

THE AUDACITY OF HOPE: EXAMINING THE INFLUENCES OF STABLE PERSONA CONSTRUCTION ON POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE UNITED STATES

ELIAS GBADAMOSI COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

*This study explores the realm of political persona construction and narrative persuasion by analysing Barack Obama's 2006 autobiography, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. It utilises Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm theory to explore how Obama's autobiography strengthened his political image during the 2008 presidential campaign. Using the thematic narrative analysis method, this paper examines the presence of two critical components of Fisher's narrative paradigm: narrative coherence and narrative fidelity, within Obama's campaign autobiography. It investigates how these elements contributed to convincing the American electorate of Obama's leadership qualities, his embodiment of a quintessential representation of citizenship, and his advocacy for the fundamental ideas and beliefs that support his proposed policy agenda. This research highlights the intricate relationship between persona construction and narrative persuasion in the context of Obama's campaign autobiography. It underscores the effectiveness of narrative coherence and fidelity in shaping a compelling political image and influencing public perception. The study challenges the notion that the coordinated stable persona strategy, which played a crucial role in establishing Barack Obama's influential political image, may yield different results in the aftermath of the Trump and Brexit eras (Marshall & Henderson, 2016). In conclusion, the study provides a nuanced exploration of the constantly evolving landscape of political persona-building strategies in American politics.*

KEY WORDS

Narrative; Campaign Autobiography; Narrative Paradigm; Political Persona; Public Narrative; Stable Persona; Disruptive Persona

INTRODUCTION

Due to the ever-increasing power of narratives in shaping politics, most aspirants in presidential elections seek to build a persuasive narrative about their lives and policy agenda. Political speeches and electoral campaigns are replete with stories of individuals who leverage their past "heroic" deeds and their shiny present to justify their candidature and convince citizens of their ability to make life better if elected. Hillary Clinton in 2016 quips that she, against many odds, succeeded as a Senator and Public Servant (Clinton, 2016). In the same vein, Mike Bloomberg, a presidential aspirant in 2020, woos voters by telling stories of how he "single-handedly" built a global business conglomerate and rebuilt the city of New York from ruins suffered in the devastating 9/11 terrorist attacks (Bloomberg, 2019).

What links these presidential hopefuls is their narrative order. They leverage their previous business and/or public service accomplishments to marshal arguments regarding why they are the best candidates to lead the country. Through the narrative process, candidates aim to craft stories that create a positive perception of their capabilities and willingness to lead the nation. A compelling narrative is crucial in building support and developing a successful campaign.

Barack Obama heavily relied on his campaign autobiography, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, in his 2008 presidential campaign. The book's title comes from a speech Obama gave at the 2004 Democratic National Convention (DNC), where he expounded his vision for the future of America and outlined the steps he would take to actualise those dreams. *The Audacity of Hope* consolidates the work that Obama started in his 1995 autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*. In *Dreams from My Father*, Obama chronicles his quest to make sense of his identity as a biracial person born in America to an American mother and a Kenyan father. He presents himself in the book as someone who understands the unique challenges of America's different communities and diverse populations. By presenting himself as someone who straddles two worlds, Obama positions himself in the book as someone who understands the dynamics of diversity and, therefore, uniquely positioned to unite the people and the nation. These two books work together to help Obama craft a narrative of his personal experiences, beliefs, values, and vision for the country. The books allowed him to present himself as a thoughtful, empathetic leader who is a merchant of peace and a unifying force who understands America's challenges and has a clear plan for addressing them. Obama leveraged the compelling persona and narrative presence he crafted in these books to socialise the electorate's emotions and find links to connect with the public.

The narrative, thematic, and persona alignment of *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope* exemplifies that the work of persona construction in American politics is intentional, methodical, and continuous. This "performed persona corresponds to 'recognised' personae, archetypal cultural figures that the politician may intentionally or unintentionally emulate" (Atkins Gaffney, 2020, p. 295). These cultural archetypes encompass various roles, such as the healer, the hero, the rebel, the antagonist, the wise figure, the warrior, and the cunning trickster (Atkins Gaffney, 2020). In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama carefully contrived a "healer" political persona focused on building bridges within and outside America during his presidential campaign in 2008. His central campaign promises included fostering international connections, bringing an end to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and shutting down the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay. This persona sharply contrasted the approach of his predecessor, who had embroiled the United States in expensive wars. Obama's stance against the 2003 intervention in Iraq, a position he maintained as a senator, contributed to the public's perception of him as "more of a dove than a hawk" (Tom & Hardy, 2016, p. 80). Tom & Hardy (2016) note that despite the chasm between Obama's healer persona and his underwhelming foreign policy legacy, his domestic popularity has not waned markedly.

In their timely introductory piece in the 2016 *Persona Studies* issue, Marshall and Henderson (2016) note that certain groundbreaking political events like Brexit and former president Trump's election have challenged our understanding of how persona works in politics. They believe both events have disrupted the stable and natural representation of political persona in culture and media. To them, the systematic, methodical, and coordinated persona-building strategy that helped Obama build a formidable political persona may not be as effective post-Trump and post-Brexit. In the context of this study, a stable persona is regarded as an unchanging image and public perception that a political figure conveys to the public through the media and in accordance with cultural dictates and social expectations. It reflects a politician's consistent portrayal of their values, beliefs, policy agenda, political ideology, and leadership

style in the public eye throughout their political career or during a single election campaign cycle.

Drawing from Marshall and Henderson's (2016) conclusion, the crux of this research study is threefold. First, the study applies Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm concept to evaluate how Obama leveraged his campaign autobiography, *The Audacity of Hope*, to construct a stable political persona. Secondly, now that we are in the post-Trump era, this study critically assesses Marshall and Henderson's (2016) claims about the collapse of stable and natural representation of political persona in politics after former president Trump's disruption of persona representation. Finally, I will argue that the Obama-style persona work still endures by examining how the components of stable political persona-building appear in President Joe Biden's persona strategy.

Persona and Political Persona

According to Atkins and Gaffney (2020), leaders typically construct two narratives – one that revolves around their own identity and another that presents the story they intend to convey (p. 293). Atkins and Gaffney (2020) maintain that a leader's outward image may not always align with their private self (p. 295). Leaders frequently adopt dual personas: one that remains concealed behind closed doors (private persona) and another that they present during public appearances (public persona). The central assertion of this argument is that individuals aspiring to hold presidential office utilise personal life stories to bolster their public persona and to demonstrate their capability to uphold the principles, values, and ethics associated with the public role they seek. It is essential to underline that the concept of persona, as interpreted in this study, differs from a person's true character. Unlike genuine character, persona pertains to a "perceived construction" rather than an absolute representation of an individual (Atkins & Gaffney, 2020).

Drawing from Carl Jung's definition of persona as a "mask" designed to make an impression on others (quoted in Kelsey, 2017b: 42), it becomes evident that leaders frequently mask their genuine disposition and beliefs to adopt a persona that aligns with their public agenda. This is often done to gain support and maintain authority without necessarily implying deceit or subterfuge. Notably, public figures assume these masks to consciously differentiate their public and private personas, rooted in their roles as citizens and patriots, as expectations from both spheres (public and private) may diverge at times.

Another possible rationale for the adoption of masks by leaders is the influence of cultural factors, ideological concepts, myths, and archetypal figures on public institutions (Atkins & Gaffney, 2020). Consequently, the public develops specific conceptions and expectations about how individuals in positions of power within these institutions should behave. Any perceived dissonance between leaders' expected public image and their actual selves could erode their authority and social standing.

The broad conception of persona as a creative refashioning of the self to negotiate interactions with others, shape an impression of the individual, and help others situate the role of the individual in the social world (Marshall & Henderson, 2016) attests to the inherently political nature of persona. Political persona, more specifically, is the negotiated public identity of a politician, separate from their personal identity. Humans live in a world where certain norms and conventions are set for each sphere of endeavor. Hence, politicians fashion a public political persona to respond and conform to a particular culture's dictates and expectations for politics and political life. It is also imperative to note that political persona, like audience expectation, is not static. Political persona must evolve as audiences' expectations, the exigencies of specific

communication channels, and the vagaries of different contextual settings change (Marshall & Henderson, 2016). Nurturing a political persona aims to create positive associations for the politician while deemphasising any negative associations attached to their identity. It is an exercise in establishing parasocial connections between political leaders and the electorate to make it seem as though the politician and the potential voters know each other intimately, as it is established that voters feel more connected to politicians whose values, beliefs, and attitudes mirror their own (Marshall & Henderson, 2016).

The Disruption of Stable Persona

In our world, norms and conventions shape various aspects of our lives. Hence, it is typical for politicians to fashion a public political image in response to the cultural expectations set for political life. In the social world, a shrewd politician must be capable of attracting and retaining attention to cultivate a devoted following. To set the cultural image of political leadership, legacy media, which wielded significant influence in determining who and what deserved a platform, worked in sync with the political apparatus to shape the public's perception of political persona in the early 21st century (Marshall & Henderson, 2016). This symbiotic relationship between politics and legacy media illustrates how both leviathan structures were intimately intertwined with culture to establish what constitutes a stable political persona and help build the image of politicians as quintessential representations of political leadership.

Given that legacy media possessed exclusive authority in setting the public agenda, it held the power to spotlight individuals as standard representations of political persona. However, the emergence of digital media has transformed the media landscape and the process of constructing a political persona. Now, more than ever, persona construction has become more adaptable, thanks to integrating online culture into political life. The proliferation of social media platforms has introduced new frameworks that bypass traditional media, altering the flow of information, news, and sharing (van Dijck, 2013). The evolution of the media landscape has extended the personalisation phenomenon that characterised the highly structured network of visible personalities in legacy media and its legitimising power. Presently, individual politicians have the agency, courtesy of digital technologies, to create strategic public displays of themselves designed to resonate with various audiences. In contrast to the former dominance of legacy media in validating, legitimising, and essentially shaping the public perception of politicians, digital media has ushered in a "pandemic of persona construction" (Marshall & Henderson, 2016). In this digital era, politicians can bypass legacy media to personally build a persona through online posts and carefully curated photos that evoke emotional connections with the public.

Defining the Campaign Autobiography

Unlike the regular autobiography, which chronicles the life of the author, their history, experiences, fears, aspirations, values, beliefs, worldview, and relationship with society (Fowler, 1988; Lejeune, 1989), the campaign autobiography is a hybrid narrative form that fuses elements of both the memoir and the autobiography (Blouin, 2021). Like the autobiography, it recounts only some parts of the author's childhood and youth while a substantial part chronicles the author's public and political life, specifically, a more communal and less personal approach characteristic of the memoir (Pascal, 1960).

Blouin (2021) argues that campaign autobiographies are symbolic, representative, myth-making documents. Political candidates employ campaign autobiographies to narrate their origin stories to emphasise their cultural identity and showcase how their lives are real-time enactments of the characters and values that their communities hold dear. As tools for self-

promotion and image management, campaign autobiographies carefully craft compelling narratives highlighting candidates' notable achievements and triumphs while also providing glimpses into the periods in their personal/private lives that have shaped their sojourn in the political world.

Narrative Paradigm

Unlike rhetoric, which revolves around truthfulness, evidence, or strength of arguments, the narrative paradigm is concerned with meaningfulness. Fisher (1984; 2009) states that persuading people is more about having good reasons and telling compelling, meaningful stories than marshalling convincing arguments supported with copious evidence. The narrative paradigm does not deny reason and rationality (Fishers, 1984; 1987; 2009). Instead, it fuses the "two traditional strands in the history of rhetoric: the argumentative, persuasive theme and the literary, aesthetic theme" (Fishers, 1984, p. 2). The ultimate tests of narrative rationality are narrative fidelity and narrative coherence. These concepts help determine "what makes one story better than others" (Fisher, 1984, p. 16).

On the one hand, narrative coherence concerns the degree to which a story maintains internal consistency. It seeks answers to questions like: How well does the story "hang together" (structural coherence)? How well does the story compare to other stories that the audience is familiar with (material coherence)? Do characters act in ways that are consistent (characterological coherence)? (Fisher, 1987, p. 47). On the other hand, narrative fidelity is premised on the logic of "good reasons" determined by the audience. According to Fisher (1987, 2009), the logic of good reasons is determined using five critical lenses: Does the story have values? Are these values in tandem with the shared values of the story's audience? Do these values match the actions of the characters? Do these values have positive consequences in people's lives? Do these values match the ideals for accepted social behaviour?

While narrative coherence is more straightforward to examine and analyse from a textual research standpoint, reaching a satisfactory analytic stance regarding narrative fidelity is elusive. As mentioned above, the fidelity of a narrative can only be determined by the audience because they are drawing from and comparing their own narrative realities to the one an author narrates. Hence, only the audience can ultimately determine whether the narrative has values, whether they share the values that the narrative propagates, whether the values have positive consequences for them, and whether the values match the ideals for acceptable social behaviour.

Human values are not monolithic as they vary from person to person, group to group, and community to community, which makes narrative fidelity even more susceptible to analytic fluidity. However, in the age of social media, people craft intricate collective personas through interactions across various online platforms and networks (Moore et al., 2017). These connections give rise to micropublics, vibrant online ecosystems where shared values and experiences cultivate specific narratives (Moore et al., 2017). Within these communities, narratives gain credibility through collective resonance. Each online community, or micropublic, shapes an individual's narrative reality. Memes, jokes, and personal stories circulating through these interconnected networks add to a shared mosaic of meaning, reinforcing the cohesive values of the community. This shared understanding becomes the filter through which individuals perceive narratives, providing a sense of fidelity and resonance that transcends personal experiences.

As narratives spread across different micropublics, their impact and resonance are amplified. A story shared on one platform can ripple through various micropublics, each layering its

interpretations and significance. This fluid process blurs the lines between personal and collective narratives, influencing how audiences gauge narrative fidelity. However, it is essential to note that micropublics are not homogeneous. Despite their shared foundations, individuals within them bring diverse perspectives shaped by their unique backgrounds. This presents an intriguing paradox: while narratives gain credibility through collective validation, their meanings remain subject to individual interpretation. This diversity of viewpoints enriches narratives, providing depth and nuance that resonate with different community members in distinct ways.

Consequently, determining narrative fidelity becomes a collaborative effort within the realm of collective personas. The values embedded in a narrative are open to negotiation and reinterpretation within the diverse micro-publics that individuals inhabit online. Audience assessments of narrative fidelity are influenced not only by the inherent qualities of the narrative itself but also by how well its values align with the complex array of interconnected identities and affiliations that constitute their collective persona. In essence, collective personas underscore the fluid nature of narrative fidelity in the digital age, emphasising the interplay between individual experiences, online networks, and the construction of meaning within contemporary storytelling.

METHOD

The qualitative method of narrative analysis guides this study. The method seeks to analyse the content of narrative texts, how the texts' stories are constructed, their functions, and their role in constructing identity and persona (Parcell and Baker, 2017). In the context of autobiographical writing specifically, this kind of analysis aims to determine what moments of personal experience the author deems significant and to situate those remarkable stories in the broader social and political contexts they are told (Earthy et al., 2016). In the case of this study, the genre of the narrative text to be analysed - campaign autobiographies - determines, to a large extent, how the stories in the text are constructed. Campaign autobiographies give authors the liberty to merge and arrange their personal and public stories in ways that will resonate with their audiences.

While there are several frameworks for conducting narrative analysis, the structural and dialogic frameworks will be applied to this study. The structural narrative analysis thrives on identifying key narrative elements - in this case, the elements of narrative coherence and narrative fidelity - and examining how these elements interact to create meaning. On the other hand, dialogic/performance narrative analysis seeks to identify various factors, such as the audience and the identities involved in narrating a specific story. Additionally, this approach explores how the story relates to broader cultural or communal discourses (Parcell and Baker, 2017).

To analyse the purposive text for this study, I read the text twice; the first reading was to become familiarised with the text, and the second reading was to identify the outstanding stories and narrative paradigm elements (elements of narrative coherence and fidelity) in the text. Having identified the essential stories and elements, I analysed the narrative structure and how it contributes to the text's overall meaning and the author's persona construction. Thereafter, I analysed the narrative to interpret the values presented and how they connect with broader social, cultural, and political issues.

PRIMARY DATA

Published in 2006, Barack Obama's *The Audacity of Hope* is a campaign autobiography that calls for a politics of mutual understanding from a personal perspective using stories drawn from Obama's personal and public lives. This narrative qualifies as a campaign autobiography because it connects stories about Obama's life with American values. It leverages that narrative to make an urgent call to American citizens to take decisive actions for critical shared purposes, including education, healthcare, foreign policy, technology, and terrorism. The narrative also fits neatly into the description of the components that typify an autobiography: it chronicles the personal and professional lives of Barack Obama, outlines his vision, aspirations, beliefs and core values, and his conception of the world while also explaining his relationship with the American society and the American people. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* further qualifies as a perfect sample for this study because it was published about four months before Senator Obama (as he then was) made public his intent to run for the office of the president of the United States of America on February 7, 2007. Furthermore, many of the ideas that Obama outlined in the book subsequently formed a substantial part of his 2008 presidential campaign manifesto - The American Promise.

It is based on these coinciding events that one can make the inference that the book was part of a grand campaign plan to foster Obama's political persona, build political momentum, drum up popular support, and find subtle acceptance for his ideas before and after his public declaration to run for the office of president. Atwater's (2007) stance that *The Audacity of Hope* is "a blueprint for his political career and, in light of his presidential bid, his belief and stand on major issues" (p. 126) confirms that the autobiography is nothing short of a campaign autobiography which makes it an appropriate fit for this study.

The previously discussed theoretical framework and conceptual standpoints are connected with insights from the primary data to answer the research questions at the heart of this study's inquiry. By analysing the text through the lens of Fisher's narrative coherence and fidelity, the study seeks to identify the elements contributing to the establishment of a stable persona. Specifically, it explores how narrative coherence enhances stable persona building in Obama's *The Audacity of Hope* and examines the impact of narrative fidelity on this process. Additionally, the study considers the potential of Obama's stable persona-building strategy in the post-Trump era, aiming to identify elements that could remain relevant and effective in shaping political discourse. Through an examination of these research questions, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of narrative strategies in political communication and their implications for future political leadership.

Narrative Coherence

A narrative is deemed coherent if the elements, including characters, events, plot, and overall structure, hang together in ways the audience would comprehend. The events and characters within the narrative should be believable and consistent with the audience's expectations, cultural norms, and the internal world of the narrative. Fisher (1987) lays out the types of coherence, including structural coherence, material coherence, and characterological coherence. Given the constraint of space, however, only characterological coherence, which aligns with the overarching subject of persona at the heart of this study, will be explored in-depth.

Characterological coherence in Barack Obama's *The Audacity of Hope* explicates the interplay between characters, including Obama (the author), American politicians, and American citizens, provides a rich tapestry through which the author weaves his narrative. The analysis below which examines how Obama characterises each of the three character categories offers insights

into the autobiography's characterological coherence and how it influences the autobiography's narrative arc.

As the author and central figure, Barack Obama constructs a persona resonating with the leadership archetype prevalent in American culture. He portrays himself as a wounded healer, drawing parallels between societal wounds and personal experiences of discrimination. He reflects that some of the wounds afflicting America have also left their mark on his life. From the unsettling experiences of "security guards tailing me as I shop in department stores, white couples who toss me their car keys as I stand outside a restaurant waiting for the valet," to the unsettling encounters with "police cars pulling me over for no apparent reason" (Obama, 2016, p. 233), he underscores the pervasive nature of these wounds. By intertwining his story with America's, Obama asserts his unique capacity to diagnose and heal the nation's afflictions. In sum, Barack Obama's portrayal of himself as a wounded healer in *The Audacity of Hope* underscores his unique capacity to address America's wounds and unite the nation for a better future, offering a compelling vision for national healing and progress.

In his portrayal of American politicians, Obama critiques their role in exacerbating economic decline and political polarisation through simplistic policies and divisive rhetoric. According to Obama (2006), these politicians are keen on "deflections of criticism and assignments of blame" (p. 24) instead of actively seeking viable solutions. While one can argue that Obama himself belongs to the political class and may bear some responsibility for the issues he highlights, he adroitly defends himself by asserting that he has distinguished himself from the politicians who hinder America's progress through his willingness to collaborate with even his most conservative colleagues in crafting legislation. In essence, Obama presents a compelling argument to explain how he stands apart from the typical politicians contributing to America's challenges as he champions a vision of unifying politics.

American citizens, depicted as victims of policies favouring the elite, emerge as resilient heroes in Obama's narrative. While Obama acknowledges the victimisation of Americans by the political class, he refrains from portraying them as helpless victims. Instead, he emphasises their resilience and determination, asserting that they possess the fortitude to overcome the obstacles that seem to be impeding their prosperity: "It wasn't just the struggles of these men and women that had moved me. Rather, it was their determination, their self-reliance, a relentless optimism in the face of hardship" (Obama, 2016, p. 356). Obama's portrayal of Americans as heroes pursuing the American dream strikes a chord with the American populace. This aligns with Fisher's (1982) findings in his study of President Ronald Reagan, which demonstrated that when politicians depict Americans as heroes, it instils in them the belief that they can overcome the myriad challenges facing them and the nation. By portraying Americans as protagonists in their own stories, Obama instils a sense of empowerment and resilience, echoing the spirit of the American dream.

Narrative Fidelity

Narrative fidelity is how a narrative aligns with an individual's pre-existing beliefs, values, and experiences (Fisher, 1984; 1987). It assesses the degree to which a story resonates with the audience's conception of the world. A narrative is considered to have fidelity when congruent with the audience's lived experiences and cultural or social contexts. Narratives with fidelity are more likely to be persuasive because they reinforce the beliefs, values, personal experiences, and worldviews the audience already holds.

The values that Obama highlights in this autobiography stress the deeds of community, service, unity, America's greatness, hard work, and faith. While it is true that values are individual and

experiences are unique to individuals, some values, mores, and beliefs are nonetheless shared by a community of people on a group and national level. As previously mentioned, specific values, including hard work, the American dream, and democracy, are shared by a myriad of American people. Whether all Americans operationalise these values in the same way is outside the scope of this study.

To begin with, Obama harps on the value of community. The author posits that etched in the soul of America is “a tradition that stretched from the days of the country’s founding to the glory of the civil rights movement, a tradition based on the simple idea that we have a stake in one another and that what binds us together is greater than what drives us apart” (Obama, 2006, p. 2). Another prominent value that Obama foregrounds is faith. He unequivocally states, “It is a truism that we Americans are a religious people. According to the most recent surveys, 95 percent of Americans believe in God... Our President routinely remarks on how Christ changed his heart, and football players point to the heavens after every touchdown, as if God were calling plays from the celestial sidelines” (Obama, 2006, pp. 198-199). Moreover, Obama brings his personal experience with faith to bear. “This is not to say that I’m unanchored in my faith. There are some things that I’m absolutely sure about—the Golden Rule, the need to battle cruelty in all its forms, the value of love and charity, humility and grace” (p. 224). Obama notes that he is a man of faith and believes in God, just like the other 95% of Americans who believe in God.

In addition, in upholding the American Dream value, the author opines that people in America are confident that “through pluck and sweat and smarts, each of us can rise above the circumstances of our birth” (p. 54). Also embedded in the value of the American Dream is the value of hard work, which Obama describes as “pluck and sweat.” The American Dream and hard work values converged again in the book when Obama argued that “Throughout our history, education has been at the heart of a bargain this nation makes with its citizens: If you work hard and take responsibility, you’ll have a chance for a better life” (p. 159).

Moreover, to emphasise the value of hard work, Obama salutes the courage of “all the faceless, nameless men and women, slaves and soldiers and tailors and butchers, constructing lives for themselves and their children and grandchildren, brick by brick, rail by rail, calloused hand by calloused hand, to fill in the landscape of our collective dreams” (Obama, 2016, p. 362). On freedom, the author stated that American “values are rooted in a basic optimism about life and a faith in free will” (p. 54). Obama considers “individual liberty” to be at the core of American society.

After pinpointing the embedded values within the narrative, the subsequent question that naturally arises is whether these values align with those cherished by the audience. One would not be remiss to argue that they indeed do. In their book *American Ways - An Introduction to American Culture*, extensive research by Datesman, Crandall, and Kearny (2005) also identified the values Obama highlighted and others, including self-reliance, equality of opportunity, competition, and diversity as the glue holding America together. Quoting the pollster John Zogby, the authors agree that Americans “share a common set of values that make us American” (p. 28). This reveals that the values emphasised by Obama are in harmony with many of the values Americans hold sacred. By weaving these American values into his narrative, Obama effectively calls upon the people of America to embrace a “new kind of politics,” one capable of unearthing and building upon the shared understandings that unite us as Americans (Obama, 2016, p. 9). While America may bear its scars, its citizens possess the strength and determination to reclaim their nation’s essence from the clutches of unfeeling politicians and nurture its rightful healing.

Furthermore, a close examination of Obama's narrative affirms that the values bear positive consequences for the audience; the values offer hope and reassurance. It uplifts Americans and reiterates that these values will prevail, notwithstanding the circumstances. And although we recognise that they are subject to challenge, can be poked and prodded and debunked and turned inside out by intellectuals and cultural critics, they have proven to be both surprisingly durable and surprisingly constant across classes, and races, and faiths, and generations (Obama, 2016, p. 69). These values, therefore, have the strength to carry us through these harsh political climes as they have in the past.

Elements of the Obama-style Stable Persona-building Strategy and their Potential in the post-Trump era

Marshall and Henderson (2016) posit that our conception of the dynamics of political persona has been significantly altered by pivotal political occurrences, especially the Brexit referendum and the election of former President Trump as president of the United States of America. In their analysis, the well-structured, orderly, and harmonised strategy that Barack Obama employed to construct a robust political persona may yield different effectiveness in the aftermath of Trump's presidency and the Brexit referendum.

The authors' inferences are right on track. To begin with, the verities of political media and communication have undergone significant disruptions since the advent of digital communication technologies. In the new era of digital media, gatekeepers in journalism and media publishing who once controlled the ebb and flow of news, cultural information, and the motions of media production have been sidestepped. In the past, media and journalism suzerains could carefully curate news and information that filtered out information not deemed as fulfilling the rituals of journalistic practice and platform specific individuals as typical representations of political leadership. The age when information flowed from political leaders and passed through the oven of journalistic scrutiny, where facts were rigorously checked, sources verified, and stories baked and framed before going mainstream, is long gone (Perloff, 2022). These days, political leaders can leverage digital communication tools to communicate directly and connect with the public. A typical example is former US President Donald Trump, who leveraged Twitter as a political communication tool before and during his presidency to communicate with the American and global public in ways many political leaders have not been able to (Perloff, 2022). The ability to sidestep gatekeepers meant Trump could craft his messages as he deemed fit and construct his persona according to his intent and purposes.

Studies (Humphrey, 2023; Wagner-Pacifici, 2023) examining how Trump deployed Twitter during his candidacy and presidency point to the fact that elements of narrative coherence and fidelity, like the ones Obama deployed in his campaign autobiography, *The Audacity of Hope*, are missing from Trump's Twitter narratives. Trump's narratives lack the components of narrative fidelity and coherence, including clear cause-and-effect relationships between stories, sequential arrangement of events, consistent narrative voice, recurrent motifs, relatability, and value alignment, which are crucial for crafting engaging and resonating narratives that advance the cause of building a constant and relatable political persona.

Humphrey (2023) notes that "Trump's narrative never fully focused on a single arc across his candidacy and presidency. Rather than cohesive, I would argue, several repetitive social media narratives coalesced around what were otherwise ever-shifting characters and events, with themes that ebbed and flowed around the momentary contexts in which they are constructed" (pp. 209-210). Trump was not able to build a stable, coherent persona because, "the particulars of his narratives shifted by the week, day, and even sometimes hour" (p. 210):

Stop working sooooo hard on being politically correct, which will only bring you down, and continue to fight for our Country. The losers all want what you have, don't give it to them. Be strong & prosper, be weak & die! Stay true.... (@realDonaldTrump, Twitter, 2019).

Despite its disruptive, alternate strategy, Trump's narrative style and persona were influential to the point that it drew into the electoral fold many voters who were previously on the fringes of political participation (Perloff, 2022). Like Marshall and Henderson (2016), Perloff acknowledges that Trump has engendered a seismic transformation of the political communication landscape and disrupted the conception of persona. Notwithstanding his refusal to conform to the standards of stable persona and his adherence to a persona that characterised "anti-institutional bombast and menace" (Wagner-Pacifici, 2023, p. 2), he was able to sail to victory in the 2016 presidential elections thanks to the proliferation of digital communication tools that have broken the yoke of journalistic and media gatekeeping.

However, as the 2020 presidential elections revealed, a non-stable persona can be defeated by a stable persona strategy post-Trump and post-Brexit. While Trump's non-stable persona may be compelling at garnering centre-stage attention and bolstering his support in the Republican fold, the persona could not win him a second term in office despite predictions and permutations of success by scholars, including Galam (2021). Instead, President Joe Biden, whose persona mirrored the Obama-style stable persona, won the popular and electoral college votes. Wagner-Pacifici (2023) asserts that Biden's consistently evolving political persona was one of the characteristics that endeared voters to him. More like Obama and so much unlike Trump, "Biden's tweets used more language typical for a president and a truth-teller, and he more often referred to moral values" (Korner et al., 2022, p. 648). In recognising the time-tested effectiveness of a stable persona, Korner et al. (2022) note that "Biden's language resembled that of past presidents, and often used references to achievements and moral values" (p. 648). Unlike Trump, Biden's tweets emphasise the importance of social connections, typical of politicians focused on working together and using the power of collaboration (Cheng et al., 2010; Brike & Keltner, 2020).

My father used to have an expression. He'd say, 'Joey, a job is about a lot more than a paycheck. It's about your dignity. It's about respect. It's about your place in your community.' (@JoeBiden, Twitter, 2019)

It is also imperative to note that the Obama-style stable persona that Biden employs does not only appear in his tweets. His memoirs, *Promises to Keep: On Life and Politics* and *Promise Me, Dad: A Year of Hope, Hardship, and Purpose*, published in 2007 and 2017, respectively, emphasise a deep commitment to politics and public service, the importance of political ideals, and reflections on the pivotal importance of shared American values to the continued progress of the country. These books adhere, to a large extent, to the principles of narrative fidelity and coherence, which are the building blocks of a stable persona. In the Obama manner, Biden (2017, p. 68), in his book *Promise Me, Dad*, harped on his commitment to shared American values like hard work and the American Dream:

I was feeling worse by the minute, but I was determined to lay down a marker. "When our government doesn't work, it's not the politicians who get hurt, it's the American people. It's hardworking ordinary Americans who get up every day, go to work, pay their taxes, pay their bills, take care of their families," I said, then I coughed aloud. "Excuse me, I have a cold—and take care of their communities, they're the ones who get hurt—the middle class. And let me tell you something: the middle class has enough to overcome without having to

overcome dysfunctional politicians and dysfunctional government.” This message mattered.

The excerpt from Biden’s 2017 publication reinforces that he is committed to maintaining a stable persona as the sentiment shared in the book aligns with those he shared in his pre-election campaign in 2020 and his presidency.

The enduring effectiveness of a stable persona seems to be blind to the dividing lines of politics. Tinctures and slivers of stable persona-building elements are pretty evident in the tweets, political debate rhetoric, and other publications by Republican party presidential hopefuls Nikki Haley and Chris Christie. In Nikki Haley’s 2019 memoir, *With All Due Respect: Defending America with Grit and Grace*, slivers of narrative coherence and fidelity are apparent. For instance, Haley’s book is characterologically coherent to a large extent. She describes herself (The author and narrator) as unlike many other American politicians. In her time representing the United States of America as the United Nations Ambassador, she narrated how she staunchly stood up for America and represented the country’s best interests, unlike other American politicians like Rex Tillerson and many others whom she claimed put their egos ahead of the country’s best interests:

Tensions were already high from an earlier meeting that day. Rex had been arrogant and condescending. He gave off the unmistakable impression that he knew more than everyone else in the room—including the president. And I will confess that I have never been good with people who are so convinced of their superiority that they refuse to hear anyone else out. Dealing with Rex could be exhausting. Tillerson opposed U.S. withdrawal from the Iran deal, and he was not alone in that view within the administration. My perspective was different (p. 4).

She also sympathises with the American masses whom she calls “real people” who “work hard,” are “proud,” and “patriotic” but have unfortunately been forgotten by the political establishment (p. 40). She did not hold back on chastising the political elites who “benefit from the division caused by this debate, so they do what they can to prolong it. Meanwhile, Congress, whose job it is to change the law and fix the situation, does nothing” (p. 136).

Haley calls forth shared national American values to exhibit narrative fidelity. Values like faith, hard work, and the American Dream are interspersed in her book:

We have to resist the forces that are pulling us apart, whether they are coming from the left or the right. Because it is our values—our belief that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness come to us from God, not government—that tie us together as Americans. It is in countries where these values are absent that tribalism and hatred flourish. We can never fail to make this case (p. 96).

In the run-up to the 2024 presidential elections, Haley also appears to be conjuring the “American Restoration Jeremiad” discourse mode to establish material coherence:

I’m running for President to save our country. We’ll end Joe Biden’s disastrous slide into socialism. We’ll unlock the power of American freedom. And we’ll move forward, together, into a future of prosperity and peace (@NikkiHaley, Twitter, 2022).

The seeming stability of Haley’s narrative, including her despise of extremism, which made her lead the charge for taking down confederate flags in her time as Governor of South Carolina, the characterological and material coherence of her narrative, and her emphasis on shared national values show that Haley is keen on establishing a stable persona.

Similarly, Chris Christie, another Republican party presidential hopeful, laces his speeches and tweets with shared American values, exhibiting elements of narrative fidelity and some shred of characterological coherence to establish a stable political persona:

We need to stop normalizing Donald Trump's conduct. It's beneath the office of the Presidency.

Boo all you want, I'm not going to stop telling the truth (@GovChristie, Twitter, 2023).

Christie and Hailey's aversion towards Trump's persona and rhetoric, coupled with the fact that both personas exist alongside Trump's persona within the same party, offer an alternative narrative worldview that shows that there is still space for a stable persona post-Trump.

DISCUSSION

The exploration of political persona dynamics uncovers pivotal factors that shape the appeal and success of various persona styles, with one crucial element being the allure of authenticity. In recent political landscapes, candidates with disruptive personas have effectively harnessed the power of authenticity to connect with voters. With their straightforward and passionate style, figures like Donald Trump appeared to resonate with many who viewed him as unfiltered, unconventional, and genuinely in touch with their concerns. The capacity to communicate candidly and authentically has proven to be a compelling characteristic in politics, benefiting disruptive personas like Trump, who project an image of unvarnished honesty.

Moreover, Trump's ability to leverage the transformative force of social media has enhanced the amplification of his unfiltered and disruptive persona style. Trump uses social media to exhibit his disruptive style and engage with voters directly. As Marshall and Henderson (2016) noted, given the proliferation of social media, unorthodox political personas can now bypass traditional gatekeepers and connect directly with their base. This leverages the power of immediacy and reach in the digital age to cultivate a loyal following, excite their audience, and mobilise supporters in ways previously unattainable. The fact that individual politicians do not have to pass through the gatekeepers of legacy media platforms makes it easier for disruptive personas to appeal directly to the voting public and spread the appeal of their persona.

Furthermore, the appeal of each political persona style – the stable and disruptive styles – finds appeal with the voting public depending on the prevailing socio-economic, political, and cultural milieu. Consider the defining backdrop of the 2008 economic crisis, which profoundly shadowed the American political landscape. During that tumultuous period, as the nation grappled with unprecedented financial instability and uncertainty, Barack Obama, with his stable, consistent persona, as exhibited in his campaign autobiography, *The Audacity of Hope*, emerged as a symbol of stability. His calm and reassuring demeanour most likely struck a chord with voters seeking leadership capable of navigating chaos and offering a sense of security during troubled times. This highlights a stable persona's enduring appeal when confronted with crises and upheaval.

On the other hand, as the political landscape evolved in the years that followed, the American electorate yearned for change, and the 2016 elections ushered in Donald Trump with his disruptive, unconventional persona. Trump's unorthodox style and outsider status resonated with voters disenchanted with the political establishment. Hence, Trump emerged as a disruptor, embodying the desire for a departure from the status quo and a shift towards unconventional leadership. His victory in 2016 marked a notable departure from the persona stability seen in previous administrations.

Then came the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant effects. The paradox lies in the fact that, after the turbulence of the Trump era, American voters once again sought a stable persona during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The pandemic and other events that spiralled out of it, such as widespread racially motivated protests, ideological tensions, and damaging economic impact, negatively affected Trump's re-election chances (Clarke et al., 2021). During a time of profound uncertainty, Joe Biden became a symbol of reassurance and clarity with his measured and unwavering approach. His Obama-style stable persona provided a reassuring presence in the face of a global crisis, once again affirming the enduring strength of stability during tumultuous times. This dynamic interplay underscores the ever-shifting nature of American politics. All of the preceding highlights the notion that the effectiveness of a particular persona style in American politics is an intricate interplay of a multitude of factors. The prevailing socio-political context, the candidates' individual qualities, and the influence of digital communication technologies all contribute to the dynamism of political personas.

In this changing landscape, the enduring strength of a stable and relatable persona, exemplified by leaders like Obama and Joe Biden, coexists with the appeal of disruptive personas typified by figures like Donald Trump. The success of a particular persona style ultimately hinges on how effectively it aligns with the prevailing circumstances and the evolving preferences of the electorate. Therefore, leaders must navigate these shifting dynamics skilfully, crafting personas that authentically resonate with the American public. In this context, the 2024 presidential election looms as a critical litmus test, poised to illuminate the enduring appeal of the stable persona style in American politics, even as it adapts to the ever-changing currents of history.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study shed light on the evolution of political persona-building strategies, especially in the context of American politics. The research shows that while the political landscape has witnessed significant disruptions and transformations, stable personas possess attributes that can help them court the trust of the voting public. As embodied by leaders like Barack Obama and Joe Biden, politicians who project stable personas maintain their relevance and offer unique advantages, even with disruptive figures such as Donald Trump. By placing a strong emphasis on core American values, stable personas can rally the nation, especially in polarised political environments, and attract voters who are seeking leaders who promote unity, reassurance, and civility. The measured approach and calm comportment that a stable persona projects can be a comforting presence when chaos abounds.

While disruptive persona styles, as exemplified by Trump, have their appeal and can draw voters disenchanted with the political establishment, they are only sometimes effective. The 2008 and 2020 presidential elections demonstrated that a stable persona could prevail when the nation seeks reassurance, clear direction, and a return to shared values. In light of these findings, it is evident that the strategic deployment of narrative coherence and fidelity in political communication remains a powerful tool for building a stable and relatable persona. As the political landscape continues to evolve, leaders will need to carefully navigate these shifting dynamics to construct personas that resonate with the American public. The 2024 presidential election will be a critical test of the enduring appeal of the stable persona style in American politics.

WORKS CITED

- Atkins, J & Gaffney, J 2020. "Narrative, persona, and performance: The case of Theresa May 2016–2017". *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 293–308. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148120910985>
- Atwater, D F 2007. "Senator Barack Obama: The rhetoric of hope and the American dream". *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 121–129. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934707305431>
- Benziman, G, Kannai, R, & Ahmad, A 2012. "The wounded healer as cultural archetype." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 14, no. 1. <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1927>
- Bercovitch, S 1978. *The American Jeremiad*. University of Wisconsin Press.
- Berryman, C 1999. "Critical Mirrors: Theories of autobiography." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp.71–84. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44029420>
- Biden, J R 2017. *Promise Me, Dad: A Year of Hope, Hardship, and Purpose*. Flatiron Books.
- Bloomberg, M 2019, November 24. *Rebuild America: Join Mike Bloomberg's 2020 Presidential Campaign*. Video. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_1T_xPpAwo
- Blouin, M J 2021. *Literary Interventions in the Campaign Biography (1st ed.)*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003132448>
- Clarke, V & Braun, V 2017. "Thematic analysis". *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 297–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>
- Clarke, H, Stewart, M C & Ho, K 2021. "Did Covid-19 Kill Trump Politically? The Pandemic and Voting in the 2020 Presidential Election". *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 102, pp. 2194–2209. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12992>
- Clinton, H 2016, November 8. *The story of her | Hillary Clinton*. Video. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzCW30RnwuY>
- Datesman, M K, Crandall, J, Kearny E N (2022). *American Ways: An Introduction to American Culture*. Pearson Education Inc.
- van Dijk, J 2013. *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199970773.001.0001>
- Earthy, S., Cuncev, A., & Cronin, A. 2016. "Narrative Analysis". In *Researching Social Life* pp. 461–483. <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/researching-social-life/book242913>
- Fisher, W R 1982. "Romantic democracy, Ronald Reagan, and presidential heroes". *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, vol.46, no. 3, pp. 299–310. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570318209374088>
- 1984. "The narrative paradigm: In the beginning". *Journal of Communication*, vol. 34, pp. 74–89. <https://doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1984.tb02986.x>
- 1985. "The narrative paradigm: An elaboration". *Communication Monographs*, vol. 52, no. 4, pp. 347–367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758509376117>
- 1987. *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value and Action*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Guest, G, MacQueen, K M, & Namey, E E 2011. *Applied thematic analysis*. SAGE Publications.
- Haley, N R 2019. *With All Due Respect: Defending America With Grit and Grace*. St. Martins Press.
- Harrell, W J 2010. "The Reality of American Life Has Strayed From Its Myths': Barack Obama's The Audacity of Hope and the Discourse of the American Reclamation Jeremiad". *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 164–183. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934709338003>
- Humphrey, M 2023. "Small Stories in Mass Media: Coalescent Themes and Tactics in Trump's Twitter Presidency". In A Georgakopoulou, K Giaxoglou & S Patron, (eds.), *Small Stories Research: Tales, Tellings, and Tellers Across Contexts*. Routledge. pp. 207–226. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003253563>

-
- Jones, J M & Rowland, R C 2005. "A Covenant-affirming jeremiad: The post-presidential ideological appeals of Ronald Wilson Reagan". *Communication Studies*, vol. 56, no. 2, pp. 157–174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00089570500078783>
- Körner, R, Overbeck, J R, Körner, E & Schütz, A 2022. "How the Linguistic Styles of Donald Trump and Joe Biden Reflect Different Forms of Power". *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, vol. 41, no. 6, pp. 631-658. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X221085309>
- Marshall, P D, & Henderson, N 2016. "Political Persona 2016 - An Introduction". *Persona Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.21153/ps2016vol2no2art628>
- Moore, C, Barbour, K, & Lee, K 2017. "Five Dimensions of Online Persona". *Persona Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.21153/ps2017vol3no1art658>
- Obama, B 2006. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. Crown.
- Sahlstein Parcell, E & Baker, B M 2017. "Narrative analysis". In M Allen (ed.) *The SAGE Encyclopedia of communication research methods (Vols. 1-4)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, pp. 1069–1072.
- The American Presidency Project. n. d. "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in Denver: "The American Promise" | The American Presidency Project". Retrieved March 31, 2024, from <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-democratic-national-convention-denver>
- Wagner-Pacifi, R 2023. "Anticharismatic Authority: Joe Biden's Approximation of the Ideal Type". *Politics & Society*. vol. 0. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323292231158915>