

“Wooing the manosphere: He’s just a bro.” Donald Trump’s digital transactions with “dude” influencers

In the 2024 Presidential campaign, Donald Trump’s winning 2.0 strategy of “transgression as entertainment” was evident in his decision to target a disaffected demographic of largely young white male voters (the “manosphere”) within the key swing states. Instead of appearing on legacy news channels designed to challenge him including Cable News Network (CNN) or Microsoft National Broadcasting Corporation (MSNBC) (or even on his conventional media mogul “ally” Rupert Murdoch’s right-wing Fox News Network (FNN)), Trump reached out online to attract the so-called “bro” vote. As such, he appeared on several “Dude” or “Gen-Alpha” social media influencers’ podcasts. These included: the US’s most popular podcaster Joe Rogan; Theo Von’s show, a right-wing comedian; the internet pranksters – the Nelk Boys founded by Kyle Forgeard and Jesse Sebastiani; the YouTube site of brothers Logan and Jake Paul; Lex Fridman’s platform, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) affiliated computer scientist, and the online channels of live gamer Adin Ross.

With 14.5 million Spotify followers and 17.5 million YouTube subscribers, the *Joe Rogan Experience (JRE)* has a vast, mostly young male, audience. For Trump the three-hour interview on the *JRE* represented his most significant online engagement. Although Rogan had supported progressive Democratic Party Senator Bernie Sanders and, in 2022, had declared Trump as an existential threat to democracy, he and the Republican Party’s nominee vibed on their mutual friendship with the “super bro” Elon Musk and their love of the mixed-martial arts Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). In the *JRE* podcast, a typically rambling Trump was allowed by Rogan to renew his personal attacks on his opponent Kamala Harris’ IQ, to blame Covid-19 on allowing the Democrats to steal the 2020 election, to make unchecked anti-immigrant rants, to accuse his ex-Chief of Staff John Kelly of being “disloyal” and to accuse his former hawkish International Security spokesperson John Bolton of being an “idiot”. An enthusiastic Rogan concluded that interviewing Trump was fun, the Republicans were now the punk rock rebels and the liberals were censors whose cancel culture undermined freedom of speech. A beaming Trump responded by stating that it was the “woke” elites who came after their political opponents like third-world dictators.

Earlier in the campaign, on Von’s “*The Past Weekend*” podcast, Trump strayed into more personal territory when he talked about the death of his older, alcoholic brother Fred Trump Junior. The pair of “homies” went on to discuss the nature of addiction, the comparative differences between drinking and use of cocaine, and Trump’s life-long sobriety. Trump flattered his host when he appeared with the part-time wrestler Logan Paul on his “*Impulsive*” podcast by informing the

YouTube personality that Paul was 18-year-old Barron’s (Trump’s youngest son) favorite social media influencer. In tandem, The Nelk Boys were reported to be spearheading a voter registration drive that they hoped would be attractive to Trump’s fellow-travelers.

Moreover, when appearing on Ross’s show, Trump admitted that he had only just come to terms with the possibilities of livestreaming on social media. Although he appreciated that the podcast was part of a “new wave” of information dissemination, Trump again maintained that it was Barron who had advised him to seek out Ross. Ross responded by putting aside his usual misogynistic rants and replacing them with a series of toned-down references focusing on Trump’s foreign and immigration policies. Finally, the host presented Trump with a Rolex watch and both men then occupied a descaled Tesla cyber truck manufactured by Trump’s most vocal supporter, the tech billionaire, Elon Musk. Inside the vehicle there was a picture of the ex-property tycoon standing in defiance of his July assassination attempt, along with patriotic images of a U.S. bald eagle and an American flag.

So Trump in his 2024 Presidential campaign embraced the often contrarian, testosterone-filled cyberspaces established by these conservative influencers on live streaming platforms including Twitch, Kick, YouTube, TikTok and Instagram. His use of podcasts demonstrated how as a celebrity “outsider” Trump could utilize his Make America Great Again (MAGA) grassroots image as a “blue-collar billionaire” to manipulate the attitudes of a mainly apolitical set of white male voters. Trump’s dialogues with adoring male social media influencers suggest that a new phase of apparent “authenticity” has emerged in the era of online political advertising and marketing.

In reality, Trump’s “impression management” of his parasocial image masked a further race to the bottom wherein the tame questions provided by Rogan et.al gave him a “free pass” rather than any proper scrutiny. The allure of Trump’s maverick outsider status to these podcasters has serious implications for the provision of any pluralistic forms of American political content and turbo charges Trump’s claims towards plutocratic power. Through the social media influencers’ false ideological “discourse” there were major distortions of information with toxic post-truths embedded into the U.S. body politic. And so, on the eve of the election, Rogan happily endorsed Trump.



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