CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background of the Problem

The role of media in shaping public perception of political candidates during election campaigns has long been a topic of interest in political communication research. As the 2024 US Presidential Election unfolds, media coverage becomes an even more crucial battleground for framing narratives that influence voter opinions. This study focuses on the portrayal of Donald Trump's candidacy by major online news outlets, with the aim of understanding how these platforms frame political news and how their ideological stances are reflected in their reporting.

From the perspective of framing theory by Entman (1993) and Scheufele (1999), this paper tries to explain how media stories about Trump emerge and what rhetorical means news outlets use to help form people's perceptions. The framing model of Pan and Kosicki is used in this study for decomposing the linguistic features and evaluative language of the media reports, which assists in comprehensively taking note of the dynamics involved. Furthermore, a comparative analysis between various outlets will highlight the variation of frames and biases that crop up during coverage.

While Pan and Kosicki's (1993) framing model provides a structural breakdown of how news media construct narratives through syntactical, script, thematic, and rhetorical structures, it does not fully account for the ideological underpinnings embedded in language use. To strengthen the analysis, this study incorporates Van Dijk's (2013) Critical Discourse Theory (CDA) to examine the deeper power relations and ideological stances that influence news discourse. CDA enables a closer reading of the ways in which political biases, media positioning, and

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the recirculation of dominant ideologies are coded through linguistic options. By integrating this methodology, the study goes beyond identifying framing devices to uncover how the frames influence general political discourse and public opinion.

This study intends to perform a content analysis of how major online news frames the candidacy of Donald Trump, drawing on the increasing scholarship on media framing in political communication. As background to this study, the writer considers six recent studies that give helpful background and context about media framing, political communication, and how online news coverage is evolving.

Pérez-Curiel et al. (2021) conducted an in-depth analysis of media coverage during the 2020 US Presidential Election. Their work focused on the reaction of mainstream media to the accusations of fraud by Donald Trump. They analyzed tweets from major US media, such as *@ABC, @AP, @CBSNews, @CNN, @FoxNews, @NBCNews,* and *@Reuters*, from that critical period of time that stretched between election night and the official proclamation of Joe Biden as President-Elect. The writers found that media outlets didn't amplify Trump's claims of fraud but rather consistently reported verified information about the electoral process. Of tweets, 80.4% were informative in nature. News organizations relied mostly on their own reporting or expert sources for information, not overtly political figures. Coverage was predominantly neutral: 79.4%. Even traditionally conservative outlets like Fox News largely aired a neutral tone. Importantly, neutrally framed, factual tweets were better engaged than either positively or negatively framed statements.

Pérez-Curiel et al. (2021) argue that mainstream media acted as gatekeepers against misinformation by employing journalistic strategies that prioritized verified reporting. This approach contributed to sustaining democratic stability, as evidenced by the media's reliance on factual content and expert sources rather than political

figures (p. 12). This has been contrary to the election coverage in 2016 where media houses often contradicted or loudly amplified Trump's utterances. These findings emphasize how important it is to study the ways in which online news framing of political candidates and their claims delivers high-quality, fact-based journalism, enabling it to combat misinformation and protect public trust in democratic processes.

Bourmeche (2024) gave an in-depth analysis with respect to the way the *BBC* framed Donald Trump's reaction to the 2020 US presidential election and further on to the insurrection in Capitol. While this was the study of framing techniques by the *BBC*, it also takes into consideration the media effects on American public opinion, comparing the coverage with Gallup polls. Results indicated that the *BBC* framed Trump's reaction and the events on Capitol Hill in terms of three dominant themes: the hotly contested race to the White House and fierce campaigning on social media; the narrative of fraud in the election and possible violence to "stop the steal" promoted by Trump; and riots on Capitol Hill and damage to the US image and American democracy.

It underlines how the refusal of Trump to concede and claims of fraud served to inflame his base for the January 6 insurrection. Reporting by the *BBC* underlined how such incidents discredit the US's international standing and reduce confidence in American democratic processes. Most importantly, this study found that media frames correlated with public opinion polling, supporting that media coverage did indeed shape public perception. These findings also make it relevant to conduct an investigation not only into framing techniques used by media but also into what effects they could cause to public opinion.

However, Saeed et al. (2023) studied how three leading Pakistani newspapers, *Daily Dawn*, *Daily News International*, and *Daily Times* framed the 2020 US

presidential election. This study gives insight into the international perspective on US elections and the role of media in shaping public opinion about US-Pakistan relations. The findings of the writers have been able to indicate that the political and current affairs stories received the highest coverage by the selected newspapers, which is approximately 66.3%; the news stories were the major form of news presentation. Joe Biden received more positive coverage compared to Donald Trump; Pakistani print media ran more negative stories about Trump. Surprisingly, the newspapers framed the US as a predominantly a friend of Pakistan with 76.6% of the US-related stories in a positive light.

While this study is based on US online media, Saeed et al. set the important footnote that this study work needed to be put into an international context of framing in media. It demonstrates a way through which media framing of news can influence public perception about international relations and proposes that we should be aware of potential biases in reporting, even from ostensibly neutral news outlets.

As opposed to Saeed et al. (2023), which focuses on how the 2020 US Presidential Election is framed by Pakistani print media from an international geopolitical perspective, this previous study focuses on the framing of Donald Trump's candidacy in the 2024 elections by high-profile US online news media. While Saeed et al. talked about how Pakistani newspapers framed the election—focusing on Pakistan's perspective on US-Pakistan relations—this study examines domestic media narratives and ideological orientations. Furthermore, although Saeed et al. applied primarily content analysis of media coverage in the print media, this study merges framing theory with the Pan and Kosicki model in a bid to examine the linguistic and rhetorical techniques within online news reports. This

mirrors the author's focus on US media coverage shaping opinion within the home country and not assessing foreign publics' views on American elections.

Meanwhile, Abdullah (2022) through a content analysis of Donald Trump's and Hillary Clinton's campaign speeches during the 2016 US presidential election - conducted a study of both generic and non-generic media frames of candidates, hence making substantial contributions toward understanding framing strategies in political communication. The findings indicated that Trump has used more economic consequence, conflict, attribution of responsibility, and negative campaign frames than Clinton. On the other hand, Clinton made more use of social inclusion, human interest, positive campaign, and mixed campaign frames than Trump. Notably, Trump only used social exclusion in campaigning, while Clinton socially included all the minority groups.

Abdullah (2022) ascertained that party ideologies significantly influenced the speech framing of the candidates: the Republican ideology by Trump influenced his framing of speech with an economic frame and a conflict frame, while Clinton's Democratic ideology drove her to make much use of the social inclusion frame and the human interest frame. Abdullah's (2022) study lays the groundwork for how political candidates can frame a message and how that frame might vary depending on party ideology. This previous study expands this by exploring how Donald Trump's candidacy in the election of 2024 is framed through online news outlets to see whether any framing strategies have changed from previous election cycles or across media platforms.

Chatfield et al. (2018) developed the Computational Text Analytics programs, which analyzed how online news media used false news to frame the Trump presidential campaign in the year 2016. These findings were important to comprehend

how misinformation is spread and can influence public opinion. Moreover, the writers ascertained that 23 online news media platforms provided the avenues of diffusion for 42.2% of fake news to spread during the 2016 campaign, the top three being *Fox News*, *Washington Post*, and *Media Matters for America*. The top false news frames carried by these sources contained negative frames against Trump; they are considered weak frames, not strong frames.

Chatfield's (2018) study revealed significant shifts in media narratives about Latin populations, with Latinos/as being mentioned twice as often in articles in 2019 compared to 2013, peaking in 2016. Importantly, the writers found a correlation between media reporting and hate-crime incidents, with increased media attention to immigration and identity politics being positively associated with increased reports of hate crimes at the state level. Increasingly negative valence in media articles corresponded positively with increased hate crimes at the state level. Their findings highlight the critical role media plays in shaping public discourse and potentially influencing social behavior, emphasizing the need for responsible reporting and the promotion of inclusive media ecosystems.

Nevertheless, Papakyriakopoulos and Zuckerman (2021) did an extensive review of more than 54 million articles from online US media during 2013-2019 to see how the media ecosystem supported Donald Trump's rise to power. The writers investigated media narratives on three key issues salient in Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. The most striking finding by the writers was that the media reporting followed, to a remarkable degree, the agenda set by Trump during his election campaign, and this bias displayed a noticeable partisan pattern. The term "Mexicans," as used by Trump in a generic sense to stand for Latin and Hispanic populations, was associated with the most biased representations in terms of stereotypes and prejudice.

The findings revealed significant shifts in the media narratives of the Latin populations; mentioning Latinos/as in articles was expressed to be twice as high in 2019 as it was in 2013, with peak usage in 2016. Most important, media reporting was evidenced to relate to hate-crime incidents where more media attention to immigration and identity politics was highly related to higher reports of hate crimes at the state level. State-level hate crimes actually increased positively with increasingly negative valence in media articles. The critical role of media in framing public discourse and by association potentially influencing social behavior is highlighted by the writer's findings, reinforcing the importance of responsible reporting and fostering inclusiveness within media ecosystems.

The previous studies mentioned above, put together, form a sound basis for this study into the framing of Donald Trump's candidacy in the 2024 US Presidential Election by major online news outlets. This also shows how complex the interaction is between media framing, public opinion, and political consequences and how essential good journalism is in sustaining democratic stability. This study will look to augment this further by incorporating both framing analysis and theory to provide a much more detailed understanding of the linguistic and rhetorical strategies in media narrative construction.

Donald Trump is a wonder that never happened in American political history. For the first time, a businessman-entertainer took the oath as the 45th President of the United States from 2017 until 2021 and continued to be an influential figure in the Republican politics of America. The section will present a background understanding of Trump's background, political ideology, policies, and impacts on American politics.

Donald John Trump was born on June 14, 1946, in Queens, New York, to Mary Anne MacLeod Trump and real estate developer Fred Trump (Trump, 2016).

After graduation from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania in 1968, he expanded his family's business, The Trump Organization, into high-end hotels, casinos, and real estate developments. His transition from businessman to television personality and later to political candidate illustrates his ability to generate media attention, an ability that has remained at the center of his political career.

Trump's political philosophy drastically evolved. Prior to seeking the Republican presidential nomination, he was registered as a Democrat from 1987 to 2009 and previously supported a series of liberal policies. But with his vocal identification with the "birther" movement of questioning the citizenship of Barack Obama, he joined right-wing populism in its call for economic nationalism, anti-establishmentism, cultural conservatism, restrictionist immigration policies, and an "America First" foreign policy (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). His ability to tap into white working-class anxieties and his "Make America Great Again" slogan became the key to his popularity (Gest, 2016).

Through his presidency from 2017 to 2021, Trump pursued policies that, in essence, transformed the American political landscape. His economic policy included tax cuts, business deregulation, and a hard-line trade policy, particularly with China. His immigration policy was arguably the most divisive, including the travel ban, construction of the border wall, and family separations along the southern border (Davis, 2019). His international agenda focused on nationalism, and he withdrew from international agreements such as the Paris Climate Accord and the Iran Nuclear Deal, and negotiated the Abraham Accords between Israel and Arab states (Lake, 2021). At the international level, his administration was marked by conservative judicial appointments, criminal justice reform, and contentious management of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Trump's relationship with the media has been one of the most characteristic aspects of his political life. His presidency was marked by extreme polarization of news media that supported or criticized his presidency, leading to massive polarization of media coverage. The American media are subject to ideological biases, with some media having traditionally aligned with conservative views and others liberal views. These ideological biases frame the coverage of Trump's policies, rhetoric, and scandals, defining political discourse and shaping public opinion.

Of the major news outlets, *Fox News* has long been right-wing and a hub for Republican opinion. It was founded in 1996 by Rupert Murdoch and Roger Ailes as a response to what it perceived as liberal media bias. Throughout Trump's term in office, the network remained loyal to him, providing favorable coverage of his policies and echoing his messages. *Fox News* talk show hosts such as Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, and Laura Ingraham were some of his loudest media defenders, defending him when other sources of news attacked him and presenting him as a defender of conservative values (Hemmer, 2021). But Trump's friendship with Fox News turned sour after the 2020 election, particularly when the network was among the earliest to call Arizona for Joe Biden on election night, a call that enraged Trump and his supporters (Stelter, 2021).

At the other extreme of the political spectrum, *CNN* has been one of Trump's most vocal critics. Originally developed by Ted Turner as the first 24-hour news network in 1980, *CNN* established itself as a fact-oriented, mainstream news source. Under Trump, however, it emerged as a leader in investigative journalism on the scandals surrounding his presidency, from the Russia investigation to how he handled the COVID-19 pandemic (Zucker, 2020). Trump constantly branded *CNN* as biased and referred to it as "fake news" and the "enemy of the people." This was a combative

relationship that escalated further when *CNN* persisted in fact-checking Trump's assertions and depicted his policies as harmful to democratic institutions and norms (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

The New York Times and *The Washington Post*, two of the most influential print media outlets, also played crucial roles in shaping Trump's media narrative. Both newspapers had long been identified as liberal publications, and in Trump's tenure, they followed his administration's scandals, policy blunders, and reported misconduct in depth (Fahrenthold, 2020). Trump consistently engaged in battles with these newspapers, calling their coverage "fake news" and harassing journalists personally.

Polarized media coverage of Trump reflects broader political divides in the US, where rising identification with party label has come to be aligned with news watching. Trump was framed by right-wing media as a strong leader resisting liberal decadence and defending American values, while liberal media framed him as a threat to democracy and institutional order. This study examines the ways that influential online news media continue to frame Trump's 2024 candidacy, whether linguistic and rhetorical practices of past election cycles persist or have been revised because of shifted political contexts. Examination of such media dynamics matters in determining news framing effects on public opinion, political behavior, and broader deliberation concerning democratic government under the internet.

Trump's leadership has been described as combative and highly personal, with direct communication through social media, disregard for institutional convention, and loyalty being a top priority (Nussbaum, 2018). His ability to dictate media narratives—both positive and negative—has made him one of the most polarizing politicians in modern American politics. Even after losing the 2020 election, his

unfounded claims of fraud in the elections, dismissed in courts but gratefully embraced by his supporters, ignited the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021 (Woodward & Costa, 2021). Despite having been involved in numerous legal battles, he remains a robust contender in the Republican Party and is contesting once more in the role of 2024 presidential candidate, forever employing rhetoric questioning democratic institutions alongside the trustworthiness of the press (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

While Trump's hold on power goes unabated, a lot of previous research has already been undertaken examining how the media covered him during past elections. Pérez-Curiel et al. (2021) explored how the mainstream US media resisted Trump's misinformation during the 2020 election, while Bourmeche (2024) studied the BBC's framing of his reaction to the election result and the Capitol violence. Saeed et al. (2023) pursued an international perspective by analyzing Trump and Biden framing in Pakistani dailies in 2020, while Abdullah (2022) analyzed framing of Trump's and Clinton's campaign speeches in 2016. Chatfield et al. (2017) analyzed false information on Trump's 2016 campaign, while Papakyriakopoulos et al. (2021) analyzed news reports on immigration and identity politics surrounding Trump's rise. However, while these studies provide important insights, they do not offer a linguistic and rhetorical analysis of how Trump's candidacy is constructed across different online news platforms.

Through framing, the writer analyzes the manner in which the online media community constructs the framing of Trump's candidacy and contributes to the literature documenting the role of the media in shaping political perceptions and their implications on democratic processes during the digital age. This study employs Pan and Kosicki's (1993) framing model to examine how Trump's image is structured

across different online news outlets, focusing on three key dimensions: structure, syntax, and image. Unlike broader thematic framing models, Pan and Kosicki's approach allows for a fine-grained linguistic and structural analysis, deconstructing how headlines, article organization, word choice, sentence structures, and multimedia elements contribute to either a positive, negative, or neutral portrayal of Trump.

Building upon this structural foundation, the study also integrates the socio-cognitive approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as developed by Teun A. van Dijk. This second framework allows the analysis to move beyond identifying the construction of frames to interrogating the underlying power dynamics and ideologies they promote. Van Dijk's CDA provides a critical lens to examine how language choices within the news articles serve to legitimize specific social and political positions, often by employing strategies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. By analyzing the discourse at both macro and micro levels, this framework helps to uncover how media texts may implicitly naturalize certain worldviews and reinforce the dominance of particular groups. In essence, while Pan and Kosicki's (1993) model deconstructs how the media frames Trump, van Dijk's CDA critically questions why these frames are constructed and whose interests they ultimately serve.

The study considers the evolving media landscape, in particular with the enhanced strength of social media platforms and the disintermediation process, where traditional media are no longer sole gatekeepers of political discourse. By looking at how news structure, language use, and visual representation influence public attitudes toward Trump's 2024 campaign, this research provides a greater understanding of the processes through which media outlets construct political realities. It enters such debates, however, while examining media bias, political communication on the

Internet, and journalism's role in shaping voter attitudes during a period of historic technological disruption and polarization.

1.2   Research Questions

1.2.1   How do major online news outlets organize and structure their coverage of Trump's candidacy through the placement of headlines, subheadings, and article layout to emphasize a negative, positive, or neutral portrayal of Trump?

1.2.2   What linguistic features and rhetorical choices (word choice, sentence structure, tone, and attribution of agency) contribute to framing Trump positively, negatively, or neutrally?

1.2.3   How do online news platforms use visual framing—such as photographs, captions, and multimedia elements—to reinforce a favorable, unfavorable, or neutral image of Trump's candidacy?

1.3   Objective of the study

1.3.1   To examine how major online news outlets organize and structure their coverage of Donald Trump's candidacy in the 2024 US Presidential Election through the placement of headlines, subheadings, and article layout, with a focus on how these elements contribute to a negative, positive, or neutral portrayal of Trump.

1.3.2   To analyze the linguistic and rhetorical features—such as word choice, sentence structure, tone, and attribution of agency—that contribute to the framing of Trump's candidacy in a positive, negative, or neutral light.

1.3.3   To investigate how online news platforms use visual framing, including photographs, captions, and multimedia elements, to reinforce a favorable, unfavorable, or neutral image of Trump's candidacy.

1.4   Significance of the study

This study contributes to the existing literature on media framing of Donald Trump by addressing gaps left by previous research. While Pérez-Curiel et al. (2021) focused on how mainstream media countered misinformation in the 2020 election and Bourmeche (2024) analyzed the BBC's framing of Trump's reaction to the election results, neither study systematically examined the linguistic, structural, and visual framing strategies used in news coverage. Similarly, Abdullah (2022) investigated Trump's campaign speeches in 2016, but did not explore how news outlets constructed narratives around his candidacy. Saeed et al. (2023) provided an international perspective on Trump's media portrayal in Pakistani newspapers, while Chatfield et al. (2017) and Papakyriakopoulos et al. (2021) focused on misinformation and identity politics in previous election cycles, leaving a gap in understanding how Trump's 2024 candidacy is framed across different online news outlets.

By applying Pan and Kosicki's (1993) framing model, this study provides a linguistic, structural, and visual analysis of how major online news platforms portray Trump—whether positively, negatively, or neutrally. Unlike prior research that focused on media strategies, misinformation, or broad thematic framing, this study dissects the language, syntax, organization, and imagery used in digital journalism, offering a more detailed examination of media bias and ideological leanings in the evolving political landscape. The findings will enhance understanding of how media narratives shape public opinion, contribute to media literacy, and inform strategies in political communication, particularly in the digital era where framing influences voter perceptions and democratic discourse.