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*Personal brand in U. S. politics:
Donald Trump the “influencer” politician*

*Személyes márka az amerikai politikában:
Donald Trump, az “influenszer” politikus*

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1. Introduction

I chose to research the subject of personal branding in US politics, with a special focus on Donald Trump and the interpretation of his personal brand, because it will provide exciting and forward-looking results for future political elections, from the social science, political science and marketing perspectives. By analyzing it, I'll be able to present an innovative angle, a clearer picture of the issue, and a deeper comprehension of the political marketing tactics being used in the U. S. today. Moreover, further investigation and study of this topic is necessary for scholarly discussions on the matter in the future, which, given the significant role that America plays in international relations, may also be of interest to a wide audience.

Donald Trump has established the role of the "influencer politician" and radically changed his political identity and the tone of the 2016 election campaign with his unique approach to personal branding in the United States politics, which is marked by a combination of conventional marketing techniques, reality TV, and the power of social media.

The aim of this study is to clarify that is he owe his success to his personal brand, and if so, has Trump shaped society with his communications, or has he recognised the need? And, to investigate whether the usage of personal branding especially Donald Trump's interpretation contributes to the growth of echo chambers and the process of political polarization in the US. The transformation of the businessman into a political product in the age of populism, with the emphasis no longer on the political programme but on the person and the brand that artificially or naturally created for them, is a crucial component of the problem outlined. The brand that has emerged, has become even more widespread over the years as technology has evolved, reaching out to a wider section of society. Reaching more people in the field of politics, especially with a bold and controversial persona like the one that Donald Trump has, means that various opinions will be formed, and these often creates a loyal following basis. This environment can easily lead to a closed system, where they mirror and support the same ideas and opinions. This has been previously assessed only to a very limited extent, given that we are dealing with the events of the recent past, perhaps it is worth taking a more detailed approach.

The thesis will be presented in three chapters. The the first chapter deals with the background and history of personal branding in American politics. In three subsequent subchapters this will be discussed through the example of Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama. how Franklin D. Roosevelt 's radio play called "Fireside chat" than John F. Kennedy's use of television in his brand, and how these contributed to the application of such a form of marketing, and the start of its political significance. As time went on and technology advanced, the development of a self-brand became increasingly important, and later became essential for Barack Obama too, which will be also further explained.

In the second chapter of my paper, I will explore the key elements and innovations in Donald Trump's brand, which have successfully elevated him to the level of national celebrity and brought his widespread recognition. In a subchapter, I will examine the role of "The Apprentice" a well-known reality TV show for the American society, aired between 2004 to 2017, which gave him not only a platform, but also an opportunity to make his brand recognizable in every American household. In another subchapter, his popularity and the perception of his usage of advanced marketing tools will be in focus.

The analysis of his marketing strategies in Chapter 3 will be essential in answering the central questions of the thesis: How Trump's reliance on personal branding and the loyal following he has managed to build up keeps fueling an echo chamber of shared thoughts and opinions, contributing to the polarization of American society? In four subchapters, I will highlight the most significant and effective strategies, from his visual branding and real-time social media management to the memes and pop-cultural references that emerge from and reflect them. Lastly, I will explain why his paid online ads are relevant to the topic and how this contributes to his brand.

In chapter 4 will show how these important marketing components have been implemented in practice, and in what ways did Trump set himself apart from his fellow professional politicians in the the Republican Party.

1. 2. Research methods

In my thesis I have used mixed method research, which means that I have integrated both quantitative and qualitative methods to get a better understanding of the topic and to better explore the field of marketing strategies used in American political communication. The quantitative component of the research was helpful for me to focus on the measurable part of

my statements, such as charts, social media metrics and statistics. On the other hand, the qualitative part involved content analysis of political advertisements, original TV shows related to the subject, social media comments, posts and the examination of these rhetorical strategies. During my research I have used sites like Google scholar or JSTOR for my written sources and charts from Statista's website. To avoid plagiarism have used other authors' work ethically and in accordance with academic standards, and I have only used sources that can be officially and verifiably attributed to the person or organization studied in my thesis, such as twitter posts, official advertiser accounts and other social media posts.

2. Background and history of personal branding in politics

Since my thesis focuses on personal brand, it is essential to clarify the meaning of the term. According to the official website of the American Marketing Association, “Personal branding is the practice of marketing one’s self, experiences, career, and whatever else makes one unique as a brand. A personal brand is built through one’s image, impact, and impression on an audience or following.” (“Personal Brand”). In this context, to make personal branding a strong feature of political communication, it is necessary to reach and win the public opinion in all levels of society. This, especially in the age of information, is indispensable without involving the latest technological developments in the field of political communication.

2. 1. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Fireside chat”

Radio became a vital tool for communication after World War I. Cirincione points out that there was no easier way to reach the American people due to its fast, simple and efficient features (18). In the first half of the twentieth century, the United States required a strong leader, who can manage the country during the Great Depression and World War II, two of the biggest crises of the 20th century, and relieve their anxiety at such a desperate and hopeless period of time. The image of a powerful president could reach American households through the typical communication tool of the time, which Franklin D. Roosevelt, the 32nd president of the United States used effectively. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “fireside chats” were the nickname for a collection of radio speeches presented by him between 1933 and 1944 (Kuehl). Eventually this term was not created by FDR, but Harry Butcher of the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) radio network, who used this term at a press release on May 7, 1933, just before the second broadcast. The name he gave got quickly accepted by the public and the press, and FDR himself used the term later (Roosevelt).

With regular broadcasts of the fireside chats, he has innovatively utilized the power of radio not only to inform American society and to shape public opinion about the evolving political situation, but also to assist in building his brand. Building his brand was particularly significant for him, as according to Clausen people were aware of his disability (25). More precisely, he was being affected by poliomyelitis (Freidel). And a president who is unable to

walk will not be a leader of great importance and strength, not only in the eyes of his opponents, but also in the critical eyes of the public, which is why building a personal brand that shows the opposite was of paramount importance to him.

A prime example for him being portrayed as a solution-oriented, progressive and empathetic president is the following passage from his second fireside chat:

Let me illustrate with an example. Take the cotton-goods industry. It is probably true that 90 percent of the cotton manufacturers would agree to eliminate starvation wages, would agree to stop long hours of employment, would agree to stop child labor, would agree to prevent an overproduction that would result in unsalable surpluses. But what good is such an agreement if the other 10 percent of cotton manufacturers pay starvation wages, require long hours, employ children in their mills and turn out burdensome surpluses? The unfair 10 percent could produce goods so cheaply that the fair 90 percent would be compelled to meet the unfair conditions. Here is where Government comes in. Government ought to have the right and will have the right, after surveying and planning for an industry, to prevent, with the assistance of the overwhelming majority of that industry, unfair practices and to enforce this agreement by the authority of Government. The so-called anti-trust laws were intended to prevent the creation of monopolies and to forbid unreasonable profits to those monopolies. That purpose of the antitrust laws must be continued, but these laws were never intended to encourage the kind of unfair competition that results in long hours, starvation wages and overproduction (Roosevelt).

In this quote, he reflects on ideas from the New Deal, where he explains why it is necessary for the American government to step in with regulations, to prevent unethical practices in different industries. FDR outlines this problem in a way that is understandable to any average American person at that time. This approach has already positioned him as a considerate, forward-looking leader, who is ready to take actions.

Another important component in shaping his brand through fireside chats is when he calls for the unification of the nation on September 3, 1939 at the beginning of World War II: “And at this time let me make the simple plea that partisanship and selfishness be adjourned; and that national unity be the thought that underlies all others” (Roosevelt). Or on February 23, 1942, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, when FDR stated:

“We Americans will contribute unified production and unified acceptance of sacrifice and of effort. That means a national unity that can know no limitations of race or creed or selfish politics. The American people expect that much from themselves. And the American people will find ways and means of expressing their determination to their enemies, including the

Japanese Admiral who has said that he will dictate the terms of peace here in the White House” (Roosevelt).

With these strong and uncontroversial statements, all helped to give his personal brand the unique and strong image he aspired to.

Cirincione raised an important element of FDR’s brand besides the weekly radio broadcasts. She states that “In the first-half of the 20th century, however, Roosevelt’s physical condition made the public question his ability to govern” (21). In other words, his proving them wrong about his walking capacity is an important pillar in building its political brand. In this era, in the absence of television, the only way to provide a visual experience for a wider audience was through the medium of photography. Cirincione quotes Kaye Minchew where he claims “Using visual tricks such as leaning against cars or walking with his arm on one of his sons’ elbows, Roosevelt appeared physically fit before the public, though not everyone believed what they saw. Following his nomination as Democratic governor of New York in 1928, Roosevelt endured veiled threats on his physical abilities... Such comments fueled FDR’s desire to appear fit” (21). Figure 1. shows FDR standing in 1924, assisted by Dr. MacDonald and his valet, which shows that he tried to appear in the photos as a healthy person.

2. 2. John F. Kennedy’s usage of television

As it was previously mentioned, during FDR’s presidency, television was not accessible to the public, therefore radio successfully became a primary tool for political communication. In contrast, by the 1960’s television had gained popularity and became a common gadget in every American household. Given that, greater importance is attached to the visual experience of consuming mass media.

John F. Kennedy came from a privileged, Catholic Irish-American family, he was wealthy and intellectual, with a political background, which has laid the foundations for his success later in his career (Manchester). In addition, Cirincione states that “Kennedy had the image of a working family man who was to be admired. Kennedy was a husband, a father, a son, and a brother” (34). Not to mention that he was indeed a young and attractive person, these features of him increased his chances of winning American society’s sympathy in the age of visual media. It is interesting to see how his popularity endured until today, according to Statista’s chart (Figure 2) In the survey 1,013 American adult were asked, and 90 percent of them nominated JFK as the most preferred former president. This implies that his persona

gained such a popularity in the eyes of the public that it has been able to maintain his brand half a century later.

Although the utilization of television was not a new idea, still, Beck in his article points out that Walton refers to JFK as the "the first television-star President" (52). To begin with, the first-ever televised debate between the presidential candidates, John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, was held on September 26, 1960. Russell's article claims that the debates played an "immensely influential" factor in the decision of 1 in 8 eligible voters. Kennedy's larger victory with this demographic segment of the population was a primary factor in his overall win. Clearly, the mass media are no more of minor role in political campaigns (429).

After JFK was elected, he made proper use of television. In his address on the Cuban missile crisis, on October 22, 1962 Kennedy calm, but firm speech presents the image of a strong, trustworthy leader who reassures the people but at the same time handles the situation with the necessary seriousness, just like FDR's fireside chats, but with the additional visual element. That was an advantage for Kennedy, FDR might have been at a disadvantage due to his physical disability.

Hence it was not revolutionary, from then onwards television was indispensable for political communication and in building a personal brand, because to build a brand properly it must be unique and easily recognizable. The use of television was an excellent way to achieve this, as it allowed each person to associate a face with the current candidate or president. As Keeter in his article quotes Gould, the TV-aware electorate is not going to vote for a man merely because of his reputation, or his thoughts as recorded in the printed word, or his disembodied voice as it comes out of a loudspeaker. Television makes the modern candidate a human being at one's elbow, who is going to be judged on the same terms as a man greets any new acquaintance (345). In other words, as the technologies developed, the ways of communication changed. Television introduced a visual medium, which brought politicians closer to the voters, giving a new, personal angle. This left scope for the viewer to judge politicians based on visual experience and external character traits, which was an obvious choice for the average American.

2. 3. Barack Obama and the Hope posters

In the age of social media, Barack Obama's "Hope poster" is one of the prime examples of media-driven political evolution in the age of social media. During the 2008 presidential

election campaign, Shepard Fairey created one of the most iconic representations of personal brand in American pop-culture: The Hope poster.

According to McCorkle, the poster was “not originally part of the official campaign branding, the design proved so popular that the poster became something of a viral phenomenon” (1). Meaning that, unlike in the examples before, this was not an action by the politician, rather than a reaction to its political significance. On the other hand, he made steps for shaping his personal brand of course, Obama used the power of the social media, as Cirincione mentions “Obama’s social media accounts while he was in office were characterized by this same level of friendliness, openness, and authenticity” (81). He shared nice pictures and behind-the-scenes moments from his everyday life. This was an essential step in building his personal brand: he was able to speak directly to the people. Although it was not as significant as it will be on Trump’s brand, nevertheless, by 2008, the internet was sufficiently advanced that this viral effect had a great impact on the spread of Hope posters.

It is crucial to understand the background beside the design’s popularity. McCorkle states that this design was inspired by the aesthetic of “High Red” propaganda posters and “Fairey himself admits being influenced by Jim Fitzpatrick's iconic Guevara poster” (2).

The color scheme of the poster is also a prominent and eye-catching element. Red, blue and white are traditional patriotic colors in American history and knowing that Obama was African American, the composition avoids highlighting his skin tone, emphasizing instead that he is a part of the American nation. The caption HOPE is a short but powerful slogan. The slogan resonated perfectly with the design: it was clean and to the point, which is essential for a political poster.

To conclude, the poster was simple and effective from the point of personal branding. It appealed to people's emotions, it made an impact, and everyone in the world understood who Barack Obama was and what he stands for: Hope.

3. Key elements of Trump's brand

The forty-fifth President of the United States, Donald Trump, since the beginning of the development of his personal brand, has utilized the media in a way that the politicians previously mentioned were unable to do, partly due to the undeveloped technology and partly because, while they were trying to build an image of a reliable, thoughtful and strong leader, Trump was attempting to establish the character of an outspoken, loud and controversial successful businessman.

First, he was a widely known character for the American citizens, prior to his political career. Trump's father, Frederick Christ Trump, was a successful business owner in the field of real estate in New York. He constructed hundreds of row houses and single-family homes in the late 1920's, but after a few decades he handed over the management of the company to his son, and in the late 1970s and the 1980s Donald Trump invested in luxurious hotels, which turned his father's company into a thriving enterprise (Duignan). Later on, he has started naming everything after himself, thereby creating the Trump brand, including:

Harrah's at Trump Plaza (1984, later renamed Trump Plaza), Trump's Castle Casino Resort (1985), and the Trump Taj Mahal (1990), then the largest casino in the world, the Jersey Generals, a team in the short-lived U.S. Football League; Mar-a-Lago, a 118-room mansion in Palm Beach, Florida, built in the 1920s by the cereal heiress Marjorie Merriweather Post; a 282-foot yacht, then the world's second largest, which he named the Trump Princess; and an East Coast air-shuttle service, which he called Trump Shuttle" (Duignan).

From these examples we can observe that he placed his own name into everything that is related to him, thereby starting to create a public persona. He wanted to make sure that everybody in America knows and recognizes his brand. Trademarking his name was not only a smart marketing move, but also for monetary purposes. By 2017, "A review of 10 trademark databases shows that Mr. Trump's enterprise, now run by his two adult sons, has 157 trademark applications pending in 36 countries. Registered trademarks are valuable financial assets, especially for a business like Mr. Trump's, which is increasingly focused on marketing his name, not building hotels." (Lafraniere and Hakim) This implies that, instead of focusing on building and developing his organization in the conventional way, he rather made his income from licences that he gained from his trademark.

Business seemed to be running smoothly, and Trump's wealth was steadily increasing until the economic recession of 1990. Most of his enterprises went bankrupt, and according to Duignan's article, Trump's net worth during this period declined from \$1.7 billion to minus \$900 million (Duignan).

3. 1. The Apprentice and its role in Trump's personal brand

Hence, the success of his reality television show called *The Apprentice*¹ proved vital at this point of his career. The show became so closely associated with Trump's name that it had emerged one of the cornerstones of his brand.

Every season had the following structure as Douglas explains: "several contestants formed teams to carry out a task dictated by Trump, and each 'contest' resulted with a winner and Trump barking "you're fired" to the loser" (7).

The prize on most reality TV shows is usually a lump sum of money, a holiday, or other high value items such as a car. The difference in case of *The Apprentice* was that, here, the reward was a position in Trump's company. This is even highlighted in 2004, on the official poster of the show, saying "The reality show, where you don't win a date... You get a career" (Figure 15). Which means that it was a must to create Trump's brand of a successful and strong business owner, to make such a position desirable for the contestants.

In the intro of the first season, Trump introduces himself inside a limo as "The largest real estate developer in New York. I own buildings all over the place, model agencies, The Miss Universe Pageant, jetliners, golf courses, casinos and private resorts like Mar-A-Lago, one of the most spectacular states anywhere in the world" (survivorfreak). Then he declares the fact mentioned before, related to the economic recession in 1990: "It wasn't always so easy. About 13 years ago, I was seriously in trouble. I was billions of dollars in debt, but I fought back, and I won Big League. I used my brain; I used my negotiating skills, and I worked all out. Now my company's bigger than it ever was, it's stronger than it ever was" (survivorfreak). In this part of the intro, he reinforces the image of the self-made billionaire, who is smart and tactical and has a corporate empire that is so powerful that working for Trump can be a huge advantage in the business world. In the intro, he even explains that he "I've mastered the art of the deal and have turned the name Trump into the highest quality brand" (survivorfreak). In this statement

¹ *The Apprentice* was an American reality show, aired between 2004 to 2017 (fifteen seasons) on NBC.

Trump himself admits that he has deliberately arranged his deals like this so far, to make the name “Trump” a brand. The aim of this intro is to clarify Trump’s personal brand to the millions of American viewers who had not been previously familiar with him, thereby reaching a wider audience.

In addition, the intro uses the visual elements to support Trump’s image. The theme song of the show is “For the Love of Money”, an R&B song from The O’Jays published in 1973, which Douglas characterizes as something that has created the “capitalist ethos” of the reality, because “money is the key to Trump’s business and celebrity success” (7).

Indisputably, the most pivotal moment of each episode is when Trump fires the losing contestant. His facial expression, his hand gesture and his phrase: “You’re fired!” have all become iconic. It was the single most important element that contributed to Trump’s personal brand. All he had to do is to say the iconic phrase and everyone identified him as a successful and powerful businessman that they saw on television. This part of the episodes showed that he had the ultimate decision, and the future of the Trump Organization and its employees were in his hands. Furthermore, it’s not so different from a leader role in politics when one considers it. There are certain important similarities between the decision making situations of a business leader and those of a political leader, and these parallels were brought to the attention of the voters as he developed his character later in his political career. Boldness and controversy characterized his political rhetoric, which viewers had already seen in the show. This made him an inescapable figure not only in the popular culture, but later also in politics.

The Apprentice made Trump a national celebrity, and built a brand around him that made people see him as a success-oriented and relentless self-made billionaire, not to mention that his name has become recognizable for all social groups. The series was also a financial hit: in 16 years, it brought Trump approximately 200 million dollars (Duignan), which has successfully started to pull himself out of the financial crisis that he found himself in 1990.

3. 2. Trump’s character and its perception

In case of such a polarizing figure, it is inevitable that everyone has an opinion on whether they find him attractive or not. It’s a factor in building his personal brand that Trump has no direct control over, but still an essential aspect. His brand was therefore significant because he shaped the public dialogue about himself, not only around his supporters but also his disbelievers.

In Figure 3, Gallup's chart shows respondents who were all registered voters in the U.S. between 2016 to 2024. In the survey they asked voters about their impressions of Donald Trump's characteristics and qualities. The figure illustrates how his personal brand that he created in *The Apprentice* remained in the public eye. In 2016, at the start of his political career, 57 percentage of the voters considered him as a strong and decisive leader. This number was slightly reduced in 2020 (by 1 percent), but in 2024 increased to 59 percent. This shows how he built a strong and unshakeable leadership character, which remained an important element of his personal brand throughout his political career.

Moving to another question about whether he can manage the government effectively after he won presidency. In 2016, 41 percent of the people responded positively to this question, and by 2024 this number has increased to 51 percent (Figure 3). This difference in his perception is a result of several factors, for instance, he has already won an election where he outperformed the current government, compared to the 2020-2024 period. This can be seen in figure 3. too, because by 2024, 52 percent of voters said that Trump would display good judgment in a crisis: this conveys that the Biden administration has not been able to deal successfully with the economic recession in the U.S. caused by Covid. American people's reaction to this was to rebuild their trust in Trump. Plus, the unfulfilled hopes of the Democratic Party in crisis management, and the sharp contrast between his bold and controversial brand, and the character of Joe Biden, who is considered as "very unfavorable" to the 42 percent to the voters by the end of his mandate in December of 2024 (Figure 4), was a pivotal element in building Trump's political brand.

In 2016, 38 percent of voters stated that he is honest and trustworthy, and in 2020, 41 percent and in 2024 this percentage remained the same, likewise with his likeability, suggesting that he did not build his brand on these qualities during his political career. On the contrary, he was considered a successful leader in all three election periods. Which implies that these personality traits are not as significant to the American voters as it was in FDR's and JFK's cases.

Figure 5 highlights why Americans dislike Trump, due to his character. The main question of the survey from 2017 was "Why do you disapprove of the way Trump is handling his job as a president?" 29 percent of the people said he's "not presidential/bad temperament/arrogant/obnoxious". This indicates that many of the American citizens disliked his brand and the rhetoric he uses. None of the issues has this high percentage, for instance, the "Issue/Policy-Related Concerns" section is only 16 percent and the „Broad Performance

Evaluations” are only 12 percent. This suggests that it is the aspect of Trump's brand that not only arouses sympathy from his supporters but also triggers the most pronounced reactions from those who do not align with his political stance. This aspect of his personality is a source of considerable controversy, contributing to the worsening political polarization in American politics. People are either strongly opposed to his views or firmly supportive, and there is a conspicuous absence of a middle ground.

4. Marketing strategies and social media management

Internet platforms have become one of the main communication tools of the early 21st century.. Political communication is no exception to this phenomenon, according to Pérez-Curiel et al: the possibility of rapid and reactive communication on social media has become key elements that maximize the effect of political impact (58).

Reflecting on the examples of the past, the latest technological innovations have always played a crucial role in building one's political brand. Radio was a major force in Franklin D. Roosevelt's time, later, under John F. Kennedy's administration television became the leading medium. These were vital because they allowed the presidents and their opponents to reach the American people. But what they did not give room for was direct reaction. This is where the emergence of social media was innovative: it offered the possibility of two-way communication in politics. Real-time social media management is the product of interactive communication and with the assistance of this, politicians now are able to connect directly with the voters and their supporters.

Social media applications, namely Facebook, Instagram, Twitter² and others have been essential in helping to shape Trump's political brand, especially during his 2016 election campaign and his presidency. It is apparent that Trump's main way of communicating with his followers is his Twitter account, which is the essence of his brand in his political career.

Before Trump, Barack Obama was the pioneer of using social media platforms as a president. The political landscape has undergone a major transformation since then, not to mention the increased number of internet users; it has become an even more effective instrument for brand building.

These social media apps have become a key platform for factors engagement, but conventional marketing tools such as advertising and political merchandise have remained important factors in political branding. These techniques were revolutionized by Trump during his 2016 campaign and presidency. His visual branding illustrates this statement well. Trump and his followers created the MAGA³ movement, which is a "nativist political movement that emerged in the United States during the 2016 presidential campaign" (Volle). In connection with this movement, a red baseball cap appeared with the acronym on it, that even Trump himself wore.

² Renamed in 2023 as "X"

³ Make America Great Again

Online ads are always a useful and effective way to attract the attention of those who are not familiar with an idea. In Donald Trump's case, he aimed to target people with his ads, who aren't in those echo chambers that his content generates.

4. 1. Visual branding

Selling merchandise, which is according to Cambridge Dictionary, "goods that have the official or unofficial brand (= names, designs, images, etc. that are linked with a particular product) of a film, TV show, singer, etc." ("Merchandise") is not an innovative act, not even in politics. Mugs, T-shirts, and pins with a name of a politician are common ways of visual branding. Bittner states that for instance, pins in Reagan's 1980s presidential campaign with the same exact slogan, "Make America Great Again" were already existing ("Iconic"). Yet, the majority of the people identifies this slogan with Donald Trump and his red hats, even though Reagan used it at least 50 times during his election campaign speeches (Bittner). This demonstrates that it is not the idea, but the politician's personal brand and marketing strategy behind it that makes the product sell.

One of the most significant features of a merchandise is that they also generate attention and financial revenues for the brand. "By 2019, Trump's campaign manager Brad Parscale reported a total of 1 million MAGA hats sold, with a revenue of 45 million dollars" (Brennan, 2019) quoted in Bittner's article. Similarly to how he turned his own name into a product, he turned his campaign merchandise to a business tool.

Kretz describes the signature hat as a "lightning rod in U. S. politics" (9). This stands for its appearance on the one hand, and its function as a cohesive symbol on the other. The striking red hat became a statement, associated with Trump and his supporters. The transformation of an everyday object into an instrument of politics is an important innovation that has been used mostly by sports teams, universities and musicians to build their brand and audience so far. The political use of the cap as a distinctive sign, reinforcing the "us" versus "them" effect, which Trump's exclusionary rhetoric just increased. Graham et al. cites Givhan, claiming that "Wearing a MAGA hat is a 'declaration of identity' to in-group members". This indicates that it was not only a lucrative move for Trump, but also an identification and a commitment to his supporters. Building an audience is crucial aspect of establishing a personal brand, since people are the basis for your brand to be recognizable. Virtanen references Holden

& Vanhuele claiming that “Marketing and consumer researches have long acknowledged the highly significant role that memory plays in consumer choice and brand consideration” (33).

It conveys that memory is highly significant when it comes to the consumer’s choices and brand consideration. This is not a new concept from a branding perspective, since brands always strove to be recognizable and easily remembered with their signature colors, slogans and logos. A well-known example of this is the brand of the huge fast-food franchise McDonald’s. The iconic logo of the enterprise is the same golden arches with a red background and the brand’s name since the 1960’s (Figure 6). Thereafter, nothing has changed radically in their brand, up until the 2000’s, when they removed the name “McDonald’s” and the red background color, leaving the logo consisting only of the golden arches. The same rule has applied to the soda brand Pepsi. Their logo at the beginning was only the red wordmark “Pepsi Cola” (Figure 7.). Afterwards, in the 1950’s, they added blue and white color to their logo in the shape of the Pepsi coke cap, which later on became a signature motif in Pepsi’s brand. Similarly to McDonald’s, they removed the brand name, and simplified it by the 2000’s. This means that if a brand is sufficiently well known, the main motif is enough to be used, and everyone will identify it with that particular brand. Plus, the audience needs something that is associated with the brand to make it memorable for them. This is exactly the case with MAGA hats. People do not need to see the full lettering on the cap, they just need to see a red cap and they will identify it with Trump, as Bittner acknowledges Lukas “Today, the bright red baseball cap with the white MAGA slogan has achieved an inflammatory quality that has been described by some as having ruined the ability of wearing red hats altogether.”

For people to identify this MAGA cap with Trump, his self-promotion is essential. In several of his speeches and debates, he himself sports the signature hat. By wearing it, he reinforced his message and his personal brand connection.

4. 2. The impact of real-time social media management

When examining the building of Trump's personal brand, it is essential to mention his innovative way of using social media. As it was discussed before, technological progress has made possible the back-and-forth communication with the help of social media. From 2016, the social media sites have become the most significant platforms for political discourse and engagement.

Trump took advantage of it and this change in leadership is defined by Crombez. et al. as a “tectonic shift” also describes his style as „narcissistic, ethno-nationalist, authoritarian, and neoliberal” (25) and these characteristics are also reflected in his political communication.

The social media site, known as Twitter at the time, became one of Trump's most often used platforms due to its structure. Twitter is fast and efficient, because as it is mostly a text-based platform specialized in decontextualized shorter posts, it doesn't require as much effort to write and create them as it does to put together a long post or a video content. These simple and short messages demonstrate the capacity of the consumer society to be receptive. From the perspective of personal brand, it is interesting to note that Trump did not use his account as a president. He preferred to utilize the username @realDonaldTrump instead of his official presidential account (@POTUS) even after his inauguration. This indicates that he wanted to be visible under the name Donald Trump, the name which by then had become the trademark of a successful brand. He did not want to be just another president. He wanted to be recognized as Trump. According to Statista's chart, by 2018, Trump had 46,9 million followers on Twitter, with 36,815 tweets⁴ (Figure 8). This demonstrates that he had an inherently large and inquisitive audience.

Garimella, Kiran, et al. stated that “There is growing concern that, as citizens become more polarized about political issues, they do not hear the arguments of the opposite side but are rather surrounded by people and news sources who express only opinions they agree with” (913). This effect leads to a profound political problem in a democratic country: narrow-minded and polarized voters. In a medium such as the Twitter interface, this is even more present. The different algorithms and changing social norms in the online world are also leading to the emergence of these echo chambers. Garimella, Kiran, et al. even claiming that “echo chambers are prevalent on Twitter” (913). Twitter, which is an algorithm-based platform, however according to Zimmer “Algorithms by themselves do not produce filter bubbles or subsequently echo chambers, they only consolidate the users' information behavior patterns” (8). Which means that the algorithm is not enough, it cannot be blamed alone for the creation of echo chambers. There must be a source, the human factor, especially from a political point of view, in this case Donald Trump.

⁴ A short remark or piece of information published on the social media service formerly called Twitter. (Cambridge Dictionary)

An important advantage of social media compared to television and radio that it allows users to communicate without formal restrictions. Utilizing this, Trump engaged directly with his followers. His style on Twitter is identical to the personal brand that he has built up so far: bold and controversial. To illustrate the presence of this rhetoric with an example, he wrote this on Aug 17th, 2018: “Wow! Big pushback on Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York for his really dumb statement about America’s lack of greatness. I have already MADE America Great Again, just look at the markets, jobs, military- setting records, and we will do even better. Andrew ‘choked’ badly, mistake!” He uses very informal language and emotional triggers by framing his opponents, for instance he openly calls Andrew Cuomo the Governor of New York “dumb” in this post. This use of language is not so distant from him: according to Statista’s chart (Figure 11), Trump frequently uses offensive words in his posts: for example, he had used the term “loser” 246 times in various statements on Twitter by June 2018 alongside with “stupid” (193 times), “dumb” (232 times), “fool” (100 times), “incompetent” (98 times), “weak” (203 times), “dishonest” (152 times), “dope” (117 times), “terrible” (244 times).

Moreover, he also positions himself in a different light: by using the method of information gatekeeping, which means that someone “only produces content from a single leaning, thus ‘filtering’ information from one side” (Garimella, Kiran, et al. 915). This means that the message Trump communicates on his account to his own followers is exclusively those relevant to him, helping to ensure that users only receive information from one direction. And thanks to his established personal brand, this effect is even more easily developed, because he had already created trust in his followers before his political journey as a celebrity.

Gounari described Trump's social media communications as an “anti-pedagogy” meaning that “These new sites of anti-pedagogy have the force not just to counter knowledge, but to produce and legitimize new knowledge” (224). So, these social media platforms are contributing to an environment where the statements that Trump is building resonates within his echo chambers. Different political narratives highlight different information and consider it relevant. Trump exploits this with the communication innovation of social media.

4. 3. Pop culture references, memes

Donald Trump’s brand has become so prominent in popular culture and has generated mass user interest that any post he makes can go viral. This idea is demonstrated by the following tweet that he posted from his @realDonaldTrump account, on May 31st, 2017:

“Despite the constant negative press covfefe.” This last word is nonsense, seemingly a typo, yet it has become so popular that it has provoked a huge wave of reactions from people. Memes, videos and even TV broadcasts have been produced about it. In Figure 8 and 9, I have included memes that reacted to the tweet that has become iconic. After just 6 hours, he reacted to his own tweet with another one: “Who can figure out the true meaning of ‘covfefe’ ??? Enjoy!” suggesting that, if the first post was not intentional, the latter was created to deliberately exploit its viral effect. This shows that Trump is tactically trying to leverage the potential of social media. Figure 8 is a parody of the MAGA hat by replacing a part of the text, with the unintelligible word “covfefe”. Another example for the cultural response is Figure 9 a modified poster of the movie “Corvette Summer” changed the title to “Covfefe summer” since no one has any idea what the word means, the mysterious word has been inserted in place of the similar sounding “Corvette”, thus creating a context for the word. These memes have been seen by 565,042 people, just on Imgur’s⁵ website, with 14,740 likes on them, not to mention those unmeasurable occasions when these memes have appeared on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Even television channels like CBC News have been involved in the cultural dialogue that developed. Furthermore, parodies were generated like Randy Rainbow Parody’s work called “COVFEFE: THE BROADWAY MEDLEY”! with 1,3 million views or The Daily Show’s video namely “Covfefe: Based on a True Typo”.

Moreover, Trump is also promoting the MAGA movement that is linked to his own brand by now on his own account. He often uses it as a hashtag, like on 2020 the 2nd of November: “...As I said at the debate – ‘Will you remember that Texas? Pennsylvania? Ohio? New Mexico?’ I will always protect American Energy and American Jobs! Get out and VOTE #MAGA!” According to Cirincione, this “#” symbol can organize information in a clear and comprehensible way for users. Thereby Trump has created an insider space and a cohesive force that followers can identify with.

These reactions all indicate that Trump does not need to engage in political dialogues to be all over the internet, compared to his political opponents, or even to his own party members. Remarkably, he stands out in the media with what he cannot match on the traditional political stage: his personal brand.

⁵ “It’s where you’ll find the funniest, most informative and inspiring images, memes, GIFs, and visual stories served up in an endless stream of bite-sized fun.” (imgur, “About”)

4. 4. The relevance of his paid online ads

As discussed in the previous chapter, Trump has built a loyal supporter base using his personal brand, which has also created a sense of interest among the users resulting in a vast number of followers in his account. But what is the solution when you need to reach people who are not active users of any social media platforms? This is what paid advertising in social media was invented for. According to Pitsillis, “Paid social media marketing is another digital marketing strategy a company can use to promote their business and product” (7). The author even cites Basha Coleman, claiming that “Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter (recently rebranded as X) are the platforms that allow paid social media marketing” (7). So, to reach an audience that does not follow Trump's social media platforms and political messages, you need to use paid advertising. This is an effective way to increase the follower base and therefore get more people to know the personal brand.

MAGA, the slogan associated with Trump's name has been transformed into a committee. This is the commission that funds the ads that are linked to Trump. In Figure 12, it is shown how much money was spent in the first year of the Trump administration between March 31 and August 17 in 2018 on Google services. The Make America Great Again Committee spent 629,500 dollars for 1,321 ads. Similarly in 2018 from May to October, the MAGA spent 3,144,921 dollars on Facebook, making them the third biggest spending political organization (Figure 13). Furthermore, during Trump's first presidential term, they spent \$47,694,800 on their ads on Google platforms alone.

Paid ads are necessary for Trump to build further his brand, and to increase his current follower base, both in terms of social media followers and political followers.

4.5 Trump's branding impact on the 2016 election campaign

On 16 June 2015, in a speech at Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue in New York, Donald Trump declared his intention to run for the presidency of the United States (Francia). *The Wall Street Journal* posted a video on YouTube, on June 16, 2015 entitled “Donald Trump Announces Presidential Campaign”.

In the first sentence of the video, he confirms that he qualifies as a businessman rather than a conventional politician: “So I've watched the politicians; I've dealt with them all my life. If you can't make a good deal with a politician, then there's something wrong with you; you're certainly not very good.” Here, Trump positions himself as an expert who, by his experience, is not taken in by politicians. He has the skills to rise to the top and has been an outsider to politics so far, distanced from the politicians of the past.

Moving on, “... and that's what we have representing us. They will never make America great again. They don't even have a chance. They're controlled fully by the lobbyists, by the donors, and by the special interests. They control them. Hey, I have lobbyists. I have to tell you I have lobbyists that can produce anything for me. They're great, but you know what? It won't happen. It won't happen because we have to stop doing things for some people but for this country.” In this passage of the announcement, he declares his position as an outsider again, highlight his independence from the “lobby system” and criticizing those politicians, who are corrupt. Moreover, Trump mentions that others do not, only he can “make America great again”. This is significant because he identifies his brand with this by now well-known slogan in his first speech as a politician.

He states that “We need a leader that wrote *The Art of the Deal*. We need a leader that can bring back our jobs, can bring back our manufacturing, can bring back our military, and can take care of our vets. Our vets have been abandoned, and we also need a cheerleader.” When he declares that “We need a leader that wrote *The Art of the Deal*” is clearly referring to himself since he wrote that memoir. Meaning that, he is the one who American society needs, with his proven track record of success as a businessman. Moreover, he portrays himself as the solution for those problems that he stated above.

Another key idea from this speech is that he is disappointed in politicians. He mentions Obama as being a disappointment to him, a “negative force” instead of being a “cheerleader”, “a great spirit—vibrant and young” and making the “brand of the United States” great again.

He even refers to America as a brand, suggesting that Trump sees not only his political presence but also the American country as a brand.

It is also fascinating to examine his presentation style, because he performs with such confidence and uninterrupted energy that it is impossible to pay attention to anything else. This attitude contributes greatly to his personal brand, as does the way he makes statements typical of right-wing populism, thereby making nationalist and anti-elitist (Campani et al. 1) statements, like when he speaks about the lobby system, or when he says "...can bring back our jobs, can bring back our manufacturing, can bring back our military, and can take care of our vets. Our vets have been abandoned".

Therefore, from the very first minutes, he began to develop a political personal brand, which is rooted in the persona of the successful businessman he has already established.

5. Conclusion

It is plausible, as discussed above, that although the right has needed a leader with a strong personal brand since FDR and JFK, this has only come with the presidency of Trump in 2016.

Trump has successfully reshaped the right-wing electoral culture through his personal brand of populism. His image as a successful businessman, which culminated in *The*

Apprentice, began to trigger a trust in Trump that would form the basis of his later political career.

With his bold, controversial rhetoric and innovative bidirectional social media communications, his posts, especially via Twitter, and the echo chambers that this created, he was able to generate a strong base of followers. He has retained this follower base by selling merchandise related to his personal brand (MAGA hats) and increasing the number of these voters through online paid advertising.

In addition, due to his personal brand, cultural references and memes have been made about him, which has boosted the reputation of his personal brand.

It can be concluded that Trump consciously created the demand in the electorate. Through innovative methods and his use of social media, he has developed a remarkable personal brand that has helped him to win the trust of the American voters.

Appendix



Figure 1.

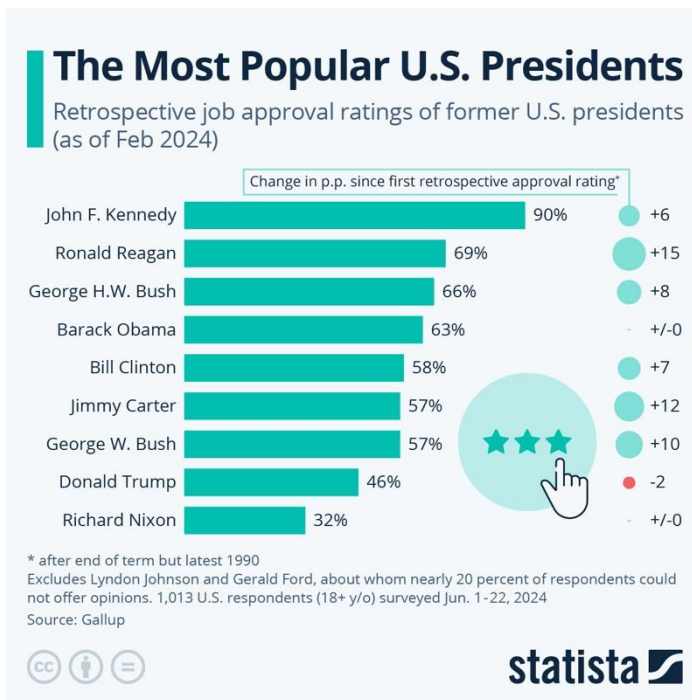


Figure 2.

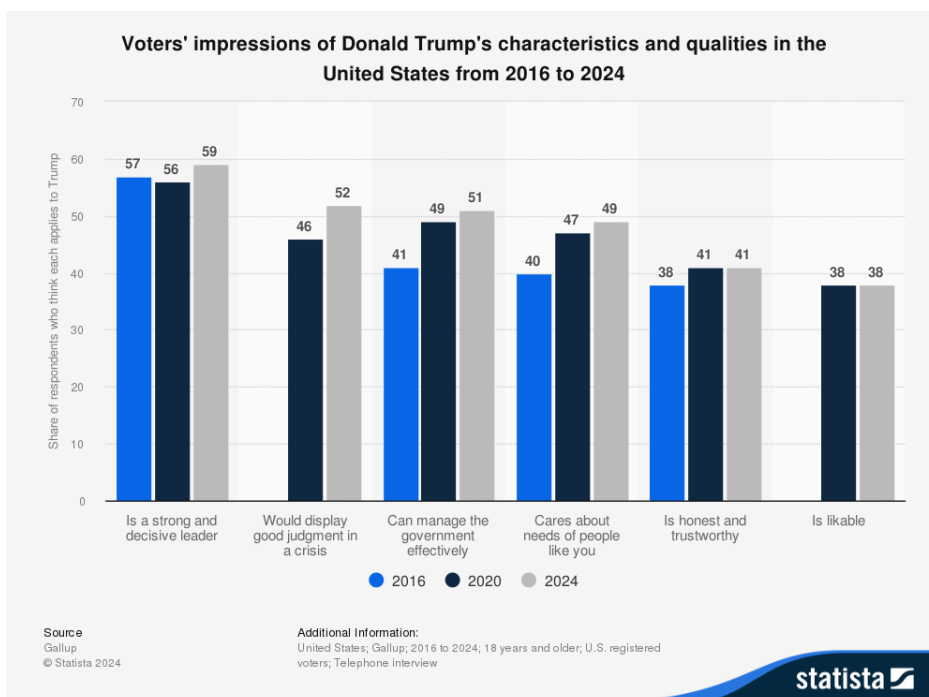


Figure 3.

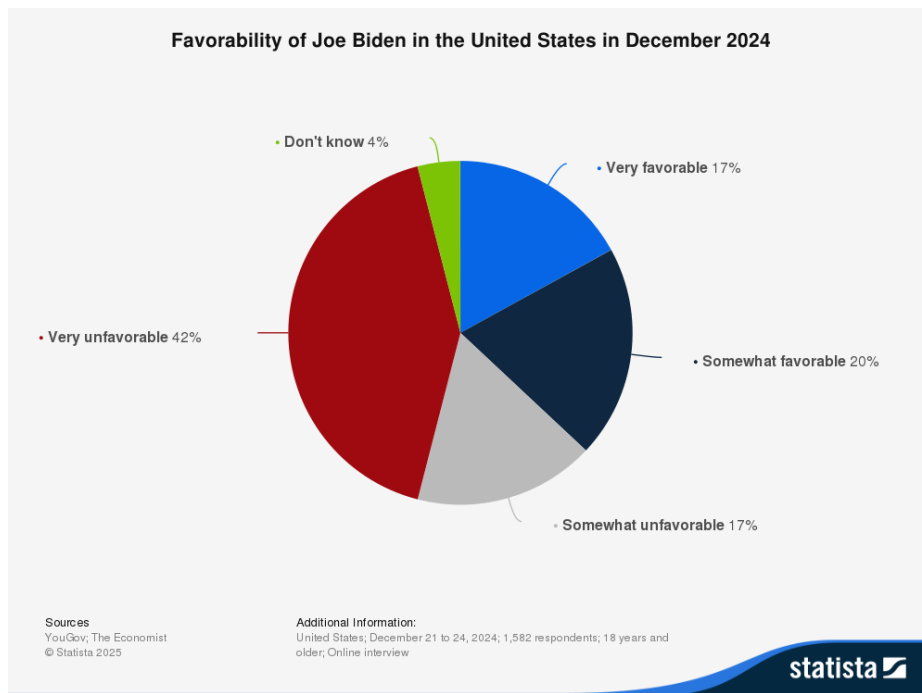


Figure 4.

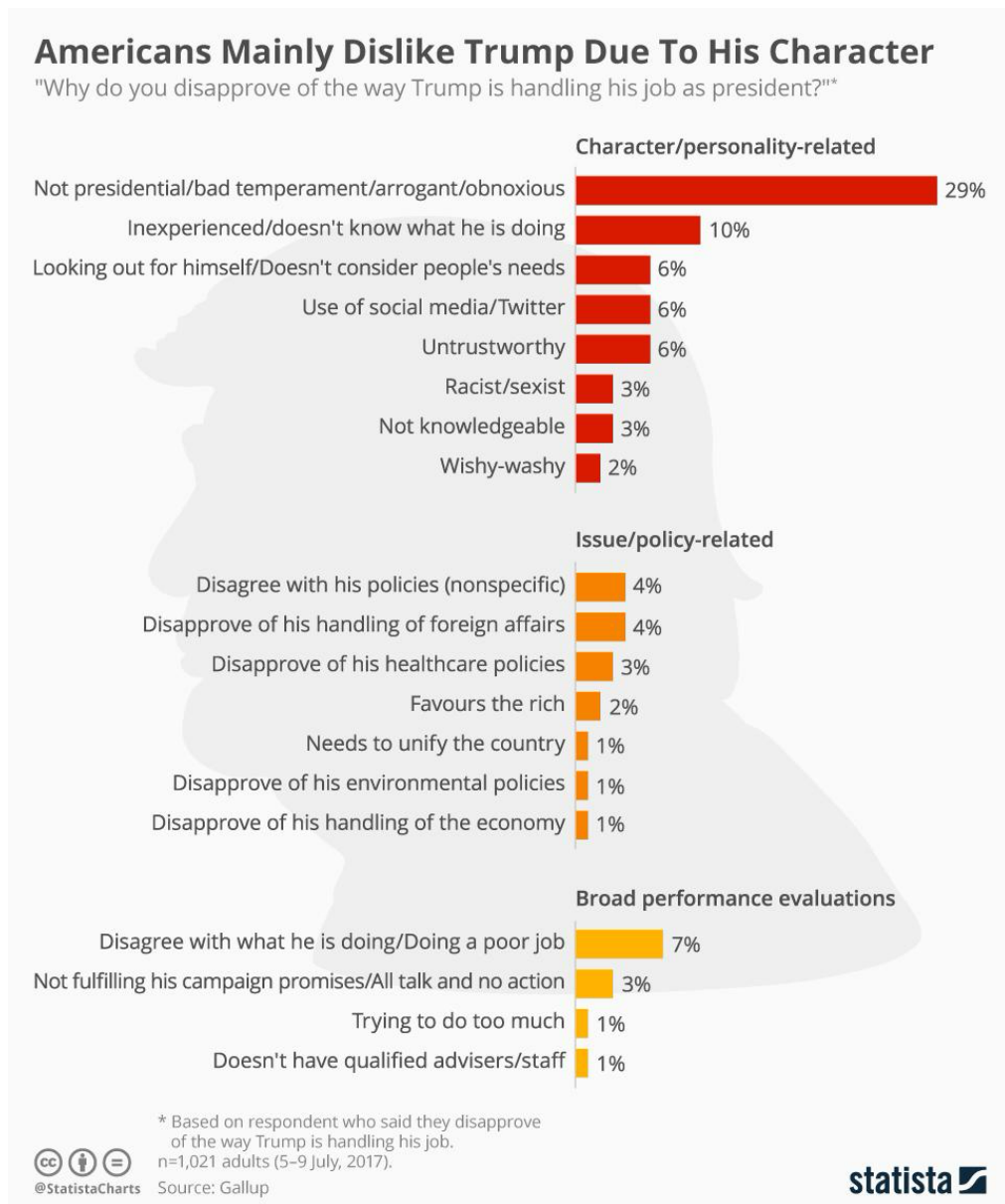


Figure 5.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.

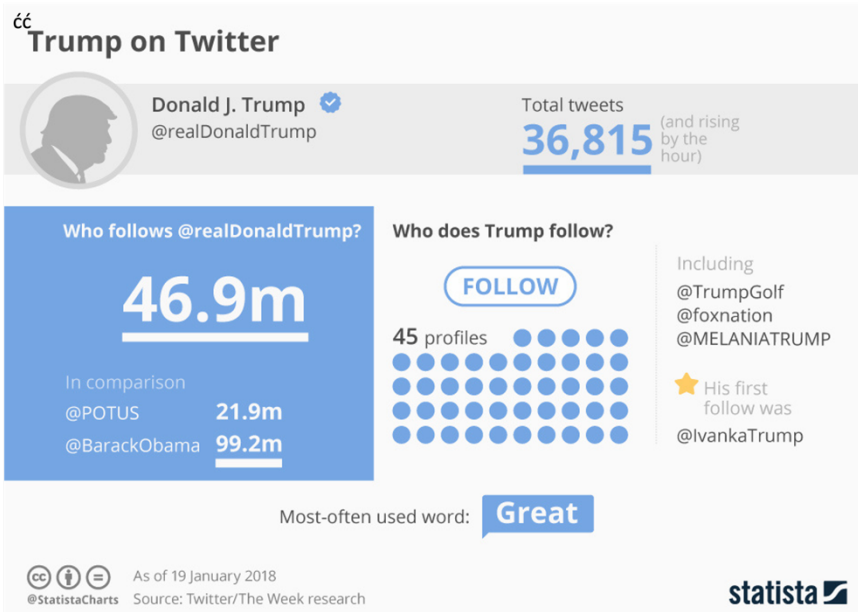


Figure 8.



Figure 9.

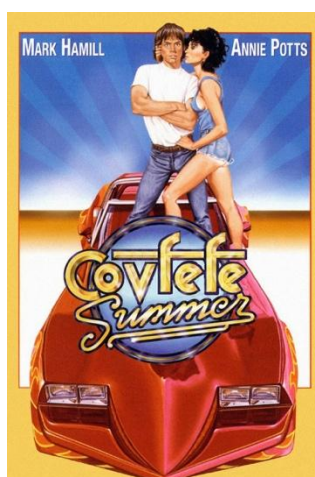


Figure 10.

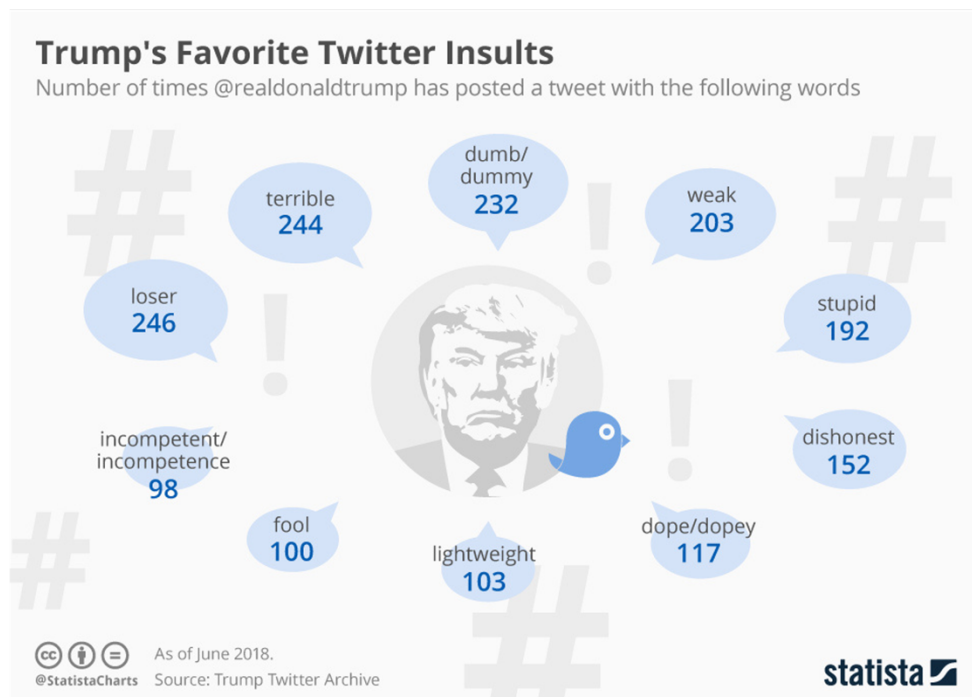


Figure 11.

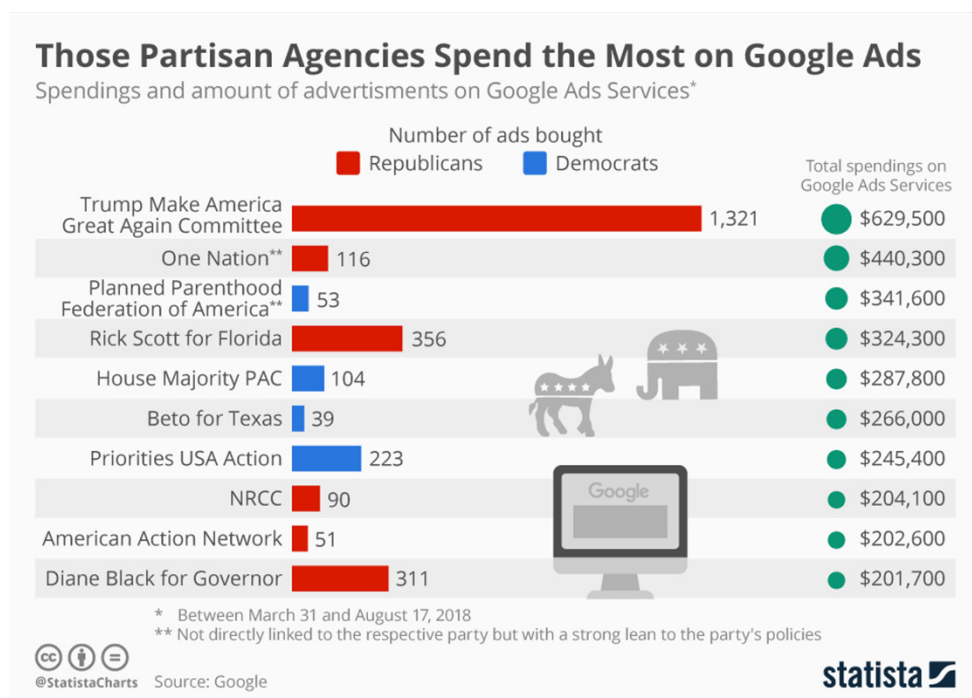


Figure 12.

Facebook Trumps MAGA on Political Ad Spend

Top political ad spenders on Facebook in US dollars*

Facebook

12,499,995

Beto for Texas

5,373,435

Make America Great Again Committee

3,144,921



@StatistaCharts

* From May to October 2018

Source: Ad Archive Report via Recode

statista

Figure 13.

Áttekintés

Megjelenítve itt: Egyesült Államok, egyéni 2018. máj. 31. – 2021. jan. 1.

Hirdetési kiadások

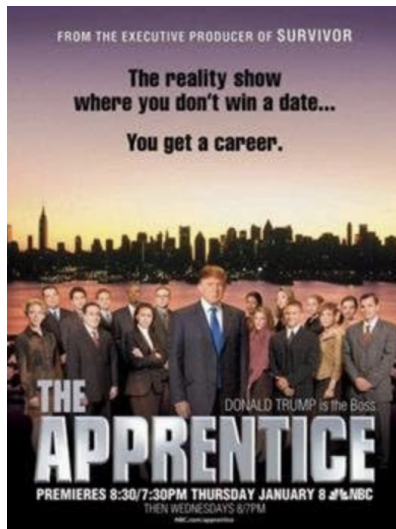
47 694 800 \$ (USD)

Folyamatosan frissül, néhány óra késés előfordulhat

Hirdetések

42 980

Figure 14.



15. Figure

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