) to create an SNL-like skit that aligns with his previously created character, Cooper the Gen Z Intern, who is featured in other videos as running amuck in the White House. In Skinner's comedy sketch, he references the controversial COVID-19 vaccine and has banter with Psaki. The Cooper skit was shared on both TikTok and @BennyDrama7's Instagram, where he has a combined 2.5 million followers. The 2-minute video garnered 7.2 million views on TikTok and 2 million views on Instagram, as of March 2023. The skit by Benito Skinner and the White House was presumably an appeal to younger audiences with the use of humor on social media. The incorporation of humor, as well as social media aesthetics such as quick cuts and a less formal tone, can be seen as a form of communication accommodation both to the affordances of these social media spaces and to its younger users. It is possible that in accordance with aforementioned scholarship, that such political humor and informal tone could prompt source credibility and gateway effects.

During the time of this video, the White House also hosted pop star Olivia Rodrigo to advocate for younger generations to get vaccinated. This hosting of a young star was a push by the White House to incorporate important figures familiar to younger audiences to demonstrate their willingness to engage politically in a new and smart way to start to bridge the gap to their intended audience. Notably, the Rodrigo video was posted on YouTube and featured longer cuts, mixing behind the scenes footage of Rodrigo at the White House meeting President Biden, Dr.

Fauci, and prepping with Psaki before taking the podium during a White House press conference. The feel of the video was less humorous as compared to Benny Drama's but it was nonetheless personal in tone, with viewers getting a glimpse of how Rodrigo felt throughout the process—her excitement and nerves—making the video more relatable and authentic. Therefore, this video could also prompt source credibility and gateway effects. During this time, the White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki stated:

> We need to reach people, meet people where they are and speaking to young people -- people who are under the age of 18, many of whom as we've seen across the country are huge Olivia Rodrigo fans -- hearing from her that ... getting vaccinated is a way to keep yourself safe, a way to ensure you can see your friends, a way you can ensure you can go to concerts, a way you can ensure that you can live a healthy life is an important part of what we're trying to do here (Sullivan, 2021, para. 8).

By the White House's own admittance, there is clearly a need to reach out to young people in America. The White House aims to speak in the language of young voters, accommodating young people in their communication and speaking in their language.

The White House's attempts to appeal to its younger online audience had mixed reviews. The sketch received backlash from anti-vaccine enthusiasts due to its promotion of vaccines by the White House staff. Former president Donald Trump's son Donald Trump Jr. tweeted, "Next they're going to waterboard you till you get vaccinated, though there's no way that would be worse than watching this!!!" (Trump Jr., 2021) in reference to the Benny Drama skit. As noted previously, engaging in new messaging techniques can create positive and negative reactions, and each administration factors these into their cost/benefit analysis of utilizing these techniques.

This thesis aims to measure the effects of these techniques, especially the White House's collaboration with SMI in the aforementioned videos with Cooper the Intern and Olivia Rodrigo. As noted above and as will be discussed more in the Method section, these collaborations featured different SMIs who used different personalizing techniques to connect with their audiences. This thesis tries to understand which approach was more successful. To do so, I pose the following research questions. First, to assess perceptions of source credibility, I ask:

RQ1: To what extent do young people view social media Influencers as credible sources?

RQ1a: When comparing perceptions of the Cooper versus Olivia videos, how do young people perceive the source credibility of influencer online political media differently?

Second, to assess perceptions of Communication Accommodation Theory and whether the White House's use of SMIs is accommodating, I ask:

RQ2: To what extent do young people view White House online political media with Influencers as accommodating?

RQ2a: When comparing perceptions of the Cooper versus Olivia videos, how do young people perceive the communication accommodation of online political media differently?

Third, to assess how these collaborations, with their varying forms of informality and personalization, can produce gateway effects, I ask:

RQ3: To what extent do young people experience a Gateway Effect after watching these influencer videos?

RQ3a: What is the relationship between social media influencer credibility and the Gateway Effect for young people?

RQ3b: What is the relationship between online political media communication accommodation and the Gateway Effect for young people?

Finally, because gateway effects in this thesis are oriented toward online behaviors, as will be discussed further in the next section, it is possible that individuals who are already active on social media and with political media may be more prone to follow and share White House content. Therefore, to assess what role SMIs' credibility and accommodation are playing in creating Gateway Effects, I ask:

> **RQ3c**: To what extent do perceptions of SMIs' credibility and accommodation predict a Gateway Effect for young people, while controlling for their social media and political media behaviors?

Method

This thesis examines how younger audiences understand influencer-endorsed communication by the White House via an online survey. Creswell (2014) argues that surveying a group can provide insight into the characteristics of that population when utilizing a quantitative within-subject survey design. Procedurally, this design was selected because it allows the researcher to gather information quickly, cost-effectively, and reliably on the targeted participant group (Graham, 2020). Within-subject survey design also allows the implementation of a theoretically-grounded construction that directly measures multidimensional-theory in the context of this research (Walumbwa et al., 2008, Alberts et al., 2020). Within-subject design is pertinent to make direct comparisons and can negate participant "noise" and allow direct theoretical comparisons in the design itself (Charness et al., 2012, Judd et al., 2001). Within-subject survey designs are also of notable use for thesis research, as it requires less participants for its analysis and a lower cost to conduct research inquiry (Russell, 1991).

The goal of this survey is to better understand how young people react to different types of computer-mediated White House communication. Utilizing a survey design allows the participants to directly express their viewpoint on White House communication, and also acts as a foundation to measure relations between variables and can provide external validity for young peoples' disposition on changing White House communication. The design of the survey allows the researcher to explore patterns between variables that can extend previous research on computer-mediated White House communication by examining this new inclusion of social media influencers.

In the survey, respondents were asked demographic questions, then viewed a video that showed pop star Olivia Rodrigo visiting the White House. Respondents then answered questions about this video. Then, participants were shown a second video of Benny Drama (Cooper the Intern) and his skit at the White House and were asked to respond to questions about this video which mirrored those of Olivia. Finally, participants then answered general questions about these videos, and their reaction as a whole to Influencers at the White House.

Participants

To gain a sample for this within-subject survey, the researcher used convenience sampling and recruited from a pool of college undergraduates. Pulling on a participant pool of undergraduates is apt as this thesis is focused on young adults' perceptions of the White House's collaboration with SMI. The initial sample included 130 responses to the online survey. After reviewing the data, it was found that 19 participants completed the survey in under five minutes and were removed from the data pool as it was not possible to view the videos and answer all the questions in less than five minutes. After further data clean up, 111 responses were analyzed.

In the respondent pool, more participants identified as female (72%) than male participants (28%). Most respondents identified as White (75%), followed by Latinx participants (8%), Black or African American (7%), Native American or Indigenous (6%) and Asian or Pacific Islander (6%), and multiracial (2%). An overwhelming majority of the participants identified as part of Generation Z (98%), with only two participants identifying as millennials (2%), thus constituting a sample of young adults. In the usable data, 81% of participants identified as heterosexual, followed by 8% identifying as asexual, 5% were bisexual, 2% were gay, 2% were queer, and 3% of participants preferred not to share their sexual orientation. Many participants identified as Republican (43%), followed by Democrat (25%), some other party (14%), Libertarian (7%), and 10% of participants preferred not to share their political party affiliation.

Given that this thesis is also focused on social media content and online political media usage, it is also apt to characterize the sample's usage of both. In terms of social media use, respondents had high usage in that 41% said they used social media "always" followed by 37% who said they used social media "most of the time". The remaining 17% of respondents used social media less frequently or never. As for sharing behavior, 32% of participants stated that they posted or shared on their social media accounts a few times a month, followed by 30% who shared a few times a week.

As far as political media is concerned, 40% of respondents said that they encounter political media on their feed a few times a month, followed by 25% said they encounter political media on their feed a few times a week. In terms of more active consumption, 67% of respondents follow accounts that are about politics on their social media, as opposed to 33% who do not follow such accounts. The majority of participants said they never shared political media

on their personal social media pages (59%). Respondents also followed White House official accounts, with 82% stating they do follow White House official accounts, and 18% stating they do not follow such accounts. In terms of where respondents get their White House communication, 60% of respondents stated that they encounter White House communication on social media and 64% stated that they encounter White House communication from friends, family, coworkers, and other individuals.

Design and Procedures

After first obtaining IRB approval for the proposed study, the researcher collected responses from a pool of undergraduate students at an American college. Students received extra credit towards their grade for the completion of this survey, permitted they first consented to the survey (see Appendix A for consent form), completed the survey in a timely manner, and passed attention checks throughout the survey. No prerequisites were needed to take this survey.

The within-subject survey was broken up into several blocks of questions that each utilized various theories and concepts mentioned previously to assess the research questions (see Appendix B). The first set of blocks gained consent to participate in the study, as well as questions aimed at retrieving demographics and social media and political media behavior. These initial questions allowed the researcher to establish a baseline to see how participants typically interacted online, as well as how involved they are in online political discourse. These questions were also important to addressing RQ3c.

The next set of blocks of the survey showed participants the video of Olivia Rodrigo at the White House, the more formal of the two videos shown, and asked participants several questions related to the RQs. The next set of blocks mirrored Olivia's both focused on the less formal video of Cooper the Intern.

The final blocks asked which video was more effective to the participant and which they would share, as well as general questions about the videos and their feelings of White House collaboration with social media influencers.

Measures

Social Media Usage

To measure the degree in which participants understood and utilized social media, CMC-based questions were used in the social media and political media blocks. These questions were adapted from Westerman et al.'s (2016) study, which employed survey research to measure how students used social media. Researchers asked about general attitudes of social media, as well as how participants learned through social media as an information source. Utilizing these similar questions in this research acted as a way to establish attitudinal correlation to computer-mediated social media, as well as to understood validity of social media as an information source. CMC questions first established social media use, asking participants to rank their online participation in a five-point Likert frequency scale ranging from "never" (1) to "always" (5) to assess frequency of online usage. Sample items include: "How often do you use social media?" and "How often do you share content personally to friends or family through the instant message feature of social media platforms?" (see Appendix B for full questionnaire). The three items were averaged together to create a scale, and higher scores indicated greater social media usage.

The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was acceptable, $\alpha = .697$. According to Fabrigar et al. (1999) a score of ~.70 or higher is satisfactory in terms of reliability.

Online Political Behavior

Online political behavior was also asked of participants and based on Westerman et al.'s (2016) study. Questions asked participants to rank their online political media usage in a five-

point Likert frequency scale ranging from “never” (1) to “always” (5), as well as “yes” (1) and “no” (5) to assess frequency of political social media behavior. Sample items include: “How often do you encounter political media on your social media feed?” and “How often do you share political media on your social media?” (see Appendix B for full questionnaire). The four items were average together to create a scale, and higher scores indicated a greater degree of online political media usage. The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was acceptable, $\alpha = .713$

Source Credibility

Source Credibility was measured using a modified version of Infante’s (1980) scale that analyzes source credibility on three dimensions: favorability, trustworthiness, and intent to pursue more from the source. These dimensions were theoretically-based, so that the researcher could measure how credible social media Influencer communication was at the White House to participants.

Source credibility was asked for each SMI, Olivia and Cooper. Questions asked participants to rank their impressions of the SMI at the White House using a five-point Likert frequency scale ranging from “extremely positive” (1) to “extremely negative” (5) when asked about participants impression of the SMI at the White House, as well as trustworthiness ranging from “Definitely not” (1) to “Definitely yes” (5), as well as a favorability score showing “unfavorable” (1) to “extremely favorable” (5), and so on. Sample items include: “What is your impression of [Olivia Rodrigo/Cooper the Intern] in this video?” and “How favorable is [Olivia Rodrigo's/Cooper the Intern’s] inclusion at the White House to you?” These five items were averaged into a composite interpretation variable and then used as a dependent variable for the analysis. Higher scores indicated greater credibility. For the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) for Olivia, all items loaded as a single factor, and the KMO was .78 and Bartlett’s test was

significant ($p < .001$). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was acceptable, $\alpha = .712$. The EFA for Cooper loaded two factors: general credibility and sharing behavior, and the KMO was .75 and Bartlett's test was significant ($p < .001$). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was acceptable, $\alpha = .783$.

Communication Accommodation

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) is typically applied to in-person conversations and measured through Conversation Analysis. However, to capture perceptions of accommodation in an online setting and with a focus on video aesthetics, this study's measure was based off of Kwon's (2012) Communication Accommodation scales. Therefore, this measure assessed sentiments on the visual aspects of each video and how participants reacted to the interactions between the White House personnel and influencers in the video. Participants answered questions on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (5) to "strongly agree" (1). Statements included, for example, "The pace of the video was just right for me" and "I like how [Olivia Rodrigo/Cooper the Intern] interacted with various people in this video." The five items were averaged into a composite interpretation variable and then used as a dependent variable for the analysis. Higher scores indicated greater perceptions of accommodation. Based on an EFA for Olivia, all items loaded as a single factor, and the KMO was .76 and Bartlett's test was significant ($p < .001$). The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was acceptable, $\alpha = .791$. The EFA for Cooper loaded two factors: aesthetic accommodation and interpersonal accommodation, and the KMO was .76 and Bartlett's test was significant ($p < .001$). The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was acceptable, $\alpha = .816$

Gateway Effect

Gateway Effect is typically measured in terms of intentionality of future behavior, specifically in a persuasion context. Measuring how influencer inclusion at the White House acted as a gateway to participants future use of White House social media was included to see if these videos did what they presumably set out to do; create a relationship between young people and the White House by means of including relevant actors (in this case, Influencers) and prompting them to engage in certain political behaviors.

Gateway Effect was measured with Yzer et al.'s (2003) scale to understand three dimensions: intention, attitude, and belief. Gateway Effect questions were asked using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (5) to "strongly agree" (1). Sample statements include: "I think the White House collaborating with social media influencers is a positive decision" and "I am more likely to follow the White House on social media after watching these videos." The five items were averaged into a composite interpretation variable and then used as a dependent variable for the analysis. Higher scores indicated a Gateway Effect. Based on an EFA, all items loaded as one factor, and the KMO was .85 and Bartlett's test was significant ($p < .001$). The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was acceptable, $\alpha = .864$

Results

The first research question asked how credible young people view social media influencers. The researcher assessed source credibility of social media influencers based on descriptive statistics of the five-item measure of credibility detailed previously. Credibility was assessed independently for both videos. As a reminder, the scale was one to five, with higher scores indicating more credibility. In the Olivia Rodrigo video, the mean score of credibility was 2.77 ($SD = .72$). In the Cooper video, the mean score of credibility was 2.30 ($SD = .81$). Overall,

both means fell below the midway point, suggesting participants do not view social media influencers as credible.

To additionally understand RQ1's examination of credibility with SMIs at the White House, the researcher ran a one-sample *t*-test. This test allows the researcher to compare the means from the sample to see if the mean is significantly different from a specific viewpoint (Cressie & Whitford, 1986). A one-sample *t*-test was performed to compare Olivia and Cooper's credibility against a hypothetical population mean, which was set to 3 as it is the midway point on the scale and represents the tipping point between less and more credible. The mean value of Olivia's video ($M = 2.92$, $SD = .68$) did not significantly differ from the population mean, $t(102) = -1.15$N, $p = .252$. This shows that perceptions of Olivia's credibility are closer to the neutral point on the scale. Cooper's credibility ($M = 2.43$, $SD = .77$) significantly differed from the set population mean, $t\ (97) = -7.31$, $p < .001$, suggesting his video was seen as less credible to participants.

To analyze RQ1(a), which compared Olivia to Cooper, the researcher ran a paired samples *t*-test to assess the perceived credibility of two videos. On average, participants perceived Olivia ($M = 2.78$, $SE = .07$) to be significantly more credible than Cooper ($M = 2.30$, $SE = .08$), $MD = .48$, $t(94) = 4.57$, BCa 95% CI [.27, .69], $p < .001$. This represented an effect of $d = .47$, meaning that there is .47 standard deviations difference between the two groups, which is a medium/moderate effect size. In turn, the Cooper video, which was more informal as compared to Olivia's video, was seen as less credible and indicates that the formality of political media greatly impacts perceptions of source credibility.

To explore RQ2, the researcher assessed communication accommodation of social media influencers based on descriptive statistics of the five-item measure of communication

accommodation detailed previously. Communication accommodation was assessed independently for both videos. As a reminder, the scale was one to five, with higher scores indicating more accommodation. In the Olivia Rodrigo video, the mean score of accommodation was 3.87 (*SD* = .75), showing that this video was perceived as somewhat accommodating to participants. In the Cooper video, the mean score of accommodation was 3.41 (*SD* = .90), showing that this video was also perceived as somewhat accommodating to participants. Overall, participants perceived each video as marginally accommodating to them because the means passed the midway point.

To better assess how well perceptions cleared the midway point, a one-sample *t*-test was run to understand if accommodation was made by SMIs to participants who viewed Olivia and Cooper's videos at the White House, with the set hypothetical mean set to 3.0. The mean value of Olivia's video (*M* = 3.87, *SD* = .75) was significantly higher than the population mean, *t*(111) = 12.17, *p* <.001. This indicates that her video was understood to be more accommodating by participants. Cooper's video (*M* = 3.41, *SD* = .90) reported credibility higher than the population mean, *t*(111) = 4.82, *p* <.001. This test also shows that participants viewed Cooper's video as accommodating. These tests show that both SMIs videos at the White House were viewed by participants as enacting accommodation within this collaboration.

To understand RQ2(a) which compared Olivia to Cooper, the researcher ran a paired samples *t*-test to assess the perceived accommodation of the two videos. On average, participants perceived Olivia (*M* = 3.87, *SE* = .07) to be significantly more accommodating than Cooper (*M* = 3.41, *SE* = .09), *MD* = .46, *t* (110) = 4.61, BCa 95% CI [.26, .65], *p* <.001. This represented an effect of *d* = .44, meaning that there is .44 standard deviations difference between the two

groups, which is a medium effect size, meaning that the formality and styling of political media moderately impacts perceptions of communication accommodation.

To investigate RQ3 and potential gateway effects, the researcher used descriptive statistics with the five-item measure of Gateway Effect detailed previously. Gateway Effect was assessed cumulatively for both videos. As a reminder, the scale was one to five, with higher scores indicating a greater gateway effect. The mean score of the Gateway Effect was 3.03 (SD = .94), thus hovering right around the neutral point and potentially showing that these videos did not create a substantial Gateway Effect for participants.

A one-sample t-test was also ran to understand the Gateway Effects that might have been produced after participants watched both Olivia and Cooper's videos. The mean value of White House Gateway Effects (M = 3.03, SD = .94) was not significantly different than the population as a whole, $t(109) = .37$, $p = .715$. This suggests SMIs' collaboration at the White House did not produce substantially positive Gateway Effects .

To understand RQ3(a) and comprehend the relationship betwixt social media influencer credibility and the Gateway Effect for young people, the researcher ran a Pearson correlation analysis. The relationship between credibility and Gateway Effect was assessed independently for each video. The correlation between Olivia's perceived credibility and WH Gateway Effect, $r = .55$, $p < .001$, is positive, significant, and a medium correlation. The correlation between Cooper's perceived credibility and WH Gateway Effect, $r = .33$, $p = .001$, is positive, significant, and moderate in size. Therefore, in both cases, as source credibility increases, so does the tendency for a Gateway Effect. Both correlations are moderate in size, though Olivia's is slightly larger, suggesting a stronger relationship, comparatively, between Olivia's source credibility and Gateway Effects. To compare to see if the r value for Olivia's video is higher than Cooper's

video, a Fisher's r-to-z transformation was conducted. This analysis revealed that Olivia's correlation was significantly higher than Cooper's, thus indicating that her video produced a stronger relationship between Gateway Effect and credibility ($z = 1.91$, $p = 0.06$).

Investigating RQ3(b) to understand the relationship betwixt social media influencer accommodation and the Gateway Effect for young people, the researcher ran a Pearson correlation analysis. The relationship between accommodation and Gateway Effect was assessed independently for each video. The correlation between Olivia's perceived accommodation and Gateway Effect, $r = .35$, $p < .001$, is positive, significant, and moderate in size. The correlation between Cooper's perceived credibility and Gateway Effect, $r = .40$, $p < .001$, is also positive, significant, and moderate in size. In turn, for both influencers, as accommodation increases, so does the tendency for Gateway Effects. The correlations for both influencers are quite close, suggesting relatively no differences between the two in terms of spurring Gateway Effects based on their perceived accommodation.

To compare to see if the *r* value for Olivia's video is higher than Coopers, another Fisher's r-to-z transformation was conducted. This analysis revealed that Cooper's correlation was significantly higher than Olivia's, thus indicating that his video produced a stronger relationship between Gateway Effects and accommodation ($z = 1.91$, $p = 0.06$).

To assess RQ3(c), which assessed the extent to which perceptions of credibility and accommodation predict the Gateway Effect in young people while controlling for their social media and political media behavior, the researcher employed hierarchical regression analysis with social media and political media behavior entered first and then credibility and accommodation entered second. These analyses were run separately for each video. Table 1

includes information regarding the Olivia video, while Table 2 includes information regarding the Cooper video.

For the Olivia video, the first model was significant, $F(2,99) = 7.435$, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .113$. As the results in Table 1 indicate, both political media and social media behaviors positively predicted gateway effects. The second model was also significant, $F(4,97) = 14.290$, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .345$, and the R^2 change was significant at .240, $p < .001$. Therefore, the introduction of credibility and accommodation accounted for an additional 24% of variance for gateway effects. Results in Table 1 indicate that credibility was driving this shift as the results for accommodation were insignificant.

Table 1. *Hierarchical Regression of Gateway Effect for Olivia Video*

	R	R^2	R^2 *Change*	*B*	*SE* of B	*β*	*t*
Model 1	.361	.131***					
Political Media Behavior				.18	.08	.21*	2.22
Social Media Behavior				.28	.11	.26**	2.79
Model 2	.609	.371***	.240***				
Political Media Behavior				.14	.07	.17	1.941
Social Media Behavior				.19	.09	.18	2.097*
Source Credibility				.54	.12	.45	4.741***
Communication Accommodation				.12	.12	.01	1.008

Note. *p <.05; **p <.01; ***p <.001

For the Cooper video, the first model was significant, $F(2,93) = 6.837$, $p = .002$, adjusted $R^2 = .109$. As the results in Table 2 indicate, both political media and social media behaviors positively predicted gateway effects. The second model was also significant, $F(4,91) = 7.389$, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .212$, and the R^2 change was significant at .117, $p = .001$. Therefore, the

introduction of credibility and accommodation accounted for an additional 11.7% of variance for gateway effects. However, as indicated in Table 2, none of the results for credibility and accommodation for Cooper were significant.

Table 2. *Hierarchical Regression of Gateway Effect for Cooper Video*

	R	R^2	R^2 *Change*	*B*	*SE* of B	*β*	*t*
Model 1	.358	.128**					
Political Media Behavior				.15	.18	.08	1.871
Social Media Behavior				.31	.28	.11	2.893**
Model 2	.495	.245***	.117**				
Political Media Behavior				.17	.20	.08	2.155*
Social Media Behavior				.27	.25	.10	2.633*
Communication Accommodation				.18	.18	.13	1.416
Source Credibility				.21	.19	.14	1.542

Note. *p <.05; **p <.01; ***p <.001

Additional Analysis

To assess whether certain demographics may affect perceptions of how young people perceive influencer collaborations at the White House, analysis was also conducted on participants' gender, sexual orientation, and political affiliation. Specifically, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted. Gender was selected because one video features a woman and another features a man, and it is possible that gender affinity between the SMI and the participant could affect results. Previous research has found a gender affinity effect before between politicians and voters regarding vote choice (Sanbonmatsu, 2002). Regarding sexual orientation, while Bennito Skinner, the influencer who played Cooper the Intern, is forthcoming

about his sexuality, there were no explicit mentions of the Cooper character's sexuality. But if participants were familiar with Skinner's sexuality, it could also create the potential for identification between Skinner and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Further, the researcher was interested to see how young people reacted to the breaking of gender norms in Cooper video, where Bennito wore a skirt. Finally, participants' political party affiliation was included as the videos center on a Biden White House, who is a Democrat, and feature promotion of the COVID-109 vaccine, which Democrats were more likely to support (Lin & Beitsch, 2020).

For gender, no significant differences were found between men and women for political media behavior or perceived accommodation in the Olivia video. Significant differences were found for social media behavior, $MD = .75$, $F(1,109) = 22.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .17$, such that women used social media more than men; Gateway Effect, $MD = .52$, $F(1,108) = 7.03$, $p = .009$, $\eta^2 = .06$, such that women experience more Gateway Effect than men; credibility for Olivia's video, $MD = .36$, $F(1,101) = 6.04$, $p = .016$, $\eta^2 = .06$, such that women found Olivia's video more credible than men; credibility for Cooper's video, $MD = .52$, $F(1,95) = 8.87$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .09$, such that women found Cooper's video more credible than men; accommodation in Cooper's video, $MD = .65$, $F(1,109) = 12.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$, such that women found Cooper's video more accommodating than men. Collectively, then, the videos appeared to prompt greater effects for women as compared to men.

Regarding sexual orientation, no significant differences were found regarding social media behavior, gateway effects, credibility for both videos, or the perceptions of accommodation for both videos based on sexual orientation. Significant differences were found for political media behavior, $F(5,105) = 2.65$, $p = .027$, $\eta^2 = .11$. Post Hoc comparisons with Bonferroni corrections reveal that the only significant difference in political media behavior was

between participants who identified as Asexual and participants who identified as Bisexual, *MD* = 1.92, *SE* = .55, *p* = .011, such that participants who identified as Bisexual used more political media than participants who identified as Asexual. Given the small sample size of those who identified as Bisexual or Asexual—or as anything other than heterosexual in general—it would be imprudent to draw any large conclusions from these results.

Finally, for political party affiliation, no significant differences were found regarding credibility for Cooper's video, or the perceptions of accommodation for both videos based on political affiliation. Significant differences were found for social media behavior, $F(4,106) = 3.43$, $p = .011$, $\eta^2 = .11$. After Bonferroni corrections no contrasts remain significant. Significant differences were found for political media behavior, $F(4,106) = 2.83$, $p = .028$, $\eta^2 = .10$. Planned contrasts reveal that participants who identified as Republican differ significantly from participants who identified as Democrat, *MD* = .70, *SE* = .24, *p* = .039, such that Democrats used more political media than Republicans. Significant differences were also found for Gateway Effect, $F(4,105) = 2.18$, $p = .039$, $\eta^2 = .09$. Planned contrasts reveal that participants who identified as Republican differ significantly from participants who identified as Democrats, *MD* = .70, *SE* = .22, *p* = .018, such that Democrats experienced Gateway Effect more than Republicans. Additionally, significant differences were found for Olivia's credibility, $F(4,98) = 2.28$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .19$. Planned contrasts reveal that participants who identified as Republican differ significantly from participants who identified as Democrats, *MD* = .55, *SE* = .15, *p* = .005, such that Democrats found Olivia's video more credible than Republicans. Republicans also differ significantly from Libertarians, *MD* = .93, *SE* = .25, *p* = .004, such that Libertarians found Olivia's video more credible than Republicans. Finally, Libertarians differ significantly from participants who did not wish to reveal their political affiliations, *MD* = .91, *SE* = .30, *p* = .032,

such that Libertarians perceived Olivia's video more credible. In total, then, Democrats were more likely to experience a gateway effect and found Olivia's video more credible as compared to Republicans.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how young people understand the shifting White House communication style of collaborating with social media influencers to project White House-centric messaging. A within-subject survey design was used where participants saw two videos of social media influencers (SMI) at the White House. One video featured Olivia Rodrigo as the SMI and was understood as a *less* informal video, and the second with Cooper the Intern as the SMI was treated as *more* informal based on their respective video's aesthetics and content. Participants then answered questions that gauged their feelings towards influencer credibility, accommodation of interactions, and they were asked whether these videos might encourage them to seek out more White House communication to create a gateway effect.

Persuasion occurs when the source is perceived to be credible and trustworthy (Kelman, 1958). Persuasion is based on the message, but also those producing the message. Previous research has found that SMIs gain credibility and trust from their viewers through their highly personal, authentic communication and visual style (Schmuck et al., 2022, Lookadoo & Wong, 2019). However, this thesis found that SMIs are not viewed as very credible by young people. Analysis showed that both influencers used in the content of this thesis research did not cross the midway point on the credibility scale, indicating that young people viewed SMIs as less credible.

Within the comparison of the two different influencers, data revealed that Olivia's *less* informal style of messaging was viewed as more credible to young people than Cooper's *more* informal style. Olivia's video was less formal as compared to the usual White House

communications that Americans typically see, as it featured behind-the-scenes footage and Olivia talking about how nervous and excited she was to be at the White House and speak with President Biden. However, Olivia's video did show some cues of comparatively more formality than Cooper's as she was dressed in a Chanel-style skirt suit and spoke at the podium in a press conference, as well as interacting with numerous White House officials, and showing these interactions in her video. Cooper's was relatively less formal as it featured humor with a comedic yet flippant interaction with only one White House official. Cooper adorned a skirt suit as well. This stylistic choice of Cooper's showed gender-bending of stereotypes, potentially resulting in his clothing being viewed as less formal. Figure 1 includes pictures to show each influencer's attire at the White House. While this thesis cannot delineate which aspects of each video prompted more credibility for Olivia versus Cooper, there does seem to be an overarching effect of (in)formality on credibility. It is possible too, that Cooper's video was perceived as overaccommodating to participants given its greater informality and editing, which can trigger negative effects according to CAT, such as perceptions that the source is pandering to the target audience. Atalay (2015) found that when major accommodation changes occurred by a speaker to overdo accommodation to audiences, it prompted feelings of aversion. The content and production of this video was consistent with Benny's ongoing portrayal of Cooper the Intern, but because so few participants were familiar with Benny (6%), they did not know this character, his general styling, or his humor. Without background to this influencer, participants might have felt as if this video was pandering to Gen Z or they may have needed context to fully understand the character's goal and involvement at the White House, which might have produced the effect of Cooper being seen as less credible.

Figure 1



Olivia Rodrigo at the White House



Benito Skinner at the White House

Communication accommodation is also related to credibility-based messaging, and this thesis explored the notion of CMC accommodation practices in two ways. First, the inclusion of influencers as the message source was a form of accommodation as it used (famous) peers to make the messages more accessible and relatable, both of which are affiliated with SMIs (Riedl et al., 2021). Second, aspects of perceived informality by the SMIs at the White House in terms of visual styling and editing as described above, as well as interactions within the videos between SMIs and White House officials also might have contributed to perceptions of accommodation. According to the results, perceptions of accommodation for both influencers at the White House leaned toward a positive trend indicating that these techniques were viewed as accommodating by participants. Comparatively, Olivia's video was viewed as more accommodating than Cooper's. The changing and adaptation of expected norms in terms of White House digital

communication with the use of influencers may have created an understanding of accommodation by young people, showing that these videos by the White House still had impact even if they were not initially viewed as credible.

In terms of persuasive outcomes, this thesis focused on Gateway Effects. Though Gateway Effects are often conceived of as only future behaviors, this thesis took a more expansive approach to measuring this concept, applying Yzer et al.'s (2003) scale to understand three dimensions: intention, attitude, and belief. While the White House has been explicit about their use of SMIs to reach young adults (Sullivan, 2021, para. 8), they have not provided specific outcomes. Previous research shows that informal avenues of communication create trust in an institution, and with trust, political participation grows (Long et al., 2021). Presumably the White House wants young adults to become more politically active, as well as engage in other political activities, such as consuming more political media to become more informed citizens, as these are the bedrock of any democracy. Therefore, this thesis focused on this more expansive measure of Gateway Effects as an important outcome measure in general and in coordination with using SMIs are a more "informal avenue."

Despite previous research showing the political humor and less formal political communication can spur gateway effects (e.g., Baum, 2003; Feldman & Young, 2008; Long et al., 2021; Xenos & Becker, 2009), this survey found that SMI collaborations do not necessarily create a Gateway Effect for young people. However, this thesis did still reveal some trends related to gateway effects. Data showed that as source credibility increased towards SMIs, gateway effects increased as well—creating a moderate relationship. In terms of comparing influencers, participants continued to prefer the less informal type of SMI inclusion like they saw of Olivia Rodrigo at the White House. Data also suggests that as accommodation increases,

Gateway Effects increase as well. Notably, correlational data showed very little difference between Olivia and Cooper when it came to accommodation and Gateway Effect. However, when controlling for young people's social media and political media behaviors, only Olivia's credibility was found to increase Gateway Effects. It appears that Olivia's less informal styling can positively contribute to Gateway Effects, providing the White House with a new type of communication that might prompt young adults' attitudes and intention toward White House communications.

In addition to the core analysis, this thesis also examined whether any participant demographics might also add to the persuasive process. Interestingly, results found that Democrats used more political media than Republicans, and those same Democrats were also more likely to experience gateway effect. Furthermore, Democrats were more likely than Republicans to view Olivia's video as credible. This might be because the White House is currently occupied by a Democratic president, and President Biden was also featured in Olivia's video, which might have reinforced Democrats' view of credibility as a gateway. Given America's political climate, with high levels of negative partisanship (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018), it is not surprising to see that those who are of different political affiliations also hold different perceptions of White House-centric messaging.

That said, that there were no significant partisan differences for Cooper's video is interesting as it still included a White House official. Partisan differences in this research might have been due to who each influencer was directly communicating with in the video. In Cooper's video he is acting as a fictious intern to the White House press secretary, whereas Olivia is not assuming a fictitious role, and more so speaking alongside the then White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki. Olivia also interacted with different political individuals at the White House in her

video, such as Vice President Kamala Harris, Chief Medical Advisor to the President of United States, Dr. Anthony Fauci, and President Biden. Olivia's video still holds informal communication, as there are behind the scenes and more casual conversations with officials, but the presence of so many Democratic figures could have prompted Democratic participants to heavily favor her video and created a turnoff for Republican participants. Conversely, the presence of only one Democratic figure and the fictious nature of Cooper's video could have sparked less partisanship, resulting in similar evaluations from Democratic and Republican participants.

Olivia Rodrigo's video outperformed Cooper the Intern's video at the White House, which seems to show that while messaging from the institution assumed that having a very informal video like Cooper's might create more interest or trust, ultimately young people prefer communication from the White House to meet expectations in line with the office of the presidency. In other words, still trending toward some formality. While younger generations are now more entrenched in pop culture via influencers than ever before (Morton, 2020), adaptation to meet young people where they are at and with whom they view as potentially credible sources, was not highly effective for this audience. While the White House is actively trying to incorporate new adaptations of messaging control, like those executed by the Office of Digital Strategy in this thesis's research, it appears as though communication with young people needs to still embrace some formal expectations. Based on this research's findings, young people still want their governing body to create communication that is closer to the status quo.

The status quo, though, does not mean the press conferences of yesterday. As noted in the ubiquitous presidency framework (Scacco & Coe, 2021), presidents do still need to find effective ways to be personal and accessible. President Biden's appearance with Olivia Rodrigo in the

video that participants saw was casual and more informal than say, a public address. Olivia's video starts with President Biden in the background as he greets Olivia saying "Olivia! How are you?" and goes on to ask her "How ya doin?", which is followed by the president joking around with Rodrigo. Biden is even seen in the Oval Office with Rodrigo, where they both wear Biden's signature shades, and show him and Olivia with their thumbs up. The end of the video shows Biden taking a selfie with Rodrigo. This type of an informal and comfortable interaction between the president and an SMI did not create the high levels of credibility and gateway effects the White House Digital Strategy Office hoped for, but this video's styling was more successful on these measures than Cooper's video. This gives the Biden Administration, and future presidencies, some idea of next steps with their outreach to young Americans and how to incorporate SMIs in a partially successful way. As the White House begins to "speak Gen-Z" by leaning into this generation's understood online culture with the use of online creators, accommodation can be conceived of in a new way, extending the applicability and scope of CAT as communication evolves.

Limitations and Future Research

As far as limitations of this study are concerned, some changes could have been made to limit methodological issues. First, design-wise, a randomized presentation of the two videos might have offered different effects for the participants in this study. Instead, all participants were first shown the Olivia video and then the Cooper video, and comparisons might have been made with respondents that might have affected perceptions of both videos. Eisenberg and Barry (1988) found that order of presentation matters for evaluative studies.

Second, there are limitations with the sample. The sampled participants were based on only one pool of participants from one university, and therefore the generalizability of this

thesis's results to young adults generally is limited. Results might have differed if the sample included participants from various colleges, as well as young adults not enrolled in college. Generally, a within-subjects survey design enables researchers to maximize results even with smaller samples sizes, and the sample size for this thesis was still relatively low and could have led to low statistical power for the results. The researcher kept the survey in the field for several weeks to amass as many participants as possible, but it would be beneficial if future work in this area had a larger sample that included more diverse young adults behind one university.

Third, a between-subjects experimental design might have also offered different insights. An experiment where each treatment group only viewed one video, as opposed to both, might have offered additional findings that could further investigate how young people perceive SMIs at the White house. Experiments are generally a sound way to determine effects on participants when analyzing their thoughts and feelings towards phenomenon (Lee et al., 2013). Future research could employ an experimental approach to add another layer of understanding. Nonetheless, within-subject surveys can also provide sound information as it compares observations (Charness et al., 2012), and can serve as a practical approach to understanding phenomenon as this thesis does.

Finally, though the closed-ended scales were adapted from previous scholarship, were statistically reliable, and afforded statistical analysis, it may have been valuable to include some open-ended questions to assess what elements of the videos contributed to source credibility and accommodation. At the current level of analysis, the researcher is positing that certain aspects of the video contributed to these perceptions, but it would be helpful to have participants provide their views in their own words, which would also meaningfully contribute to our understanding of White House-SMI collaborations. In that vein, future work could also employ focus groups

and other qualitative means to further our understanding of these new White House collaborations.

Beyond foundational design changes, it is possible that the differences between the two videos might be greater than simply formality. For example, Cooper's video was more humorous than Olivia's, and Cooper was also playing a character, whereas Olivia was herself. Further, Cooper only interacted with Jenn Psaki as opposed to Olivia who interacted with President Biden, Vice President Harris, and Dr. Fauci, and Olivia also built more rapport with Biden. Cooper's video was more stylized to match the platform that it was shared on, TikTok, including quick editing cuts, whereas production for Olivia's met that of a long-form video, as it was published on YouTube. These variations in videos might have generated different effects in participants, and therefore future research is needed to isolate these differences and their respective effects.

Future research should further examine the methods the White House uses to appeal to young voters. Influencers at the White House offer a unique and new perspective to who Americans might consider appropriate to speak and collaborate on behalf of the country's governing body. Understanding what kinds of aesthetics are preferable in terms of White House video messaging can offer more insight into how exactly young people want to be communicated to by the White House with mediated communication. Future research can extend this idea further by examining possible parasocial or identification ties between citizens and SMIs at the White House. It is possible that if citizens have a greater parasocial relationship with the selected SMI, or a greater sense of identification with the SMI, it could boost perceptions of credibility, CAT, and Gateway Effects. Further, work could explore how the use of SMIs at the White House works within the Entertainment Overcoming Resistance Model, as works shows that

identification, similarity, and parasocial concepts help overcome resistance to persuasion (Moyer- Gusé & Nabi, 2010). This may be especially important for younger and/or marginalized adults who are not typically viewed as "belonging" in the White House and the affordances of using SMIs might overcome or change resistance to those groups as they appear at the White House.

Generally, future research should also investigate how the Office of Digital Strategy works under current and forthcoming presidents, and what this office intends to do in the future, as it has the means to impact the American people with the messaging it creates. Transparency about these practices might also encourage young people to know that they are the intended audience with attempts like Olivia and Cooper at the White House and help the White House guide messaging that would be more effective and in turn create trust in their institution. Young people want to be heard by their governing body, and representation of themselves in places like the White House is important for young people to know that they belong where decisions are made.

Conclusion

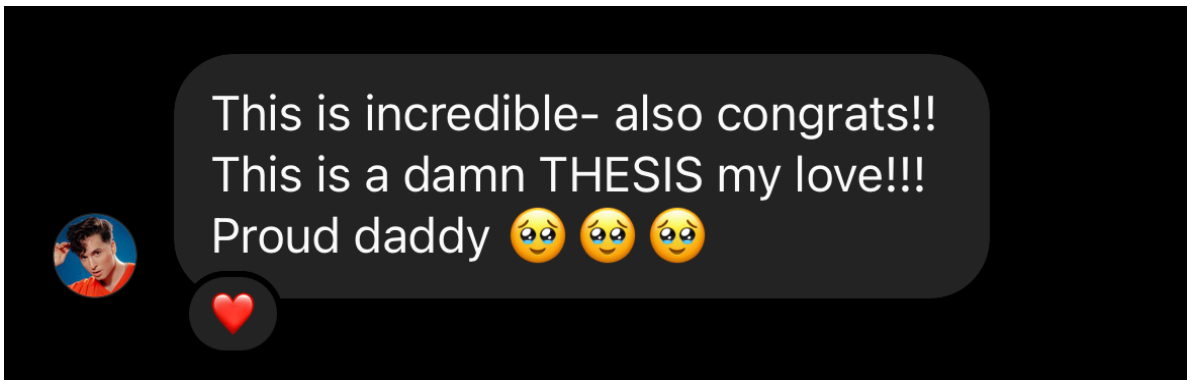
As technology advanced, so did the opportunity for presidents to communicate in informal ways with the people. Recent presidents like Trump used platforms of social media to connect with citizens and also afforded stylistic communication that was much less formal than we have seen with past presidents (Kreis, 2017). After Trump's presidency, where he helped organized an insurrection with the use of social media platforms, changing how presidents had communicated online previously, it was likely that President Biden came to the office with the goal of subduing the online space that Trump had disrupted. As previously mentioned, the current White House wanted to negate the uncertainty that young people felt after Trump was in

office with their messaging (Khalid & Keith, 2020). It is possible young adults also desired this return to normal, and the results of this survey, with young adults preferring the more formal type of presidential communication, lend credence to this notion. Presidents' utilization of SMIs to speak at the White House might offer a conduit in which the president has the opportunity to lend visibility, personality, and utilize pluralistic ideas of the president and the White House (Scacco & Coe, 2021), and such usage must be cognizant of its intended audiences' preferences.

Addressing the change in White House communication style is a phenomenon that is in need of additional investigation by researchers. As Sacco and Coe (2021) assert, presidential communication can only reside in the socio-technological environment in which it traverses. Failure to understand this change might affect perceptions of the very institution that governs the American people, as well as the American people themselves. White House communication as we know it is in constant flux, increasingly trying to meet the demands of the times, yet still trying to retain some of the expected formality associated with the institution. With attention to these changes, research can better grasp how the intended audience feels about this transformation, and if it is successful to them.

It is the researcher's hope that when White House messaging alters to meet those who may feel alienated from the institution or as though they are not heard by the institution, that this aim for inclusion becomes the mode of White House messaging, not for pandering sake or for merely garnering votes, but so that young adults can see themselves as part of a government that is *by them* and *for them*.

And according to Bennito Skinner himself, this work is;



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Appendix

Appendix A: Survey with Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in research about White House communication in online spaces. In this survey you will complete a short survey, watch two videos, and answer questions over the video content.

If you agree to participate, you will receive 0.5 SONA credit. You will not receive credit if you do not pass the attention check questions throughout the survey. If you do not wish to participate in this survey, you have the option to choose a different survey to complete for course credit.

There are no risks to participating in this research.

Your participation is voluntary, your responses will be anonymous, and your identify will be confidential. We will not share your data or use it in future research. Even if you choose to participate now, you may stop participating at any time and for any reason.

If you have questions about this research, please contact: Lauren Pettigrew, lpett@ou.edu and Dr. Lindsey Meeks, lmeeks@ou.edu

You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu with questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant, or if you don't want to talk to the researcher.

Appendix B: Survey Questions

Block 1: Consent Form

1. You are invited to participate in research about White House communication in online spaces. In this survey you will complete a short survey, watch two videos, and answer questions over the video content. If you agree to participate, you will receive 0.5 SONA credit. You will not receive credit if you do not pass the attention check questions throughout the survey. If you do not wish to participate in this survey, you have the option to choose a different survey to complete for course credit. There are no risks to participating in this research. Your participation is voluntary, your responses will be anonymous, and your identify will be confidential. We will not share your data or use it in future research. Even if you choose to participate now, you may stop participating at any time and for any reason. If you have questions about this research, please contact: Lauren Pettigrew, lpett@ou.edu and Dr. Lindsey Meeks, lmeeks@ou.edu You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu with questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant, or if you don't want to talk to the researcher.
    a. Yes, I agree to participate.
    b. No, I do not agree to participate.

Block 2: Demographic Section

1. What is your gender?
    1. Man (1)
    2. Woman (2)
    3. Non-binary (3)

    4. Prefer not to say (4)

2. What generation were you born in? What is your major?
    1. Boomer (1946-1964) (1)
    2. Gen X (1965-1980) (2)
    3. Millennial (1981-1996) (3)
    4. Generation Z (1997-2012) (4)
3. What is your race and or ethnicity? Check all that apply.
    1. Asian or Pacific Islander (1)
    2. Black or African American (2)
    3. Hispanic or Latinx (3)
    4. Native American or Indigenous (4)
    5. White or Caucasian (5)
    6. Multiracial (6)
    7. Prefer not to answer (7)
4. What is your sexual orientation?
    1. Asexual (1)
    2. Bisexual (2)
    3. Gay (3)
    4. Heterosexual (4)
    5. Pansexual (5)
    6. Queer (6)
    7. Prefer not to answer (7)
5. What political party do you identify with?

1. Libertarian (1)
2. Green Party (2)
3. Republican (3)
4. Democrat (4)
5. Other (5)
6. Prefer not to answer (6)

Block 3: Social Media Usage

6. How often do you use social media?
    1. Never (1)
    2. Sometimes (2)
    3. About half the time (3)
    4. Most of the time (4)
    5. Always (5)
7. Rank the social media platforms you from most frequent to least frequent
    1. _____ TikTok (1)
    2. _____ Facebook (2)
    3. _____ Instagram (3)
    4. _____ Snapchat (4)
    5. _____ Twitter (5)
    6. _____ Reddit (6)
    7. _____ YouTube (7)
    8. _____ Other platforms not listed (8)
8. How often do you post/share on your social media accounts?

1. Daily (1)
2. A few times a week (2)
3. A few times a month (3)
4. A few times a year (4)
5. Never (5)

9. How often do you share content personally to friends or family through the instant message feature of social media platforms?
    1. Daily (1)
    2. Few times a week (2)
    3. Few times a month week (3)
    4. 1-3 times a Year (4)
    5. Never (5)
10. Rank the type of content do you typically share privately or publicly?
    1. _____ Humor (1)
    2. _____ Sports (2)
    3. _____ Politics (3)
    4. _____ Music (4)
    5. _____ Art (5)
    6. _____ Food (6)
    7. _____ Photography (7)
    8. _____ Content not listed (8)
    9. _____ News (9)
11. How trustworthy is the content you see online?

1. Very trustworthy (1)
2. Trustworthy (2)
3. Neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy (3)
4. Untrustworthy (4)
5. Very untrustworthy (5)

12. How negative or positive is the content you see online?

1. Extremely negative (1)
2. Somewhat negative (2)
3. Neither positive nor negative (3)
4. Somewhat positive (4)
5. Extremely positive (5)

13. How useful is the information you encounter on your social media feed?

1. Not at all useful (1)
2. Slightly useful (2)
3. Moderately useful (3)
4. Very useful (4)
5. Extremely useful (5)

Block 4: Political Media Usage

14. How often do you encounter political media on your social media feed?

1. Never (1)
2. A few times a year (2)
3. A few times a month (3)
4. A few times a week (4)

5. Daily (5)

15. How often do you share political media on your social media?

    1. Never (1)
    2. A few times a year (2)
    3. A few times a month (3)
    4. A few times a week (4)
    5. Daily (5)

16. Do you follow accounts that are about politics on your social media?

    1. Yes (1)
    2. No (2)

17. Do you follow White House officials (e.g. @POTUS/@VP) on any of your social media accounts?

    1. Yes (1)
    2. No (2)

18. How do you typically encounter White House communication? Select all that apply.

    1. Social media platforms (1)
    2. Television news channels (2)
    3. Newspaper (3)
    4. News websites (4)
    5. Talk radio (5)
    6. Friends, family, coworkers, etc. (6)
    7. Other modes of communication (7)
    8. I do not encounter WH communication (8)

Block 5: Influencer Familiarity

19. Do you know who this person is? (Image of Olivia Rodrigo)
    1. Yes (1)
    2. Maybe (2)
    3. No (3)
20. The person shown is Olivia Rodrigo. Do you follow her on any of your social media accounts?
    1. Yes (1)
    2. No (2)
21. Do you know who this person is? (Image of Benito Skinner)
    1. Yes (1)
    2. Maybe (2)
    3. No (3)
22. The person shown is Benito Skinner. Do you follow him on any of your social media accounts?
    1. Yes (1)
    2. No (2)

Block 6: Olivia Video Impressions

23. Please watch the following video carefully and be prepared to answer questions about its content.
    1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2wHOtsQ44HA
24. What is your impression of Olivia Rodrigo in this video?
    1. Extremely Positive (1)

2. Somewhat positive (2)
3. Neither positive nor negative (3)
4. Somewhat negative (4)
5. Extremely negative (5)

25. Do you find Olivia Rodrigo to be a trustworthy source to speak at the White House?
    1. Definitely not (1)
    2. Probably not (2)
    3. Might or might not (3)
    4. Probably yes (4)
    5. Definitely yes (5)

26. How favorable is Olivia Rodrigo's inclusion at the White House to you?
    1. Favorability Likert scale, 1-10

27. After watching this video, how likely is it that you would follow Olivia Rodrigo on social media? If you already follow her, please select "Current Follower".
    1. Extremely likely (1)
    2. Somewhat likely (2)
    3. Neither likely nor unlikely (3)
    4. Somewhat unlikely (4)
    5. Extremely unlikely (5)
    6. Current Follower (6)

28. How likely is it that you would share this video on social media?
    1. Extremely unlikely (1)
    2. Somewhat unlikely (2)

3. Neither likely nor unlikely (3)
4. Somewhat likely (4)
5. Extremely likely (5)

29. Do you like this collaboration with the White House and Olivia Rodrigo?

1. Like a great deal (1)
2. Like somewhat (2)
3. Neither like nor dislike (3)
4. Dislike somewhat (4)
5. Dislike a great deal (5)

30. How informative was this collaboration with Olivia Rodrigo and the White House?

1. Very informative (1)
2. Somewhat informative (2)
3. Neither informative nor uninformative (3)
4. Somewhat uninformative (4)
5. Very uninformative (5)

Block 7: Olivia CAT

31. Would you agree with the following statements: (Strongly disagree to agree)

1. The pace of the video was just right for me. (1)
2. The editing of the video made it easy to follow. (2)
3. I liked the style of the video (3)
4. I like how Olivia Rodrigo interacted with various people in this video. (4)
5. Other people in this video adapted to Olivia's communication while she was at the White House. (5)

Block 8: Benito Video

32. Please watch the following video carefully and be prepared to answer questions about its content
    1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcRijSLD1Bs
33. What is your impression of Cooper the Intern in this video?
    1. Extremely Positive (1)
    2. Somewhat positive (2)
    3. Neither positive nor negative (3)
    4. Somewhat negative (4)
    5. Extremely negative (5)
34. Do you find Cooper the Intern to be a trustworthy source to speak at the White House?
    1. Definitely not (1)
    2. Probably not (2)
    3. Might or might not (3)
    4. Probably yes (4)
    5. Definitely yes (5)
35. How favorable is Cooper the Intern's inclusion at the White House to you?
    1. Favorability Likert scale, 1-10
36. After watching this video, how likely is it that you would follow Benito Skinner (Cooper the Intern) on social media? If you already follow him, please select "Current Follower".
    1. Extremely likely (1)
    2. Somewhat likely (2)
    3. Neither likely nor unlikely (3)

4. Somewhat unlikely (4)
5. Extremely unlikely (5)
6. Current Follower (6)

37. How likely is it that you would share this video on social media?

1. Extremely unlikely (1)
2. Somewhat unlikely (2)
3. Neither likely nor unlikely (3)
4. Somewhat likely (4)
5. Extremely likely (5)

38. Is this collaboration with the White House and Benito Skinner as Cooper the Intern positive or negative?

1. Extremely negative (1)
2. Somewhat negative (2)
3. Neither positive nor negative (3)
4. Somewhat positive (4)
5. Extremely positive (5)

Block 9: Benito CAT

39. Would you agree with the following statements: (Strongly disagree to agree)

1. The pace of the video was just right for me. (1)
2. The editing of the video made it easy to follow. (2)
3. I liked the style of the video (3)
4. I like how Cooper the Intern interacted with various people in this video. (4)

5. Other people in this video adapted to Cooper's communication while she was at the White House. (5)

Block 10: Video Effectiveness

40. Of the two videos' shown to you, which video did you find most effective?

1. Olivia's video at the White House (1)
2. Cooper's video at the White House (2)
3. Neither video was effective (3)

41. Would you talk about these videos with family, friends, or peers?

1. Yes (1)
2. Maybe (2)
3. No (3)

Block 11: General Questions

42. How much do you agree with the following statements? (Strongly disagree to agree)

1. I think the White House collaborating with social media influencers is a positive decision. (1)
2. I find the White House more trustworthy when they communicate with social media influencers. (2)
3. White House collaboration with social media influencers shows they care about young people's perspective. (3)
4. I am more interested in the White House messaging after watching these videos. (4)
5. I am more likely to follow the White House on social media after watching these videos (5)