

TWITTER AS A PLATFORM FOR ENGAGING POLITICAL DIALOGUE:  
A DIALOGIC THEORY CONTENT ANALYSIS OF DONALD TRUMP'S  
GENERAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN TWITTER FEED

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## ABSTRACT

The Internet and social media are tools that possess the ability to make communicating with celebrities, politicians and all types of important figures an actual possibility. This content analysis explores the use of then- presidential candidate Donald Trump's use of Twitter to communicate with his followers. A random sample of tweets was selected following the time period after the Republican National Convention to a week after the general election. The study relies on Kent and Taylor's (2001) principle strategies of how to create effective relationship building through dialogue. There is very little research available concerning political candidates and dialogic theory on social media. However, what is found in this study remains consistent with that of similar studies on dialogic theory and celebrities and organizations' use of social media. Social media as a tool for building effective relationships through the use of dialogic principles is severely under-utilized. Despite the lack of dialogic principles, Trump's followers remained highly engaged into his tweeting habits, especially with tweets that attacked an individual or the media. The findings prove that these types of tweets were published most often thus lending credence to assert that the aggressive rhetoric was popular amongst his followers.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my father who inspired my love for politics and encouraged me to pursue my education.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

Freq.	The frequency with which an element was observed
%	The percentage an element appeared out of the overall sample
df	Degrees of freedom: number of values free to vary after certain restrictions have been placed on the data
sd	Standard deviation
$\chi^2$	Computed value of chi-square analysis
$\leq$	Less than or equal to
=	Equal to

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

With more than 88% of the U.S. population online, the country is more digitally connected than ever (Live Internet Statistics, 2016). Increasing steadily each year, online communications have transformed the way people share ideas and connect with their friends, family, and even their favorite public figures. For politicians like Donald Trump, whose Twitter audience is made up of nearly 19 million followers, social media has been a vital part of his success (Trump, 2016). Online connectivity allowed him to maintain communication with the people who ultimately decided his fitness to preside over the United States. The research reported here content analyzed then-candidate Trump's general election Twitter feed to see how he managed dialogue with his followers and how his purposed communication corresponded to the popularity and success of his presidential campaign. By analyzing Trump's tweets via dialogic theory, it will be easier to understand what aspects of his social media practices helped create dialogue that built a strong constituency leading to his election to the world's most powerful position.

Donald J. Trump is one of the world's most famous and polarizing billionaires. Trump's reported net worth of \$4.5 billion dollars (US) is credited to his real estate ventures under the Trump Organization and Trump Entertainment Resorts, along with his career in reality T.V. (Forbes Staff, 2015). Noted for his aggressive, sharp, and fiery rhetoric, he was the ideal character to host his own reality T.V. show, helping bolster his

international reputation as a demanding CEO. Over the years, Trump has supported both Republican and Democratic candidates, switching his party affiliation multiple times. Despite being a registered Democrat from 2001-2009, and a declared independent from 2011-2012, Trump announced his candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination in June 2015 (Sargent, 2014).

Trump announced he would be seeking the GOP nomination amidst one of the largest fields of contenders the Republican Party has ever seen. Trump emphasized his qualifications, touting himself as the most successful candidate to ever seek the office (Diamond, 2015). His announcement speech addressed some of the most polarizing, controversial issues facing the country. “Our country has a debt which will soon pass \$20 trillion. We have unsecured borders. There are over 90 million Americans who have given up looking for work. We have 45 million Americans on food stamps and nearly 50 million Americans living in poverty” (Trump, 2015). Trump suggested his business acumen uniquely qualified him to address these problems. He also famously proclaimed that he would build an immigration-control wall on the southern border of the United States and make Mexico pay for it (Diamond, 2015).

During his campaign, Trump proved a constant fixture in mainstream media headlines because of his unusual style of campaigning and his uninhibited language on social media and traditional media outlets. Following his announcement, Trump polled at ninth place, tied with New Jersey Governor Chris Christie (Diamond, 2015). After a series of controversial comments, speeches and appearances, Trump climbed from the back of the pack to become its front leader. In August of 2015, he proposed a plan to deport 11 million illegal immigrants (Forbes Staff, 2015). He also offended women with

his crude comments regarding journalist Megyn Kelly's menstrual cycle and the physical appearance of his competitor Carly Fiorina's (Forbes Staff, 2015). He attacked Vietnam prisoner-of-war and Arizona Senator John McCain's military record, implying that being captured does not make someone a hero (Forbes Staff, 2015). He also insulted the Muslim parents of fallen U.S. soldier for the mother's silence during a speech at the Democratic National Convention (Habberman and Oppel, 2016). Despite his politically insensitive statements, Trump won the Republican nomination for Presidency of the United States. In October of 2016, weeks before the election, the candidate was plagued with sexual assault allegations involving several different women (Graham, 2016). Notwithstanding his many perceived offenses, on November 7, 2016, the American public ignored the political abnormalities and elected Trump president of the United States.

Twitter, a micro-blog messaging service, serves 313 million active users while garnering 1 billion unique monthly views to sites with embedded tweets (Twitter, 2016). Twitter's mission is "to give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers" (Twitter, 2016). Users are able to share whatever is on their mind in 140 characters or less. Unmoderated, immediate communication access provides an ideal platform to create dialogue and conversations. Twitter messages, called tweets, can be comprised of words, photos, links and videos. Twitter is considered to have originated the use of hashtags to organize conversations. For instance, a user tweeting about a music awards show may include #nameoftheawardshow at the end of the message to attract other users wanting to discuss the topic.

By tweeting a daily average of nearly 12 times and using Twitter's engagement features, Trump established a committed following that contributed significantly to his success (Twitonomy, 2016). Trump used Twitter as a communication tool by occasionally replying to his follower's tweets, liking, re-tweeting and even quoting his followers. The research proposed here examines how Trump used social media to establish and maintain continued support among his followers. Impassioned comments and relationships created through Twitter seemed to rally a group of voters who had previously been politically inactive. This research also assesses the possibility that dialogic theory principles evident in Trump's feed influenced his eventual electoral success.

Chapter 2 provides a literature review covering the tenets of dialogic communication theory in a public relations context, describes dialogic theory principles and reviews previous research. Chapter 2 concludes with research questions to be investigated via content analysis of Trump's general election Twitter feed. Chapter 3 details the research methods undertaken to investigate the research questions. Chapter 4 offers a detailed statistical analysis of Trump's tweeting activity and correlates these activities with his positions in public opinion polls. The research concludes with Chapter 5, Results. This last chapter describes the implications of Trump's Twitter strategy, notes the limitations of the current research and suggests future research relating to Twitter as a political campaign communication platform.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Originally developed by Pearson (1989), dialogic theory suggests mutually beneficial relationships are built upon open, goal-directed dialogue between parties. Researchers have defined organization-public relationships as “the state that exists between an organization and its key publics that provide economic, social, political, and/or cultural benefits to all parties involved, and is characterized by mutual positive regard” (Lendingham and Bruning 1998, p.62). Kent and Taylor and their collaborators researched the implications of dialogue in public relations contexts. They suggest that “the concept of dialogue may now best capture the process and product of relationship building” (Taylor, Kent & White 2001, p.265). With the expansion of the Internet and various social media platforms, two-way communication between influential policy makers, organization leaders, brands, companies and interested stakeholders has become more common. Absent stable, successful relationships, organizations and individuals cannot achieve goals. Bortree and Seltzer (2009) reported empirical evidence that relationships do yield positive outcomes. Dialogue is crucial to effective relationship building because it encourages a mutual effort to create an honest, open, and ethical environment.

Kent and Taylor (1998) proposed dialogic communications as an effective public relations social media strategy for building relationships. They defined dialogic communication as “any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions” (p.325), noting that

all of the relationship's members need not agree. They described dialogic theory relationship building as more than simply responding to or listening to publics. Rather, dialogic theory relationship building requires respecting and acknowledging the positions of competing stakeholders.

Kent and Taylor (2001) described five orienting principles for creating active dialogue. The first principle, mutuality, suggests an understanding between parties that each party affects each other party in some relational way. Propinquity, Kent & Taylor's second principle, describes timely rhetoric oriented toward future relationship while actively encouraging engagement. The empathy principle describes dialogue suggesting understanding and supportiveness, even under conditions of disagreement. The risk principle recognizes each party's vulnerability under conditions of open dialogue. Finally, dialogue encompasses various levels of commitment including honesty, an agreement to deliver mutual benefits and attempts to understand different, sometimes competing points of view.

Kent and Taylor (1998) described several tactics distinguishing dialogic communication management from other public relations communication models. These tactics include providing opportunities for feedback and responsiveness via a dialogic loop. Usefulness of information suggests that all communication delivered by any members of the relationship must be relevant and interesting to the recipient. Relevant dialogue leads directly to the generation of return visits. If stakeholders find the dialogue timely and relevant, stakeholders will return and participate in the dialogue. Ease of interface refers to how easy it is to understand and participate in the dialogue,



while the conservation of visitors tactic aims to attract and retain interested stakeholders to other websites managed by the organization.

### Dialogic Theory Research

Research has been conducted investigating the use of dialogic theory on websites and blogs. Kent, Taylor & White (2001) examined how activist organizations use dialogic principles on their websites. Ultimately, they concluded that the then-new technology was not being used to its full potential. A communication platform designed to facilitate two-way communication was most often used as a one-way platform disseminating information. In an effort to further Kent, Taylor & White's research on how activists use websites to build online relationships, Seltzer and Mitrook (2001; 2007) investigated how activists use weblogs to establish connections with stakeholders. They drew a purposive sample of 50 activist weblogs and found that when compared to websites, weblogs consistently scored higher in ease of interface and conservation of visitors. Although websites offered the dialogic loop principle more frequently, weblogs are still more responsive. Seltzer & Mitrook concluded that weblogs may provide a better platform to facilitate dialogue.

Watkins and Lewis (2014) investigated how athletes used Kent and Taylor's (1998) strategies and tactics to engage fans on Twitter. Watkins and Lewis incorporated the structural elements of Twitter by examining how many retweets and likes individual tweets obtained. Watkins and Lewis found two-way communication lacking, however the generation of return visits and conservation of visits principles were highly utilized.

Waters and Jamal (2011) investigated how nonprofits use Twitter effort to identify which type of public relations model nonprofits were using to communicate. In terms of

one-way communication, nonprofits were more likely to share through the public information model. As for two-way communication, nonprofits more commonly practice asymmetrical communication. Waters & Jamal's findings confirm previous research stating that online relationships are still heavily one-sided. Internet communication platforms are under-utilized.

In research on how nonprofit organizations use Facebook to engage stakeholders Waters, Lamm and Lucas (2009) found three elements to be paramount. Disclosure, or the ability to be open and transparent through communication was first on the researchers' list. Second and equally important was how useful the social media profile was to engaged publics. Did the organization use the profile to disseminate valuable information about the cause? Finally, they considered interactivity the most crucial element. Did the nonprofit engage or make any effort to exchange ideas and information directly with stakeholders? Ultimately, they found that nonprofits are not utilizing Facebook to its fullest potential. While the organizations they researched are open and disseminating valuable information, they weren't interactively engaging stakeholders, a finding consistent with previous studies (Waters et. al, 2009).

#### Parasocial Relationships

Relationships exist on many levels. Regardless of whether the current research produces evidence of dialogic principles in Trump's general election campaign Twitter feed, it is evident that the type of relationship he seeks with his followers is not conventional, face-to-face interaction. As a practical matter, it would be impossible for Trump to have personal contact with each one of his 20 million Twitter followers.

Therefore, this study will use parasocial relationships as a framework for understanding Trump's efforts.

Parasocial interaction can be defined as one-sided, mediated communication between a media user and a media personality (Frederick et. al, 2012). Unless direct contact is made by the personality to the user, the relationship remains in a parasocial state (Frederick et. al, 2012). Recent studies have found that Twitter and other social media platforms afford the opportunity for personalities to have direct contact with fans, thus changing the constructs and expectations of parasocial relationships (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Frederick et. al, 2012). Marwick & Boyd argue that the new dynamic created by social media demands that celebrities and other public figures read and respond to their followers. Celebrities that don't interact with followers will be perceived as disinterested and uncaring. The result could be a loss of fans.

In their study on entertainers' use of Twitter, Stever & Lawson (2013) found varying results concerning direct communication between celebrities and fans. Despite Twitter's opportunity for interactive dialogue, the researchers found that such relationships are still parasocial because of the small number of celebrity replies to fan queries (Stever & Lawson, 2013). Limited research is available concerning Twitter and social media. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, it will be assumed that Trump is seeking to establish a parasocial relationship whereby he occasionally replies to his followers. Occasional replies create the appearance that he is genuinely concerned about their thoughts and opinions.

#### Political Communications

There is little research available concerning how and whether candidates for

political offices use dialogic theory principles on social media platforms. However, a study of the 2008 Obama Presidential Campaign combined relationship management theory principles and dialogic principles to gain a better understanding of how websites and social media can be used to develop effective online relationships (Levenshush, 2010). Organization-public relationships (Lendingham & Bruning, 1998) provide a framework for explaining the connection between a campaign and its supporters. “Campaigns depend on supporters and are impacted by their actions (i.e., volunteering, voting). Likewise, supporters depend on potential leaders and are impacted by their actions (i.e., economical, political)” (Levenshush, 2010, p. 315). Therefore, the relationship between a politician and a supporter has the potential to be mutually beneficial. Through interviews, articles and an in-depth look at the campaign website, Levenshush was able to assess how the Obama campaign established a participatory Internet strategy and managed relationships with its grassroots supporters. Levenshush determined that the Obama team was the first to fully utilize Internet tools to build online relationships that benefitted the campaign. Successful use Internet-based communication strategies and tactics helped Obama win the 2008 Presidential Election.

Sweetser and Lariscy (2008) investigated users’ comments on Facebook profiles of U.S. Senate and House of Representatives candidates. They reported that although candidates rarely replied to queries or commented about content posted by followers, people who left comments on a candidate’s Facebook wall felt a sense of closeness to the candidate and considered themselves politically engaged. This result supports Sweetser and Lariscy’s assumption that the mere existence of a politician’s Facebook profile encourages people to participate in dialogic communications.

A political policy analyst (Shogan 2010) advised that social media growth and the expectations of its participants would produce changes in how political candidates communicate with one another and the candidate's constituents. Shogan's Twitter analysis reported that fewer than 20 of 1,187 tweets from U.S. Congress members were direct replies to constituent queries. Shogan predicted that falling communication barriers and demands for two-way social media communication would rise as the media and the electorate became increasingly able to share information and monitor elected officials. Ignoring the technical abilities of media and the electorate and their demands for two-way interaction could end a political career. Political candidates and other public officials should expect to increasingly account for their policies and actions via social media.

Hong and Nadler (2011) researched the benefits of political use of Twitter for U.S. politicians because of the microblog's asymmetrical relationship possibilities (Grant, Moon & Grant, 2010; Porter, 2009). Other social media platforms, such as Facebook, require both users to connect through "friendships" in order to exchange information. In contrast to Facebook, you don't have to subscribe to the individual's feed to view the candidate's tweeted content. Twitter's free flow of thoughts, ideas and opinions have also led some to describe Twitter as a modern-day public square where controversial topics can be debated. Hong & Nadler analyzed social media activity for nine different Republicans monitored by several reliable public opinion polls. They observed no significant relationship between a candidate's tweet frequency and the candidate's poll position. However, Hong and Nadler did not account for the tweet content, nor did they apply the dialogic theory principles to their analysis.

In perhaps the most significant investigation of Twitter's political use, Grant and Moon (2010) examined Twitter activity in an Australian political context. Their research objectives included determining what politicians were doing on the platform, if any political benefits were derived from Twitter presence and to observe social media's impact on Australia's political culture. Grant and Moon suggested that more controversial politicians were likely to be active on Twitter than their less controversial counterparts. They operationalized a tweet's Twitter success by observing the number of retweets received by the original tweet. They assumed that user retweeting broadened the reach of the original posting, thereby increasing the tweet's (and the candidate's) visibility. They found that Twitter benefited candidates that weren't politically entrenched. Twitter provided opportunities for opposition and minority parties and less well-known candidates to engage the electorate via competing tweets. As a practical matter, less well-known or well-financed candidates don't attract media attention at levels similar to more well-known candidates. Employing social media while bypassing traditional media created communication opportunities unavailable in prior elections. They determined that Twitter did not introduce a group-think dynamic to the Australian political sphere, but rather encouraged new thoughts gathered in small networks of people. They concluded that Twitter "offers something of an unmediated connection with politicians," and that for Australia it is the place where "ideas, issues, and policies are first announced, discussed, debated and framed" (p. 599).

Twitter as a Communications Platform

Twitter has grown immensely since its launch in October 2006 claiming that its microblogging service is " ... a platform for you to influence what's being talked about around the world (About us, 2010). According to Twitter, there are more than 200 million registered users generating 340 million tweets daily. When users create profiles, they select an avatar and write a 160-character profile description. They can then send brief messages, called tweets, of no more than 140 characters, to the account's followers. Tweets can include photos and URLs linked to other content. Twitter collects tweets from the profiles a user follows, compiles the tweets and posts them to the user's Twitter feed. This allows users to quickly browse the information. Political candidates using Twitter create profiles just like other users. Twitter verifies profiles to assure users that the page represents the candidate. A verified page is denoted with a blue checkmark (Twitter.com). Celebrity status confers no additional technical privileges. Celebrity tweeters are subject to the same rules as less famous tweeters. Shaw & Weaver (2014) describe Twitter as an example of horizontal media (compared to corporate owned and managed vertical media). Horizontal media offer the advantage of targeted content delivered peer to peer on "many different types of niche media (that) reach out to specific communities of people (Vargo et. al, 2014, p298).

There are several Twitter-specific terms. Mentions refer to Twitter users referencing other Twitter users in their tweets. Mentioned content is identified by an @ symbol preceding the account name ("Happy birthday @Beyonce). A hashtag mark (#) helps users identify and follow conversations centering on a particular topic, for example, "#WorldSeries." A third structural component of Twitter is retweets. When users receive tweets they wish to pass along to their followers, they retweet the

message. Users can edit or add comments to the tweet or send it as originally received, for example, “I agree! RT ‘@john doe I Love Cat Videos.’”

Twitter provides a powerful direct communication tool to politicians, athletes, entertainers, business leaders, philanthropists and other opinion leaders. To determine whether dialogic communication possibilities were used in a U.S. presidential campaign, this study examined Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump’s Twitter feed during the 2016 general election period. This thesis builds upon previous research examining dialogic theory, strategies and tactics, most of which does not examine Twitter in political contexts. This research builds upon Hong and Nadler’s (2011) research by more closely examining Trump’s tweeted content, as well as his standing in subsequent public opinion polls. Similar to Watkins and Lewis (2014), Trump’s Twitter feed was examined for use of Twitter’s structural features (embedded videos, links, hastags, etc). While content analysis cannot confirm specific tactical decisions made by the feed’s managers, the presence of consistent, repetitive content categories can offer insight into what the managers think the electorate is interested in and most likely to respond to.

Krippendorff (2013) asserts that in the absence of direct observation of content creation, content analysis allows researchers to assess content, then overlay assumptions and explanations. Krippendorff notes that content analysis allows “analysts (to) draw specific inferences from a body of texts to their chosen context (p30).” In the absence of direct observation of the Twitter feed’s managers, content



analysis of the text corpus provides the most readily available insight into unobservable managerial practices (Krippendorff's "inaccessible phenomena" (p38)). In the absence of direct confirmation from the feed's managers concerning decisions about these critical areas, content analysis offers the best proxy for gaining insight.

### Research Questions

Several research questions regarding activity observed on then-candidate Trump's general election Twitter feed was researched in this thesis. It is important to note that Trump was not the only author of the tweets disseminated from this account. However, since there is no way for average followers to determine which tweets came directly from his fingertips, all will be included in this assessment and are assumed to be Trump-approved postings.

The first question seeks to determine if Kent & Taylor's (1998) dialogic communication tactics can be observed in the Twitter feed. Frequent use of these tactics suggests the feed is being used to establish a dialogic, two-way relationship with followers designed to engage those followers and build mutually beneficial relationships.

*RQ1: Which (if any) dialogic tactics were employed in Trump's general campaign Twitter Feed?*

A presidential candidate's Twitter feed could be used to communicate a wide variety of information, including statements of political policy and philosophy, contemporary campaign issues (immigration, health care, economic policy, etc.), appeals for campaign funds, dates, times and locations of personal appearances and

media appearances, responses to competitors and much more. This variety will be assessed with a second research question.

*RQ2: What content topics did Trump tweet during the general election campaign?*

One of the objectives of this research is to determine if the pattern and content of Trump's general election Twitter feed impacted his standing in public opinion polls. Therefore, several questions about temporal variables are proposed.

*RQ3.1: What was the overall pattern of Trump's tweets during the general election campaign period?*

*RQ3.2: What was the weekly pattern for Trump's tweets during the general election campaign period?*

*RQ3.3: At what time of day was Trump most likely to tweet during the general election campaign?*

A last research question concerns the campaign's use of Twitter's structural features, such as video embeds, links to other web-based content, hashtags organizing conversation threads, etc.

*RQ4: Which of Twitter's structural features are observed on Trump's general election campaign Twitter feed?*

## CHAPTER 3

### METHOD

This thesis content analyzed a random sample of tweets posted to then-candidate Trump's Twitter feed during the 2016 general election campaign period. The unit of analysis content analyzed is the tweeted message. Tweets were collected by subscribing to Trump's Twitter feed. Each tweet was received by the researcher and archived for analysis. The dataset includes only those tweets posted to Trump's official Twitter feed. The researcher began collecting tweets on Thursday, July 31, 2016, the day Trump officially accepted the Republican Party nomination for the presidency. Tweet collection proceeded throughout the general campaign period and concluded on Tuesday, November 15, 2016, one week after the general election date of Tuesday, November 8, 2016. A total of 1,388 tweets were collected during this period.

#### Tweet Sampling

Each tweet posted during the general campaign period was assigned a unique number ranging from 1 – 1,388 and entered into an Excel Spreadsheet. The Excel software program was used to randomly select 416 tweets as the final coded sample (30% of all tweets). An additional 150 tweets were randomly selected for coder training. The training tweets were not included in the final sample.

#### Coding Tweets for Dialogic Principles

Each tweet was examined for the presence or absence of dialogic communication theory principles and tactics described by Kent & Taylor (1998). One of Kent & Taylor's principles, usefulness of information, is excluded from this analysis. The usefulness principle asserts that a follower will find the information relevant to the follower's interests. The content analysis research method is unable to assess communication effects as a result of the communication (e.g. interest, relevance, usefulness, actions undertaken, etc.) However, the presence of Kent & Taylor's other remaining dialogic principles can be assessed as described in the next sections. This coding scheme was adapted and modified from the Watkins and Lewis (2014) content analysis of athletes' Twitter activity.

#### Dialogic Loop

The dialogic loop principle should exhibit Trump engaging with his followers. This could include such actions as retweeting content sent to him by his followers or retweeting non-follower content, quoting his followers or others, posing a question to his followers and seeking responses and/or requesting an action of his followers (such as asking them to retweet a post if they agree, for example). This variable was coded at the nominal level of yes (loop present) or no (loop absent). If yes, the tweet was further coded as a retweet, a follower quote, a question for followers, or a suggested action.

#### Conservation of Visitors

This principle's objective is to retain and direct followers to other Trump-related content managed by Trump's campaign. Alternative platforms could include Facebook, the campaign website, YouTube channel, Instagram and other

social media platforms. This variable was coded at the nominal level of yes (effort to retain) or no (no effort to retain). If yes, the tweet was further coded to determine the location of the recommended content.

#### Generation of Return Visits

If relationships are to develop, followers must return and participate in engagement. Twitter postings can include structural features that allow followers to return and rejoin on-going conversations. The hashtag symbol, #, organizes threads of similar topics. Each tweet was coded as yes (hashtag present) or no (hashtag absent). If yes, the conversation thread identified by the hashtag was recorded. Hashtag content categories were established post-hoc.

#### Dialogic Orientation

Tweets can be considered as having dialogic orientation if they are conversational in nature or suggest that some form of communication has taken place. For instance, tweets that are posted as a response to a follower's inquiry, request, or agreement/disagreement of statements could be considered dialogically oriented. Retweeting a follower's tweet would also fall into this category. This principle was coded as yes (orientation present) or no (orientation absent).

#### User Interaction

The most efficient way to observe how users interact with any specific Tweet is to observe how many times a tweet is liked and retweeted. Thus, to measure user interaction, each tweet was coded for the presence and number of follower retweets and likes, resulting in ratio-level variables.

## Tweet Content Codes

A political candidate's Twitter feed could address a wide variety of political and non-political issues. This research coded content areas Pew Research Center survey respondents identified as "very important" in determining how the respondent planned to vote in the 2016 presidential election (2016). The topics are: economy, terrorism, foreign policy, health care, gun policy, immigration, Social Security, education, Supreme Court appointments, treatment of racial/ethnic minorities, trade policy, environment, abortion and treatment of gay/lesbian/transgender people. Additionally, the following content categories were added to this list: media response (Trump commenting upon media content appearing on other platforms or in traditional media) and general campaign activity (announcement of campaign rally appearances/times/locations/broadcast media appearances/appeals for financial support, etc.). A last category, labeled other, was included to capture content unrelated to the previous codes. Each tweet was assigned to one content category.

## Temporal Activity Codes

Trump's tweets were examined to determine the daypart and day of the week the tweet was posted. Dayparts were coded as follows: early morning (12:00 am – 5 am), morning (5:01 am – 11 am), afternoon (11:01 am – 2 pm), late afternoon (2:01 pm – 6 pm), night (6:01 pm – 9 pm) and late night (9 pm – 11:59 pm).

## Correlating Twitter Activity with Public Opinion Polling

To determine whether Trump benefited from his Twitter postings, this research will correlate Trump's tweet frequency to his standing in public opinion

polls during the general election campaign period. Real Clear Politics' (2016) website offers polling information from virtually every major polling organization in the country and averages the results. The website provides a timeline graph for both candidates since the start of the race, as well as individual reports from each polling institution. Users can select dates ranging from July 2015 until Election Day.

### Coder Training

An initial subset of 150 tweets were randomly selected and used to train two graduate students familiar with content analysis methods. The results of the training codes were assessed with Krippendorff's alpha. The two coders were required to meet a minimum .80 agreement threshold before proceeding to the final sample. Coders were provided with the full content of each randomly selected tweet. Coders entered responses directly into an Excel spreadsheet that was downloaded to SPSS for statistical analysis.

The coder training process identified several topics that were not present in the Pew Research Center study (2016). As a result, five new content categories were added to the coding scheme: personal/character attacks, media response, public opinion poll results, forwarded media coverage and law enforcement.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

A random sample of 415 tweets (30% of all tweeted content) posted to then-presidential candidate Donald Trump's general election Twitter feed was content analyzed. The presence of Kent & Taylor's (1998) dialogic theory principles was assumed if the principle was observed in 50 percent or more of the sampled tweets. The 50 percent benchmark was chosen because there is no standard set forth in previous literature. If the principle was present 50 percent of the time, it was reasonably assumed to be a regular feature of Trump's Twitter use. The data were then statistically analyzed to test for any significant differences. A pre-determined alpha probability of  $\leq .05$  was selected as the minimum probability for identifying statistically significant differences. In this section, results for the sampled tweets are reported, along with tests of statistical differences.

#### Twitter Feed Frequency Analysis

Research question 1 addressed which dialogic principles, if any, were employed in Trump's general campaign Twitter feed. Tweets were considered as demonstrating the dialogic loop principle if the feed's manager posted a question to followers, if the content was a retweet from another source, or if the tweet quoted a media source or was follower-generated content. Of the total tweets sampled, 21 tweets (5%) were retweeted or quoted from a non-follower source, 43 tweets (10%) were retweeted or quoted from a feed follower, while only 11 (3%) of the tweets posed a question



generated by the feed's managers. Another 340 tweets (82%) consisted of Trump-originated content, but contained no evidence of the dialogic loop principle. None of the sampled tweets analyzed here consisted of Trump responding to questions submitted by the feed's followers. The conclusion is that the dialogic loop principle is absent from the feed.

Research question 1 also included an assessment of the conservation of visitors principle, operationalized as whether Trump's feed directed followers to other media content managed by his campaign, such as Facebook, Instagram or other websites. Conservation of visitors was observed in 107 (26%) of the sampled tweets. Most tweets contained no link to other content. When links were observed, most tweets contained only one link. Links that led followers to external platforms were present in 67 (16%) of the tweets. If external links were present, there was only a single link available. The conclusion is that the conservation of visitors principle is absent from the feed.

Hashtag use was observed and cataloged to determine presence of the generation of return visits principle. In the sample, most tweets, 258 (62%) contained no hashtags organizing discussion threads. When hashtags were observed, the tweet was most likely to contain a single hashtag. One hashtag was present in 96 (23%) of the tweets, while 57 (14%) of the tweets had two hashtags and only 9 (2%) of tweets included 3 hashtags. Trump's campaign slogan, #MakeAmericaGreatAgain, and rallying call, #DrainTheSwamp, were observed most often. A list of all observed hashtags and frequencies is reported in Table 1. The conclusion is that the generation of return visits principle is not observed in the feed.

Table 1

*Frequencies and percentages of hashtags in Trump's feed*

Hashtags	Frequency	Percentage
#CrookedHillary	2	.48
#MAGA	9	2.2
#Debate	8	1.9
#DrainTheSwamp	10	2.4
#TrumpPence16	4	.96
#BigLeagueTruth	6	1.4
#VPDebate	5	1.2
#ImWithYou	8	1.9
#AmericaFirst	5	1.2
#MakeAmericaGreatAgain	10	2.4
#VoteTrump	2	.48
#ObamaCare	2	.48

**Note.** Several hashtags were mentioned once rendering a percent of .24. Those hashtags were: #Trump, #dtmag, #Enjoy! #DebateNight, #Obamacarefail, #LawandOrder, #TrumpTrain, #NeverHillary, #TheDonald, #JimmyFallon, #TheTonightShow, #VoteTrumpPence16, #Pence, #CBSNews, #WheresHillary, #Isis, #USA, #DonaldTrump, #PhilRobertson, #DuckDynasty, #Obamacare, #CommanderInChiefforum, #ICYMI, #RNCinCLE, #Obamacarefailed, #TBT, #LaborDay, #Trump2016

User interaction was operationalized as the number of retweets and likes for each tweet. All 415 sampled tweets (100%) were retweeted and liked at least once. The retweets variable mean is 11,083 (s.d. = 10,488; range = 1,763 - 166,565). The likes variable mean is 29,202 (s.d.= 21,810; range = 6,490 - 180,674). While the ranges are large for the retweet and like variables, the conclusion is that the user interaction principle is observed in the feed.

Research question 2 concerned the feed's content: What topic areas were observed on Trump's feed. Tweet content was coded with a two-step process. First, each tweet's content was coded as addressing an international issue or a domestic issue. The second step was to code tweet content into a single content category. Tweet content that could not be placed into the pre-determined coding scheme was placed in a category labeled other. Frequencies and percentages for content areas are summarized in Table 2. Trump's tweets were overwhelmingly focused on domestic content (398/96%). Many of the content topics identified as important by voters in the Pew Center Research (2016) were not observed. The three most frequently observed tweet categories are general campaign information (138/33%), personal character attacks (56/14%) and media response (40/9.6%). Most media coverage references did not refer to a specific media vehicle or a specific media personality. However, CNN is specifically identified more than any other outlet.

Table 2

*Frequencies and Percentages of Content Categories in Trump’s Feed*

Content Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Domestic Economy/ Finance	9	2.2
International Trade/ Finance	3	.7
Terrorism	8	1.9
Foreign Policy/ Diplomacy	13	3.1
Healthcare	6	1.4
Gun Control/ Firearms	3	.7
Immigration	7	1.7
Supreme/ Federal Courts	2	.5
Ethnic/ Racial Minorities	6	1.4
Media Response	40	9.6
General Campaign	138	33.3
Personal/ Character Attack	56	13.5
Law Enforcement	12	2.9
Poll Content	24	5.8
Debate Topics	35	8.4
Forwarded Media	16	3.9
Other	37	8.9

Note. Content categories that were not observed in the feed are not listed above. Those categories are social security, education, environment, abortion and LGBTQ issues.

Overall, tweets were somewhat more likely to refer to someone (236/57%). The person most frequently referred to in tweets was Trump’s general election campaign opponent, Hillary Clinton. Nearly 29% of all tweets refer to Hillary Clinton in some way (combining all references to Hillary Clinton including hashtags, formal name, nicknames, titles, etc.). Often, the feed refers to Clinton as “Crooked Hillary,” “@Crooked Hillary” or uses “Crooked” without referencing the candidate’s name. Table 3 lists the names and frequencies of people mentioned in the sampled tweets.

Table 3

*Frequencies and Percentages of people mentioned in Trump’s feed*

Person	Frequency	Percentage
Hillary	28	6.75
Mike Pence	3	.72
Bernie Sanders	3	.72
Obama	2	.48
Kaine	7	1.69
Clinton	3	.72
O’Reilly	2	.48
Susie Sentinel	2	.48

Note. Several people were mentioned once rendering a percent of .24. Those people were: Clintons, @pnhelen, @kimguilfoyle, Mike Ditka, Jesse Watters, @Chernuna, Malik Obama, Sean Spicer, Newt Gingrich, Bongino, Don Lemon, Dan Scavino, Linda AHRden, Jimmy Fallon, Eric Trump, Pocahontas, Donna Brazile, Keith Kellogg, Michael Flynn, Harry Reid, David Shiloach, Madaa, John Podesta, @jnelsonsz722, @zulu\_out, @deplorableCBTB, Phil Robertson, Ivanka Trump, @RepLouBarletta, Juanita Broadrick, @SenJohnMcCain, @JerryJrFalwell, @anncoultter, @patriotcpepe and Mr. Khan.

Research question 3 was concerned with the temporal patterns of Trump's Twitter activities. The peak times for tweeting were equally divided between morning, 5:01 am-11:59 am (120/30%) and night, 7 pm-9:59 pm, at (122/30%) tweets. The fewest tweets were posted in the early morning hours between 12:00 am- 5:00 am.

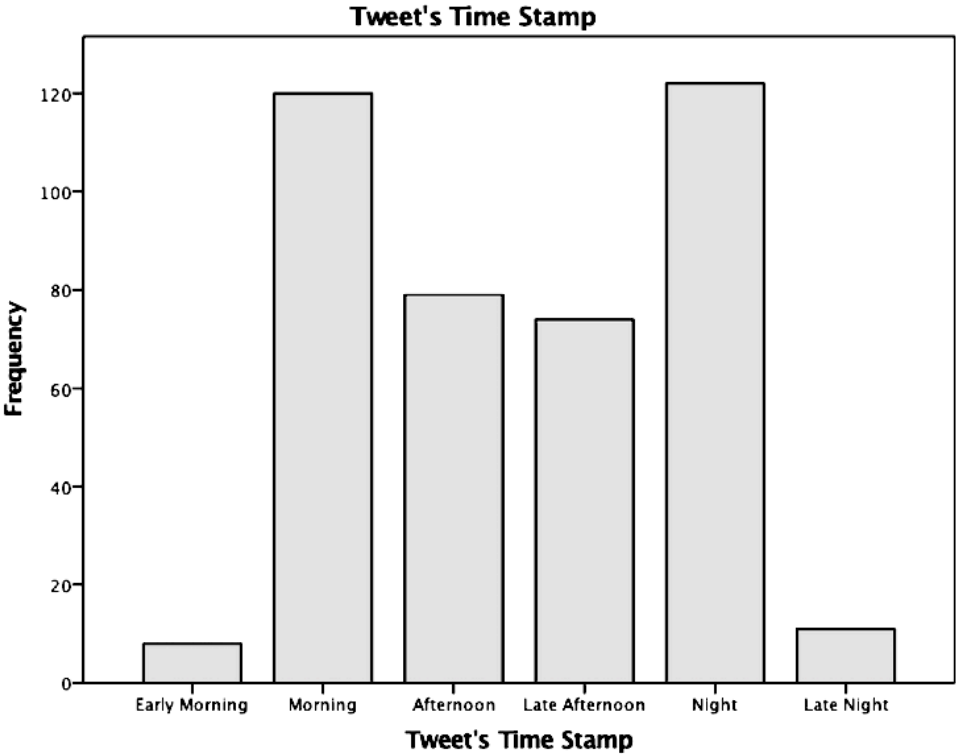
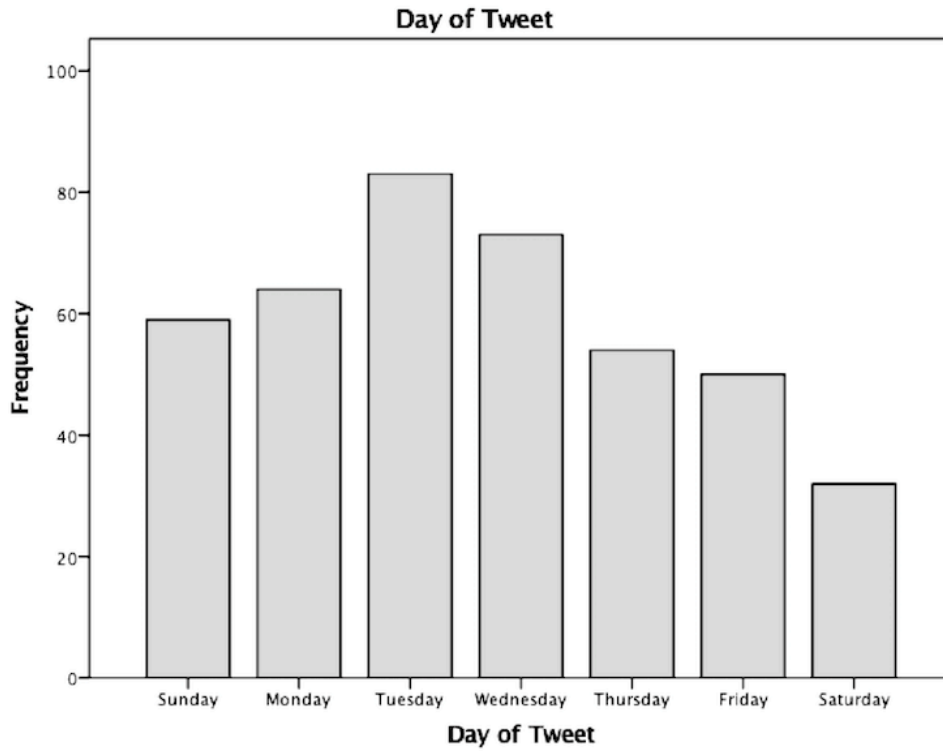


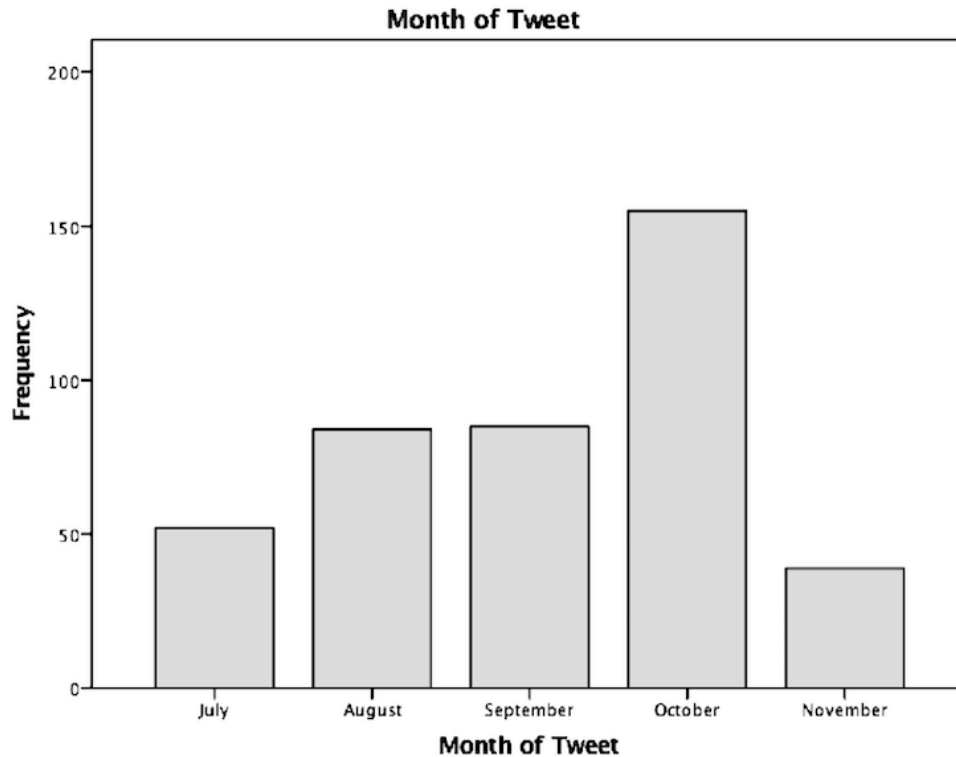
Figure 1. The time periods in which Trump tweeted most often. This figure illustrates during which portion of the day Trump tweeted most regularly.

As for the daily tweet pattern, Trump's tweet frequency begins building on Sunday (14%), peaks on Tuesday (20%) and declines on Thursday (13%) and Friday (12%).



*Figure 2.* The days in which Trump tweeted most often. This figure depicts the daily tweet frequency.

Some variation is also noted over the five months of the general election twitter feed activity. More activity was observed in October (37%) compared to other months.



*Figure 3.* The months in which Trump tweeted most often. This figure depicts the frequency of tweets based on the months.

Research question 4 concentrated on the presence of Twitter’s structural features employed in Trump’s feed. He rarely included photos (23%) or videos (3.9%). As previously noted, links directing followers to other Trump-managed sites were observed in 26% of tweets. Most tweets do not contain hashtags organizing discussion threads (62%). The conclusion is that Twitter’s structural features were seldom used on Trump’s general election campaign Twitter feed.

#### Twitter Feed Statistical Analysis

The three most frequently observed content areas are general campaign announcements tweets (138/33.3%), personal and/or character attack tweets (56/13.5%) and media response tweets (40/9.6%). The means and standard deviations for the retweets variable are as follows: general campaign tweets, 8,861.1 (sd =



6639.1), character/personal attacks, 14,773.5 (sd = 21,752.7), media response, 12,143.0 (sd = 5507.1). Oneway ANOVA was used to identify significant differences in the mean retweets for these three content areas. A Levene's Homogeneity of Variances test was calculated to determine if the standard deviations meet the ANOVA's homoscedasticity assumption. The computed value ( $F = 4.1$ ;  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .01$ ) suggests the standard deviations may not meet the assumption, therefore the computed ANOVA may lack robustness. The ANOVA indicates a significant difference between mean retweets for these content areas. Post-hoc Tukey analyses indicate significant differences between general campaign announcements and personal/character attack content ( $p = .006$ ). Personal/character attack tweets were retweeted significantly more often than any other tweeted content. The personal/character attack content tweets were significantly more likely to be retweeted than tweets concerning general campaign announcements or Trump's response to media reports concerning his campaign. No other significant differences were observed for the retweet variable.

The three most frequently observed content areas are general campaign announcements tweets (138/33.3%), personal and/or character attack tweets (56/13.5%) and media response tweets (40/9.6%). The means and standard deviations for the likes variable are as follows: general campaign tweets, 25,206.6 (sd = 16,334.5), character/personal attacks, 14,773.5 (sd = 21,752.7), media response, 33,580.7 (sd = 12,844.9). Oneway ANOVA was used to identify significant mean differences in likes for these three content areas. A Levene's Homogeneity of Variances test confirmed the homoscedasticity assumption ( $F = .09$ ;  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .92$ ). The ANOVA indicates a significant difference between mean retweets for these content areas. Media response

tweets are liked significantly more often than general campaign announcement tweets (p = .006). No other significant differences were observed for this variable.

Temporal Variables Statistical Analysis

The three most frequently observed content categories were analyzed to determine if significant temporal differences are present across the general election campaign period. The monthly total for general campaign announcements, personal/character attacks and media responses are shown in Table 4. October contained the largest number of general campaign announcements, 41, and personal character attacks, 19. However, July includes nearly as many personal character attacks, 18, despite being a very brief observation period. August contains the largest number of media responses, 21. Chi-square analysis indicates a significant difference in topic content by month ( $\chi^2 = 51.2$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p \leq .000$ ).

Table 4

*Top Tweet Content Categories by Month*

	July		August		September		October		November	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Media Responses	3	5.8	21	25	7	8.2	9	5.8	0	0
General Campaign Announcements	10	19.2	28	33.3	37	43.5	41	26.5	22	56.4
Personal/Character Attacks	18	34.6	7	8.3	10	11.8	19	12.3	2	5.1

The three most frequently observed content categories were also analyzed for significant differences by weekday and daypart. No significant differences are observed for daypart ( $\chi^2 = 13.97$ ,  $df = 10$ ,  $p = .18$ ). General campaign announcements, personal/character attack and media response tweets are equally likely to be tweeted

during any single daypart. Similarly, there is no significant difference for day of the week. General campaign announcements, personal/character attacks and media response tweets are equally likely to be tweeted on any day ( $\chi^2 = 15.1$ ,  $df = 12$ ,  $p = .24$ ).

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

The previous chapters outlined a rationale for examining tweets published by then- presidential candidate Donald Trump during the 2016 general election period. The unusual character of this candidate, rampant media coverage and public outrage and support over Trump's Twitter usage provided a basis for this research. The vast majority of previous research on dialogic theory and the use of the Internet and social media indicates that the web's communication tools are not being utilized to create dialogue or build relationships. Instead, these tools are often focused on one-way communication to push an organization's or influential figure's message rather than cultivate relationships. Twitter offers political candidates a way to bypass mass media and communicate directly with potential supporters.

It is essential that political communication researchers monitor the Internet and social media. Political campaigns are now beginning to effectively use the Internet for their own benefit. The 2016 Presidential election featuring Trump's Twitter usage attracted an unprecedented amount of attention from supporters, critics and the media. Trump, on several occasions, claimed that his use of social media, specifically Twitter, helped him win the White House. Research suggests that the mere creation of a social media account by a politician or campaign is inherently dialogic, thus providing an opportunity for candidates to not only have their messages heard but also to establish advantageous relationships with the electorate. Therefore, it is crucial to have a better

understanding of how social media is used by political candidates during their election seasons.

The research reported here content analyzed a random sample of Trump's 1,387 tweets collected from the end of the Republican National Convention (July 2016) to a week following the general election (November 2016). A random sample of 415 tweets (30%) was coded for message content, presence of dialogic principles, structural features and temporal activities. In this section, the results and implications are discussed, limitations are identified and future research areas are suggested.

The first research question investigated the presence of dialogic principles in Trump's Twitter feed. Despite Trump crediting some of his successes to Twitter, there is almost no dialogue present in his feed. Very few of Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic principles are observed. Trump doesn't respond to questions or pose questions to his followers. He doesn't conserve visitors by sharing other Trump-managed links. Structural features aren't used to organize the feed's content and generate return visits (hashtags). He doesn't make use of Twitter's structural capabilities (video, pictures, links, etc.). In short, the feed is essentially a one-way communication tool. The feed was used to post content from the campaign to the feed's followers, rather than to engage in genuine interactive communication. In this respect, Trump's feed matches most of the research noted in the literature review (Kent & Taylor, 2001; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2001, 2007; Watkins & Lewis, 2014; Waters & Jamal, 2011; Waters, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009; Stever & Lawson, 2017).

Despite the lack of dialogic principles, there is one finding that supports dialogic theory. Retweets and likes were used as proxies for the user interaction principle.

Therefore, it was assumed that liking and/or retweeting the tweet demonstrated that followers were interacting with the feed. Liking the tweet might be broadly considered as interacting with the feed itself. Managers are able to see the likes and know that followers responded to the tweet. This could help managers determine content for future tweets by seeing what followers are responding to and then provide similar content. However, it is important to note that this is only speculation; content analysis methodology can't confirm this assumption.

Retweeting is a different form of interaction. It's nonsensical to retweet preferred content back to the originating feed. Likewise, it doesn't make sense to retweet the content to other followers of the same feed. It's more likely that followers receiving the tweets will retweet to their own followers, thereby extending the tweet's reach. Recipients who aren't following Trump's feed may forward the contents on to more non-Trump followers. This is an example of how social media enable peer-to-peer, horizontal communication. Content can be delivered "on many types of niche media (that) reach out to specific communities of people" (Vargo et. al, 2014, p.298).

Another interesting research result pertains to Trump's tweet contents, addressed by research question 2. Despite frequent media coverage of Trump's incendiary tweets, the sample reviewed here includes mostly non-controversial, mundane content. The most frequently observed category is general campaign announcements. These are very benign messages concerning rallies and appearances and are unlikely to be perceived as controversial. In other words, the large majority of Trump's sampled tweets were not inflammatory. It is possible that the most provocative tweets were not randomly selected and not included in this content analysis. This leads

to speculation that very few tweets generated an enormous amount of media coverage. This research did not content analyze media coverage of Trump's tweets.

Since retweeting and liking are commonly accepted markers of follower engagement, managers can observe which content followers are engaging with. It is evident from these research findings that followers engaged with the character/personal attack topics and media response tweets. When Trump identified someone by name or oblique reference, that person was likely to be his Democrat Party opponent, Hillary Clinton. Therefore, it seems likely that content with negative associations to Hillary Clinton was frequently retweeted and/or liked by the feed's followers. Also, Trump's followers responded to tweets referencing media coverage Trump perceived as unfair or inaccurate.

The third research question dealt with Trump's temporal habits concerning his Twitter feed. Media coverage during the general election campaign period made aggressive note that Trump's feed was active during overnight hours (12:00 a.m.-5:00 a.m.). The sample analyzed here doesn't provide evidence to substantiate these media claims. This sample doesn't show significant tweeting activity during the overnight period. This result suggests that media portrayals of a flustered candidate tweeting personal attacks throughout the night may be inaccurate. However, this is a speculative assertion. This research did not content analyze media coverage of Trump's tweets. Also, it is possible that some overnight tweets, especially tweets with contentious content, were not selected for the random sample.

The fourth research question concerning the use of Twitter's structural features produced no significant results. The majority of the sampled tweets did not include links,

pictures or videos. The feed's lack of Twitter's structural features suggests that the campaign did not consider the strategic and tactical potential of Twitter's potential effect on voters. Rather, the feed's managers may have considered Twitter more appropriate for disseminating brief messages, rather than considering Twitter as a communication channel leading to stronger relationships between the candidate and his supporters.

### Theoretical Implications

Content analysis methodology can't confirm some assumptions provided in the preceding discussion. However, dialogic theory's impact on the Internet still offers a basis for considering the potential effects that social media could have in cultivating relationships. It should be noted that this election cycle was extremely unusual. The controversies plaguing this candidate may not be typical enough to draw inferences for future election cycles.

This study adds to existing research findings concerning dialogic theory. Kent and Taylor's (2001) principles are still not used to create dialogue between organizations and followers. Although there was not much evidence to support the claim that Trump was dialogically active on his Twitter account, he still won the election. Perhaps the few engagements he did provide to his followers were enough to establish the impression he was listening to their concerns and that communication was a possibility. It is time for dialogic theory to modernize and perhaps create a new set of standards for people and organizations with extremely large followings. As it stands, there is little chance for public figures like Trump, with millions of followers, to hold a steady line of dialogic communication with their stakeholders on the Internet, especially via social media. It is time to revise the theory to incorporate a new list of strategies that



are applicable to celebrities, politicians, influencers, etc. in order to adequately hold them responsible for some level of communication with their fans and followers. Politicians on a scale as large as Trump may not need to reply to every comment received to be perceived as dialogically active. A simple response once or twice daily might suffice in making followers feel connected. However, smaller scale politicians like mayors and city councilmen would have to reply more often in order to be considered dialogically active, since their audience is much smaller.

These research findings suggest that the most practical relationship that can be cultivated on social media between organizations, public figures and followers is the parasocial relationship. Followers cannot expect Trump to speak and respond to his millions of followers. It is seemingly impossible for a presidential candidate to reply to the thousands of mentions and questions received daily. Therefore, direct engagement with followers is likely to remain rare. Occasional responses and other content (photos with supporters made at rallies, retweeting especially supportive comments, supporters with yard signs in front of homes, etc.) might create the impression that the feed is involved and that communication managers are aware of and listening to follower concerns. Since Twitter does offer interactive responses, perhaps the possibility of a response is enough to keep a follower engaged with the feed.

#### Research Limitations

There are several limitations concerning this research's generalizability. Content analysis methodology itself is a limitation. While content analysis offers a thorough appraisal of the most common tweets present in Trump's general election Twitter feed, it cannot provide conclusive effects of his communication activities. The tweets

examined in this research were published from the end of the Republican National Convention to a week following the general election. The unusual events that took place during this period concerning both candidates may not be typical enough to apply these conclusions to future campaigns. Also important to note is that retweets and likes counts were gathered as presented at the time of collecting the tweet. In most cases this was several days following the original published time of the tweet. Therefore, it is possible that numbers may have fluctuated from the day of collection. Another limitation of this research concerns deleted tweets. Often, Trump would delete tweets from his feed that attracted media attention. There was no way to include these inflammatory tweets in this sample. There is no way to be certain if the tweet is a of managerial authorship (written and posted to the feed by a Trump campaign proxy) or if the tweet is of authentic authorship (written and posted by Trump himself). In the absence of this certainty, it can be assumed that all the tweets were at least Trump approved. If researchers can't determine the difference, neither can his followers. It was assumed that followers accepted the tweet's credibility because it was delivered via a Twitter-verified feed managed by Trump's campaign organization. This research presents the results of sampled tweets. This research does not present a complete census of all tweets published during the general election period. Consequently, there is the possibility of variance between the sampled tweets and the full collection. Lastly, this was the first-known study of a presidential candidate's use of Twitter during the general campaign.

## Future Research Areas

There are ample opportunities for research in the area of dialogic theory, political communication and social media. A comparison of how opposing candidates use social media and the outcome of an election is possible. Does one candidate employ dialogic principles? Which candidate tweets more often? Is there any correlation between social media usage and the election winner? While this research reported these findings for Trump, it did not consider Clinton's Twitter habits. Also, this study focused on the highest-profile election in the United States. It would be interesting to study the effects of dialogic theory in social media in local and state elections, such as mayoral or congressional races. In a smaller arena, the candidates may have more of an obligation to engage with followers, and thus employ dialogic principles. Another area for future research would concern the effects of tweeted content on the candidate's followers. Focus groups and interviews could be used to investigate how the presence or lack of dialogic principles and various content affected a voter's impressions of the candidate and how those impressions impacted voting behavior. It would also be interesting to correlate a candidate's interpersonal communication style with the candidate's Twitter feed communication. If a candidate is interpersonally outgoing, collaborative and relationship oriented, then the Twitter feed might mirror the interpersonal style. Candidates that appear more formal, personally reserved and taciturn in person, might be reluctant to reveal personal details or engage in Twitter-based dialogue.

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