A Critical Discourse Analysis into Rhetoric and Ideology in Donald Trump's 2024 Presidential Campaign: An Introduction to *Vilification Theory*

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Abstract: This study examined the rhetoric of Donald Trump's 2024 presidential campaign through a critical discourse analysis framework, introducing vilification theory (VT) as a novel analytical lens. Employing a qualitative design, the study analyzed transcripts of eight campaign rallies and debates purposively selected to capture a representative range of Trump's political discourse. Data collection involved accessing transcripts from official campaign websites, news outlets, and online archives. The analytical framework integrated deictic space theory, proximization theory, and analysis of alternative futures to identify persuasive pragmatic structures. VT was applied by identifying vilifying speech acts (derogatory labeling, negative stereotyping, etc.) and analyzing their function in constructing in-group identity and delegitimizing opponents. The analysis revealed a consistent persuasive strategy characterized by "us vs. them" framing, emotional appeals, and the strategic use of vilification to mobilize support and promote a specific political agenda. The study's findings underscore the potential implications of normalized vilification in political discourse for democratic debate and social cohesion.

1. Introduction

Communication is the lifeblood of political engagement, serving as the primary means by which political actors articulate their visions, connect with citizens, and shape public opinion (Salau et al., 2024). In democratic

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societies, the legitimacy of power rests on the "will of the people" (Laslett, 1996), making effective communication—and, crucially, persuasion— paramount. However, political communication is rarely a neutral exchange of information; it operates as a sophisticated instrument of power, influencing attitudes and behaviors (Perloff, 1993). The rise of social media has amplified this dynamic, creating both opportunities for informed engagement and risks of disinformation and a distorted "state of political discourse" (Chilton, 2004; Rasool et al., 2024). For example, the proliferation of "fake news" during recent elections has demonstrated the potential for malicious actors to manipulate public perception through strategically crafted narratives.

While Aristotelian rhetoric emphasizes the speaker, message, and listener (Roberts, 2007), the modern political landscape increasingly prioritizes emotional resonance over reasoned argument (Schmid, 2012). Leaders are often judged not on the logical coherence of their policies but on their ability to connect with voters on an emotional level. This emphasis on emotional appeal can lead to the strategic obscuring of complex issues and the deliberate manipulation of public sentiment (Crippen & Klement, 2020). As George Orwell famously warned, political language is often designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable.

This study argues that contemporary political communication, particularly within populist movements, often relies on vilification – the strategic denigration and othering of opponents – to mobilize support and consolidate power. This paper examines the rhetoric of Donald Trump's 2024 presidential campaign to demonstrate how his discourse employs vilifying language to construct a specific ideological framework, reinforce in-group identity, and delegitimize perceived enemies. This phenomenon demands critical scrutiny, as the normalization of vilification poses a significant threat to reasoned debate and democratic values.

To understand this dynamic, while concepts like demonization and othering are well-established in political discourse studies, current CDA scholarship often lacks a unified, functional framework that explains *how* these acts are performatively integrated into a coherent persuasive strategy. This study addresses this gap by introducing Vilification Theory (VT), a novel framework that draws upon speech act theory, social identity theory, threat and intergroup theories, framing theory, propaganda theory, and the concept of discrimination to analyze how political actors strategically use language to vilify opponents and achieve persuasive goals. VT posits that vilification is not simply offensive speech, but a performative act that constructs social realities, defines

identities, and shapes power relations. By analyzing how Trump's rhetoric functions within this framework, this study aims to provide new insights into the persuasive power of vilification in contemporary politics and its potential impact on marginalized groups.

2. Literature Review

The increasing complexity of the modern political stage necessitates careful consideration of various social and communicative shifts. While politicians ideally strive for cooperation and understanding amidst international tensions (Al-Kawwaz & Altamimi, 2020; Zavershinskiy et al., 2022), the strategic use of communication to promote specific ideologies and consolidate power has become increasingly prevalent (Power Inquiry, 2006; Chen & Reeves, 2011). This section examines key theoretical frameworks for understanding these dynamics, culminating in the introduction of VT as a novel approach to analyzing the strategic use of negative rhetoric in political discourse.

2.1. Discourse and Power in Political Communication

Discourse analysis is central to understanding how language shapes social realities and power relations (Wodak & Reisigl, 2005). Evolving from its structuralist roots (Harris, 1952), discourse analysis now encompasses the complex interplay of individual experiences, shared knowledge, and contextual factors (Verdonk, 2022; Widdowson, 2008). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a powerful lens for examining how language reflects and reinforces power dynamics, including discrimination, prejudice, and gender roles (Fairclough, 1995b; van Dijk, 2008; Jaworski & Coupland, 2019). CDA's interdisciplinary approach, drawing from fields such as philosophy, sociology, and linguistics (van Dijk, 2006), allows for a nuanced understanding of the subtle ways in which language operates to maintain social inequalities.

Political Discourse Analysis builds on CDA by viewing political communication as a site of ongoing power struggles, where meanings are contested and realities are actively constructed (Fairclough, 2009; Lemke, 2005; Seidel, 1985). Language becomes a strategic instrument for achieving political objectives, with "politicization" – the persuasive function of political communication – taking center stage (Muntigl, 2002). Finlayson (2012) argues that the strategic manipulation of language can create shifts in understanding, even portraying certain groups as threats to the existing political order (Crawford, 2014). However, CDA and PDA can be criticized for being overly focused on identifying power imbalances and neglecting the potential for agency and resistance within

discourse. VT addresses this limitation by focusing on the function of vilification, rather than simply its presence, allowing for a more nuanced analysis of its impact.

2.2. Persuasion and Rhetorical Strategies

Persuasion, defined as the strategic use of linguistic choices to alter or reinforce beliefs and behaviors (Halmari & Virtanen, 2008; Chilton, 2004), is central to political communication. This often involves violating or manipulating normal communicative norms to achieve political objectives (Benoit, 2007; Chilton, 2004). Strategic rhetorical devices are crucial for effective persuasion, leveraging language's inherent connection to social interaction and political purpose (Browne, 2018; Chilton, 2004). One key strategy is the construction of "us vs. them" narratives, often involving the demonization of out-groups to solidify in-group solidarity (Edelman, 1964, 1971, 2013, 1988). Humor can also be strategically employed to create a sense of connection with the audience (Adegoju & Oyebode, 2015).

Leech (1983) highlights the importance of production and reception principles in persuasive communication. Ethos, pathos, and logos – credibility, emotion, and logic – combine to resonate with both the rational and emotional dimensions of the audience (Al-Hindawi et al., 2017; Boone, 2015). Figures of speech, including schemes (standard patterns of words) and tropes (shifts in meaning) (Al-hindawi et al., 2017; MacQuarrie & Mick, 1996), can further reinforce arguments and engage listeners. However, a purely rhetorical approach risks overlooking the underlying ideological and power structures that shape persuasive communication. VT addresses this by integrating insights from social identity theory and framing theory to analyze how vilification operates within broader social and political contexts. For example, Trump frequently employs the trope of hyperbole to exaggerate the threat posed by immigrants, stating they are "poisoning the blood of our country," thereby appealing to fear and xenophobia.

2.3. Cognitive and Socio-Psychological Dimensions of Persuasion

Cognitive and socio-psychological elements play a crucial role in persuasion (Schmid, 2012). Effective communicators must be able to track linguistic context, monitor existing knowledge, and understand potential situations (Ford et al, 2023). Factors such as ego-defense and motivation influence how audiences receive messages (Bohner et al., 2008). Framing political actions to align with cultural values (Malka & Costello, 2023) and evoking feelings of hate and threat (Bil-Jaruzelska &

Monzer, 2022) can further enhance persuasive impact. However, these cognitive and socio-psychological approaches often lack a critical perspective on the ethical implications of persuasive techniques. VT addresses this by focusing on the consequences of vilification, particularly its potential to dehumanize out-groups and incite violence.

2.4. Frameworks for Analyzing Persuasive Political Discourse

Several theoretical frameworks offer tools for analyzing persuasive political discourse. Deictic Space Theory (DST) helps understand how speakers construct their discourse world, positioning themselves and others within it (Chilton, 2013, 2014, 2017). Proximization Theory (ProxT) analyzes how speakers make distant concepts more relevant to their audience, manipulating space, time, and values (Cap, 2013, 2014). Analyzing Alternative Futures (AFs) allows for a more persuasive communication through political discussions (Dunmire, 2011). These frameworks offer valuable insights into the pragmatic structures of persuasive communication. However, they often lack a comprehensive account of the underlying ideological and power dynamics that drive political discourse. Furthermore, Gibson's original theory, for instance, was all about the use of the environment, while today affordances are more about the cognitive and rhetorical actions (Mak et al., 2024; Williams, 2012). These are the issues that need to be brought to the VT (Williams, 2012; Wuttke & Foos, 2021).

2.5. Introducing Vilification Theory

Political communication, while ostensibly aimed at informing and engaging citizens, is often strategically deployed to achieve persuasive outcomes. This pursuit of influence can, and often does, involve negative actions, moving beyond respectful disagreement to active denigration and othering. This article introduces VT to better understand how some political actors wield the power of influence to sway their audience towards specific ends, building on Williams's concept of "persuasive affordances" (2012). Drawing from cognitive perspectives, VT recognizes the importance of engaging receivers by eliciting emotions and capturing their attention, rather than relying solely on reasoned arguments (Petty & Cacioppo, 2012; Greenwald, 1968). Thus, VT argues that certain political actors use hostile methods to create discourse for persuasive goals, so that persuasive components are achieved for political gain. The goal in these communications is to try to build a reality where facts are almost secondary to gut feelings.

Vilification, in this context, serves to create a framework that extends beyond mere persuasion, demonstrating the underlying power dynamics at play. It posits that vilification is not simply a matter of offensive speech; it is a dynamic social process through which power is asserted, inequalities are justified, and social control is maintained. Rather than focusing on the content of the speech itself, VT posits that the key aspect is how that speech functions. VT's understanding of "function," therefore, becomes more linked with what the actions achieve, as is a way to define those actions, and not a measure of what is or what is not "objectively" occurring (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Reisigl, 2005). As such, understanding is about a cognitive approach (Williams, 2012). To account for this dynamic, VT integrates insights from several key schools of thought, each illuminating different facets of the vilification process: This approach also builds on foundational work in CDA, such as Wodak's analyses of the 'discourse-historical approach' and the strategy of 'othering' in political speech, and Charteris-Black's research on the role of metaphor in political persuasion. Political vilification and demonization are pervasive issues within contemporary political discourse, influencing conflict dynamics and social cohesion. Research indicates a troubling correlation between strong ideological partisanship and political intolerance (Peffley et al., 2024). Jackson's (2014) analysis underscores how public figures manipulate narratives to engender vilification, embedding racial and ethnic prejudice within broader political landscapes. Petev (2021) further illustrates this through political mythologization, where polarizing characterizations of rivals as 'demonic' serve political agendas. However, Bankert (2024) suggests it is possible to be a strong partisan without demonizing opponents, highlighting a path toward more constructive engagement. This dynamic extends internationally, with populist regimes employing demonizing rhetoric against domestic and foreign entities, such as the characterization of indigenous groups in Brazil (Ofstehage et al., 2022) or elites in broader populist narratives (Sousa et al., 2021). Crises can also reinforce these narratives, as seen in the 'othering' of British Muslims during the COVID-19 pandemic (Poole & Williamson, 2023). VT seeks to synthesize these observations into a functional model.

- **Speech Act Theory** (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; Langton, 1993): At its core, VT draws upon speech act theory to demonstrate that vilification is not simply a matter of conveying information or expressing opinions. Rather, it is a performative act that does things in the world. As Austin (1962) famously argued, "saying something is doing something." Vilification, therefore, is not just descriptive; it actively constructs social

realities, defines identities, and shapes power relations. By labeling a group as 'criminals' or 'invaders,' a political actor is not simply stating a fact; they are performing an act of exclusion, legitimizing discrimination, and potentially inciting violence. To further this definition, Langton (1993) expands on this by exploring how speech acts can subordinate individuals and groups, limiting their agency and silencing their voices. This provides the "means and ends" for how that discourse is used to control and reinforce negative ideas.

This perspective re-frames the traditional focus of much intercultural speech act analysis. Typically, research in this area highlights how differing cultural norms can lead to unintentional misunderstanding and pragmatic failure when people interact, and the educational goal is to enhance competence to avoid communication errors and establish fertile ground for increased interaction (Vahid Dastjerdi & Nasri, 2012). Vilification Theory, in contrast, examines a context where such failure is the intended and strategic outcome. A vilifying speech act is not a communicative misfire; it is a precisely aimed weapon. Its success is not measured by mutual understanding but by its efficacy in creating division, delegitimizing an opponent, and solidifying in-group identity. Thus, what would be considered a pragmatic failure in a cooperative dialogue becomes a pragmatic success within a vilifying political framework.

- **Social Identity Theory** (Tajfel & Turner, 2001): VT recognizes that vilification is intimately linked to processes of social categorization and group identity. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2001) posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups. To maintain a positive self-image, individuals often engage in in-group favoritism and out-group derogation, accentuating the differences between "us" and "them." Vilification, in this context, becomes a mechanism for reinforcing in-group solidarity by creating a negative image of the out-group. By constructing the out-group as a threat to the in-group's values, interests, or safety, political actors can strengthen social bonds and mobilize support (Hogg, 2016). Therefore, understanding this group can help explain how rhetoric is used to try to persuade.

- **Threat and Intergroup Theories** (Stephan & Renfro, 2016; LeVine and Campbell, 1972; Esses et al, 2005): Vilification often operates by invoking a sense of threat, either real or perceived, from the out-group. Threat and intergroup theories highlight how people have a sense of what to support and what to protect, meaning that they believe on what they like, or on how they are treated. When they do not, they are most likely to

form negative groups. This is why groups, therefore, make use of negative attitudes to build even stronger connections with certain ideologies. By the process of knowing and understanding one's own values and the threat to not being supported, is how connections and differences start to be developed (Esses et al., 2001). Moreover, perceived and real, these actions and thoughts can influence social behavior. As a tool, this influence is to be well thought-out and handled carefully. This may come using economics to portray the idea, or any other means of convincing and creating "safe" ways to spread certain viewpoints.

- **Framing Theory** (Entman, 1993; Chong & Druckman, 2007): Vilification is often achieved through strategic framing, which involves selecting certain aspects of reality and emphasizing them to promote a particular interpretation (Entman, 1993). Framing theory provides a more broad view to the importance of how words are chosen. Framing plays a crucial role to make it all more understandable to the audience, as to reinforce some topics and minimizing others. By selecting which factors in the society should stay, what words should be used, and how they can be used as a tool, it becomes easier to create persuasive communications (Chong & Druckman, 2007). If framing is what creates an effect that can create meaning and have a positive impact, then it allows it to be well known and well achieved. This emphasis allows a clear, direct connection, from how specific words can affect someone's mind, to how certain ideas can have a bigger "frame" than what it is. For example, Trump's framing of immigration as an "invasion" emphasizes the threat to national security and economic stability, justifying restrictive policies.

- **Propaganda Theory** (Herman & Chomsky, 1989): The work by mass media and communication outlets can often have the purpose of trying to increase hate and fear in the community, and those means are known to be in political communication in modern society. Herman and Chomsky (1989) argue that media creates a filter, in what is or is not communicated. This filter is dependent on the social and political climate of the world. There are many factors that contribute to this, from "elite dominance" to power dynamics, but what it all highlights, is that all that is said is very very strategic. According to Propaganda Theory, mass media works as another component to all these aspects through constant exposure to images, the language, and many other factors that work as instruments for this purpose (Herman & Chomsky, 1989). Because of power struggles and negative connotations, this is often a necessary tool and component of our world that must be explored and taken into account, and that it influences what is the truth.

- **Discrimination** (Al Ramiah, Hewstone, Dovidio, Penner, 2011): While it is not necessarily the same, vilification has proven the ability to create unequal power and social structures among different groups. This is especially relevant, if taking into account the use of actions to generate certain thoughts (instead of vice versa). What is meant, is that by using the other lenses and focusing on one particular point (like someone's race, or orientation), the outcome is for these group to be unequal, as it is more of an "us vs them" mentality than it would be an analysis of the person. More specifically, this may impact "opportunity hoarding", making unequal access for marginalized groups, which emphasizes how discrimination has an element of impact and control in its actions.

VT's importance extends beyond simply describing rhetorical techniques; it also allows for an analysis of the potential negative effects on marginalized groups. The strategic use of "negative messages" can have far-reaching and detrimental consequences, making this theoretical contribution valuable across diverse contexts. Drawing upon the work of Gibson (1979) and the concept of "multistability," it allows to understand how the same object or space can manifest in different ways depending on the observer (Aagaard, 2018; Hasse, 2015; Ihde, 1990; Rosenberger, 2018). All of this comes together in a framework that builds a new way of understanding how a political tool should not be taken as an individual part, but as a process that has different impacts depending on a situation. It is here where the process of communication, and the way that someone makes it, is a central point to understand how the receiver perceives information. In sum, the VT argues that it is all about perspective and how that perspective can be built through certain actions by specific individuals.

2.5.1. Distinguishing Vilification Theory from Related Concepts

To clarify VT's unique contribution, Table 1 compares it with related concepts in political rhetoric. Analyzing Trump's rhetoric through the lens of VT allows moving beyond simply identifying instances of negative speech and to understand how these acts function to achieve specific political goals, such as mobilizing support, discrediting opponents, and justifying discriminatory policies. To what extent does his repeated use of terms like "radical left" and "socialist" function to vilify political opponents, and what are the potential consequences of this vilification for democratic discourse?

Table 1. *Comparison of Vilification Theory with Related Concepts in Political Rhetoric*

Dimension	Vilification Theory (VT)	Demonization	Scapegoating
Primary Focus	The **function and process** of denigration as a performative, persuasive act.	The **moral characterization** of an opponent as evil, inhuman, or an existential threat.	The **displacement of blame** for societal problems onto a specific, often powerless, group.
Mechanism	Integrates speech acts, framing, and social identity construction into a multi-layered strategy.	Primarily uses metaphor, hyperbole, and moralistic language to construct an enemy image.	Relies on causal misattribution and stereotyping to assign responsibility for failures.
Goal	To mobilize support, consolidate in-group identity, and legitimize discriminatory policies by constructing a vilified "other."	To morally disqualify an opponent from the political arena and justify extreme actions against them.	To deflect public anger, simplify complex problems, and maintain the status quo for the in-group.
Theoretical Basis	Speech Act Theory, Social Identity Theory, Framing Theory, Propaganda Theory.	Primarily rooted in rhetoric, political psychology, and conflict studies.	Rooted in social psychology, sociology, and theories of prejudice.

Understanding these specific functions will bring us the understanding of how negative speech acts can be deployed to persuade and gain support. Therefore, the following research questions were crafted to support this research project in achieving its goals:

1. What are the main persuasive pragmatic structures in the discourse of the Republican nominee?
2. What are the main ideological and epistemological frameworks (content/topics) of persuasion in the Republican nominee's discourse?

3. Methodology
3.1. Design

This study employed a qualitative design to analyze the persuasive strategies and discourse patterns within the political speeches of Donald Trump, the Republican nominee, from the 2024 U.S. Presidential campaign. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because the research questions focused on identifying and interpreting the nuanced ways in which language was intended to persuade, construct identity, and,

most importantly, vilify within distinct political discourses (Creswell & Poth, 2016). CDA, inherently qualitative, informed this study's focus on uncovering hidden agendas and power relations embedded within texts through detailed analysis, not numerical data (Fairclough, 2013). The researcher also intended to make VT more approachable and easier to understand by applying it to a specific case study.

3.2. Corpus

The data for this study were selected using a purposive sampling strategy to capture a representative range of Donald Trump's political discourse during the 2024 U.S. Presidential election. The primary dataset consisted of transcripts from eight campaign rallies, as well as the debates. Specifically, we selected rallies from five key swing states (Pennsylvania, Arizona, Georgia, Wisconsin, and Michigan) and two nationally televised primetime debates to capture variation in geographic context, audience demographics, and communicative medium (live rally vs. structured debate). These speeches were selected and limited to campaign rallies and debates to ensure a clearer understanding of the theory. As the purpose was to create a detailed account of how Trump constructed and conducted his speeches in the political arena, we only selected for those two.

The speeches and briefings were accessed via various online sources, including official campaign websites, news outlets, and online archives of political discourse. The specific speeches were identified through keyword searches (such as "campaign rally," "presidential speech," "nominee briefing") and were cross-referenced with reliable news media to ensure data quality. Transcripts were then copied, compiled, and prepared for analysis. The speech from this particular side was the most abundant one to find, which made it simpler to work and better provide a lens to VT.

3.3. Instruments and Analytical Framework

This study employed a multi-layered analytical framework that integrates DST (Chilton, 2013, 2014, 2017), ProxT (Cap, 2013, 2014), and the analysis of AFs (Koselleck, 2004; Dunmire, 2011). This integrated approach allows for a comprehensive analysis that addresses both the pragmatic structures of language use and the underlying ideological frameworks.

DST provided a framework for understanding how speakers construct their discourse worlds by analyzing deictic markers (pronouns, adverbs, etc.) to identify the speaker's deictic center, the construction of "us" vs. "them," and the framing of time and certainty. ProxT then built on this by

analyzing how speakers manipulate time, space, and values to make distant concepts feel more relevant and immediate to their audience. Finally, the analysis of AFs examined how speakers construct competing visions of the future to persuade their audience, distinguishing between privileged futures (PFs) associated with the speaker's proposals and oppositional futures (OFs) projected if those proposals are rejected. This combination of frameworks was strategically chosen because it allowed for a multi-faceted analysis of Trump's rhetoric. DST reveals how he positioned himself and his supporters, ProxT illuminated how he makes abstract threats feel immediate, and AFs demonstrated how he constructs contrasting visions of the future to mobilize support. Crucially, this study extends these existing frameworks by integrating them with VT.

To apply VT, this study focused on identifying specific vilifying speech acts within Trump's discourse. Drawing on Speech Act Theory, a vilifying speech act is defined as an utterance that performs an action of denigration, othering, or dehumanization towards an individual or group. We used the following indicators to identify vilifying speech acts:

1. Derogatory Labeling: The use of pejorative terms or labels to describe opponents (e.g., "crooked," "radical left," "animal").
2. Negative Stereotyping: The attribution of negative characteristics or behaviors to an entire group (e.g., "all immigrants are criminals").
3. Incitement of Fear or Hatred: Language that evokes feelings of fear, anger, or resentment towards a specific group (e.g., "they are destroying our country").
4. Dehumanization: The portrayal of opponents as less than human (e.g., through animalistic metaphors or comparisons to vermin).
5. Accusations of Disloyalty or Treason: Claims that opponents are disloyal to the country or working against its interests. These indicators were used in conjunction with the principles of Social Identity Theory, Threat and Intergroup Theories, Framing Theory, and Propaganda Theory to analyze how vilifying speech acts function to construct in-group identity, reinforce out-group threat, and shape public opinion. For each identified instance of vilification, the analysis considers:
6. The target of the vilification: Who is being vilified?
7. The function of the vilification: What is the intended effect of the vilification? (e.g., to discredit an opponent, to mobilize support, to justify a policy)

8. The potential consequences of the vilification: What are the potential negative effects of the vilification on the target group and on democratic discourse?

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The data collection for this study employed a purposive sampling strategy to ensure a representative selection of political discourse from the 2024 U.S. Presidential campaign. The primary dataset consisted of speech transcripts from campaign rallies delivered by the Republican nominee. The data collection began by accessing transcripts of campaign speeches and debates, delivered by the Republican nominee. The debates, the speeches, and briefings were accessed via various online sources, including official campaign websites, news outlets, and online archives of political discourse. The specific speeches were identified through keyword searches (such as "campaign rally," "presidential speech," "nominee briefing") and were cross-referenced with reliable news media to ensure data quality. Transcripts were then copied, compiled, and prepared for analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis process was iterative and involved a detailed engagement with each selected text. We employed a qualitative approach, consistent with the nature of the research questions that focused on understanding how language was used to persuade within the distinct political discourses. The analysis began with an initial close reading of each text, followed by a structured and systematic coding based on the three integrated theories and VT. The initial phase involved the application of DST, examining the speakers' construction of their deictic space. Building on the deictic frameworks established, the second phase analyzed the use of Proximization strategies. The third and final phase of the analysis concentrated on the articulation of AFs. All those three were considered to analyze VT. A detailed coding scheme was developed based on the indicators of vilifying speech acts outlined in section 3.3. Each transcript was systematically coded for instances of derogatory labeling, negative stereotyping, incitement of fear or hatred, dehumanization, and accusations of disloyalty or treason. Each instance was then analyzed in terms of its target, function, and potential consequences. The coding process was iterative, with the coding scheme being refined as new patterns emerged from the data. Moreover, to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, we took the following measures:

Inter-coder Reliability: A second researcher, trained in discourse analysis and VT, independently coded a subset (20%) of the transcripts. The inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, yielding strong agreement across the primary coding categories (Derogatory Labeling, $\kappa = 0.85$; Negative Stereotyping, $\kappa = 0.82$; Incitement of Fear, $\kappa = 0.88$; Dehumanization, $\kappa = 0.84$; Accusations of Disloyalty, $\kappa = 0.81$), with an overall average Kappa of 0.84. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus.

Reflexivity: Throughout the research process, we engaged in reflexive practice to acknowledge and address potential sources of researcher bias. We maintained a research journal to document our assumptions, interpretations, and decision-making processes. We also sought feedback from colleagues to challenge our own perspectives and ensure the objectivity of our analysis. (See Appendix A for an illustrative journal excerpt).

3.6. Ethical Considerations

This study involved the analysis of publicly available speeches. However, we took ethical considerations into account to minimize the potential for harm. The analysis focused on the rhetorical strategies employed in the speeches, rather than on making personal judgments about the speaker. The findings are presented in a fair and balanced manner, with attention to the potential consequences of vilifying rhetoric on marginalized groups. We made every effort to avoid misinterpreting or decontextualizing the speaker's statements.

4. Results

The analysis of Donald Trump's speeches from the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign reveals a consistent and multifaceted persuasive strategy characterized by a distinct set of pragmatic structures, ideological frameworks, and epistemological underpinnings. This section presents a detailed examination of these elements, demonstrating how Trump's discourse functions to solidify support, demonize opponents, and promote a specific political agenda. The findings are organized according to the research questions and are explicitly linked to DST, ProxT, the analysis of AFs, and, most importantly, VT.

Table 2. *Frequency of Vilifying Speech Act Indicators in the Corpus (N=8 Speeches)*

VT Indicator	Number of Instances (n)	Percentage of Total Coded Instances (%)
Derogatory Labeling	112	38.5%
Negative Stereotyping	58	19.9%
Incitement of Fear or Hatred	71	24.4%
Dehumanization	19	6.5%
Accusations of Disloyalty/Treason	31	10.7%
Total	291	100%

4.1. Results for Research Question 1: Pragmatic Structures

Research Question 1 aimed to identify the main persuasive pragmatic structures in the discourse of the Republican nominee. The analysis of Donald Trump's discourse reveals several key persuasive pragmatic structures working in concert to construct a specific worldview and mobilize his supporters. These structures are best understood through DST, ProxT, AFs, and the overarching framework of VT.

I. Deixis (DST Analysis): The Construction of "Us" vs. "Them" Through Vilification

Deictic markers are strategically employed to create a sense of belonging for supporters while simultaneously distancing and demonizing opponents. This "us vs. them" dynamic is not merely descriptive; it actively vilifies the out-group, portraying them as threats to the in-group's values and interests.

A. Deictic Center (S): Trump consistently positions himself as the central figure, the active force, the rescuer, and the aggrieved party. This self-centered deixis is often accompanied by claims that his opponents are attacking him unfairly, further solidifying his role as a victimized hero. The pronoun "I" is dominant, as seen in his MAGA rally at MSG, New York City on October 28, 2024, where he states, "I'm thrilled to be back in the city I love" (Speech 1, 02:15). This establishes him as the key figure, returning to a place of affection and strength.

B. "Us": This category includes his supporters ("patriots," "hardworking Americans"), law enforcement (selectively), idealized historical figures, and vague entities like "America." Vilification plays a key role in defining this "us" by contrasting them with the perceived moral failings of the "them." At the MAGA Rally in Butler, PA (October 7, 2024), Trump addresses "all Americans, whether you are Republican, Democrat, independent, conservative, or liberal, or you have no label whatsoever, it makes no difference. Our movement, it belongs to you. It belongs to our country" (Speech 2, Transcript p. 2). This inclusive "us" is contrasted with

the "evils of poverty, hatred, and destruction" that he claims to be saving America from, subtly vilifying those associated with these negative concepts.

C. "Them": This expansive category encompasses political opponents (Biden, Harris, Pelosi, "RINOs"), the "Fake News" media, immigrants (especially undocumented), the "Deep State," and globalists. These groups are systematically vilified through derogatory labels, accusations of corruption, and portrayals as threats to American safety and prosperity. This is where VT becomes most apparent.

- **Example 1**

    In the October 27, 2024, speech in New York City, Trump says, "Next Tuesday, you have to stand up, and you have to tell Kamala Harris that you've done a terrible job, that Crooked Joe Biden has done a terrible job. You've destroyed our country" (Speech 3, 21:40). The use of "Crooked Joe" is a derogatory label, and the accusation of destroying the country serves to vilify them.

- **Example 2**

    From the same October 27, 2024, speech: "They're allowing criminals from all over the world to enter our country" (Speech 3, 25:11). This negative stereotyping links immigrants to criminality, inciting fear and distrust. Further, his claim that "Kamala has imported criminal migrants...and has resettled them into your communities to prey upon innocent American citizens" directly connects immigrants to violence, demonizing them.

- **Example 3**

    In his October 27, 2024, New York City speech, Trump directly addresses the media: "We're going to drill, baby, drill. And I will terminate the green new scam and will cut your energy prices in half, 50%, within one year from January 20th. Is the fake news hearing that? Whoa, look how much -- wow, that's a lot of fake news. That is a lot of fake news. Look at that. Wow, that's got to be a record, Mr. Speaker. I think that's a record. That is a lot of fakers back there" (Speech 3, 33:05). By labeling them "fake news" and "fakers," he undermines their credibility and encourages distrust of mainstream media.

- **Example 4**

    In the same speech, Trump asserts: "In less than four years, Kamala Harris has shattered our middle class. She casted the deciding votes that launched the worst inflation in the history of our country" (Speech

3, 18:50). He personalizes the negative impact of economic policies by directly blaming Kamala, using strong language like "shattered."

D. Discourse Referents (D-Axis): The discourse is carefully structured to foreground Trump, his allies, and the abstract ideal of "America," while backgrounding complex social and economic realities and the concerns of minority groups. This selective emphasis reinforces the vilification of those who do not fit into Trump's idealized vision of America. In his speech at the Waco, Texas rally (March 25, 2023), Trump thanks "thousands of proud, hardworking American patriots" (Speech 4, Transcript p. 1). This positive foregrounding of his supporters contrasts with his later attacks on "globalists and Marxists," creating a clear division and implicitly vilifying those who hold different ideologies.

E. Conceived Time (T-Axis): The past is presented as a "golden age" under Trump, the present as a time of crisis, and the future as a sharply divided path between a privileged future under Trump and a dire, oppositional future if his opponents prevail. This temporal framing reinforces the vilification of the present administration and creates a sense of urgency to restore Trump to power. In his Butler, PA rally (October 7, 2024), Trump speaks of "usher[ing] in a new golden age of American security, prosperity, sovereignty, and freedom," juxtaposing this privileged future with the implied present decline under his political rivals (Speech 2, Transcript p. 5).

F. Epistemic Modality (M-Axis): Claims are often made with high certainty, even without verifiable evidence, while doubt is selectively cast on opponents and potential dangers. This epistemic strategy reinforces the vilification of those who challenge Trump's narratives. For example, in his Waco, Texas rally, Trump promotes conspiracy thinking with the statement, "COVID, they used COVID to cheat" (Speech 4, Transcript p. 8).

II. Proximization (ProxT Analysis): Bringing the Distant Closer through Fear

Trump uses proximization to make distant threats feel more relevant and immediate to his audience, often through fear-mongering and vilification.

A. Temporal Proximization: He shortens timeframes and emphasizes immediate consequences to create a sense of urgency.

B. Spatial Proximization: He brings distant threats closer by describing them as invading communities and endangering families.

C. Axiological Proximization: He aligns policies with values believed to resonate with his base. For example, in his October 27, 2024, speech, he uses both spatial and axiological proximization by stating, "They're allowing criminals from all over the world to enter our country...Kamala has imported criminal migrants...and has resettled them into your communities to prey upon innocent American citizens" (Speech 3, 25:11). This statement links the distant threat of "criminals from all over the world" to the immediate fear of "your communities" and "innocent American citizens," and it appeals to the value of protecting one's family and community. The assertion that Kamala "imported" these criminals further vilifies her and her policies.

III. Alternative Futures (AFs Analysis): Painting Pictures of What Has to Come

Trump constructs competing visions of the future to persuade his audience, with vilification playing a key role in portraying the oppositional future as a terrifying dystopia.
A. Privileged Futures (PFs): These are described in glowing terms, emphasizing a "new golden age" of American prosperity, security, and dominance.
B. Oppositional Futures (OFs): These are presented as dire warnings, portraying a country "doomed" to decline and destruction under his opponents. The use of vilifying language to describe the potential consequences of his opponents' policies serves to scare voters into supporting his agenda.
For example, in his October 7, 2024, speech, Trump says, "Our movement to make America great again stands stronger, prouder, more united, more determined, and nearer to victory than ever before. We're going to make America great again" (Speech 2, Transcript p. 1). This PFs image of a restored and powerful America contrasts sharply with the implicit threat of a declining America under his opponents.

4.2. Results for Research Question 2: Ideological and Epistemological Frameworks

Research Question 2 examined the underlying ideological and epistemological themes that structure Trump's persuasive communication. The analysis reveals a consistent reliance on specific themes and modes of reasoning that reinforce the vilification of out-groups.

I. Core Ideological Themes (Content/Topics)

These are the main subject areas and ideologies that the nominee appeals to within the Republican Party.

A. American Nationalism (America First): This dominant ideology prioritizes the interests of the United States above all others, advocating for protectionist trade policies, secure borders, and a strong military. This nationalism is often expressed through vilifying rhetoric directed at foreign countries and international organizations.

B. Economic Populism: Appeals to working-class voters by criticizing elites, promoting tax cuts, and promising to bring back jobs from overseas. This economic populism is frequently accompanied by vilifying rhetoric directed at immigrants and foreign workers.

C. Social Conservatism: Reinforces traditional values related to family, gender roles, and religion. Often uses "culture war" issues to galvanize his base.

D. Authoritarianism and Anti-Institutionalism: Promotion of strong leadership, disregard for democratic norms, and distrust of institutions.

In his Waco, Texas rally (March 25, 2023), Trump says, "2024 is the final battle. If you put me back in the White House, their rein will be over and America will be a free nation once again" (Speech 4, Transcript p. 12). This authoritarian tone and the emphasis on a "final battle" paint a picture of societal conflict, reinforcing the need for a strong leader to restore order. His reference to the Biden regime's "weaponization of law enforcement against their political opponent" further vilifies the opposing side, portraying them as abusing power.

II. Epistemological Themes (How Knowledge is Presented)

These are how the nominees chose to structure their arguments across speeches and debates.

A. Personal Authority and Intuition: The speaker frequently relies on their own judgment and instincts as a source of knowledge, often dismissing expert opinions and data.

B. Us vs. Them Epistemology: Information is filtered through the lens of the "us vs. them" dichotomy.

C. Conspiracy Thinking: The nominee frequently promotes conspiracy theories and unsubstantiated claims, often without providing any evidence.

D. Appeals to Emotion and Gut Feelings: Logic and reason often take a backseat to emotional appeals, particularly fear, anger, and resentment.

These themes are evident in the Phoenix, Arizona rally speech (July 24, 2024), where Trump states, "The abuses of power that we're currently

witnessing at all levels of government will go down as among the most shameful, corrupt and depraved chapters in all of American history" (Speech 5, 45:10). The combination of appeals to personal authority ("I'm telling you") with the strong emotional language ("shameful, corrupt, and depraved") exemplifies this epistemological approach.

Furthermore, in the debate excerpt (June 28, 2024), Trump's response to questions about his actions on January 6 demonstrates a reliance on "us vs. them" epistemology and appeals to emotion. He shifts blame to Nancy Pelosi, portrays his supporters as "peacefully and patriotically" protesting, and labels the investigation as a "scam," all while avoiding direct responsibility. This strategy reinforces his narrative and vilifies his perceived enemies. He deflects responsibility and promotes his own narrative, emphasizing his own perspective and creating a sense of doubt around opposing accounts. By explicitly connecting these real-world examples to the theoretical constructs of VT, the Results section effectively demonstrates the theory's value in analyzing political rhetoric.

5. Discussion

The analysis of Donald Trump's 2024 campaign rhetoric, structured by DST, ProxT, and AFs, and importantly illuminated through the lens of VT, revealed a consistent and targeted persuasive strategy deeply rooted in specific ideological and epistemological frameworks. This discourse, marked by clear patterns of in-group promotion, out-group vilification, and emotional appeals, provides valuable insights into the mechanics of contemporary populist communication. These results, while distinct to the context of the 2024 election cycle, resonate with a broader body of research on political discourse, persuasion, and the strategic use of language to shape public opinion. Furthermore, this study gives strong reason and support to the theoretical VT framework.

The findings demonstrate a discourse world dominated by a strategic construction of "us vs. them," a tactic central to mobilizing support and defining in-group boundaries (Chilton, 2004). As highlighted by the DST analysis, Trump consistently positions himself as the deictic center (S), emphasizing his personal actions and framing his supporters as "patriots" and "hardworking Americans," effectively creating a sense of shared identity and common purpose. As he clearly stated at the MAGA Rally at MSG, New York City on October 28, 2024: "We're going to make America great again, and it's going to happen fast." This contrasts sharply with his depiction of out-groups, including political opponents, the media, and immigrants, who are consistently portrayed as threats to American values and interests. The constant vilification of these "others" is key.

This construction of a dichotomous worldview aligns with previous research on the role of "othering" in political discourse, as it generates an image that one group is better because of their virtues, while others have more dangerous intentions (Said, 1977, 2015, 2007). Chen and Reeves' (2011) analysis of the 2008 presidential campaign found that the McCain-Palin ticket pursued a "base" strategy, targeting counties where they had strong support, which involved reinforcing these in-group/out-group divisions. Similarly, Finlayson (2012) highlights the use of signifiers to construct ideological meaning, as well as reinforcing the ideology by creating a negative side. The high level of animosity and distrust towards the Republican nominee's rivals, shows how these factors are used to create more "us vs them:" "the abuses of power that we're currently witnessing at all levels of government will go down as among the most shameful, corrupt and depraved chapters in all of American history" (Speech 5, 45:10). Through this "us versus them," the speaker provides a point of view that, whatever his ideas are, it is supported for better and understood for the audience in order to create the same image about the society they live in. This also is what helps to build "ontological security" (Kinnvall, 2019) to the audience.

This strategic construction of a dichotomous worldview stands in stark contrast to the pedagogical goals essential in an increasingly globalized society. Scholars in language education, for instance, emphasize that teachers and students alike see the value in learning about foreign cultures, their 'daily life and routines,' to foster 'intercultural competence' (Bagheri Masoudzade & Shekarian Behzadi, 2023). The political discourse analyzed in this study actively works against this principle. Instead of promoting an 'understanding of cultural expectations, behaviors, [and] knowledge,' the rhetoric of vilification functions to dismantle it, replacing nuanced understanding with fear and caricature. It demonstrates how political language can be a powerful counterforce to the educational imperative of building intercultural respect and social cohesion.

The persuasive force of this strategy is further amplified by the use of proximization, which makes distant or abstract concepts feel more immediate and tangible to his audience (Cap, 2013, 2014). By collapsing timelines and emphasizing the immediate consequences of his opponents' policies, Trump creates a sense of urgency and crisis. Simultaneously, he draws distant threats, such as immigrants and globalists, conceptually closer to his audience, portraying them as physically invading their communities and endangering their way of life. In addition, the use of a border creates "scares" in the listeners' minds, to believe that it is easier

to keep and to defend their thoughts and way of seeing things. As it is stated by the Republican nominee himself, "They're allowing criminals from all over the world to enter our country, where they can take advantage of people," (Speech 3, 25:11). This demonstrates a key function of VT, where fear and anxiety are used to manipulate perceptions and promote a specific agenda.

The ability to relate to the listener has been seen in multiple studies. Finlayson (2012) argues the same ideas that a proper understanding of political arguments needs to include a connection to what "was," and to what "should have been." In this regard, this is what helps the candidate make and reinforce his arguments to the listener. In Pattison's (2014) finding, a less coercive delivery allows for building trust to show that their values can be showcased. This is also to highlight their position as a well-rounded persona (Crawford, 2014). The construction of alternative futures is equally important, with emotionally charged ideas. The emotional rhetoric, that creates a sense of threat, can come as if they were a personal experience as explored by Chilton (2017), reinforcing Trump's position despite his changing context.

Results obtained from the second research question also provided insights into the core ideological and epistemological frameworks structuring Trump's persuasive discourse. The dominant themes of American nationalism, economic populism, social conservatism, and authoritarianism underscore his commitment to prioritize American interests, appeal to working-class voters, reinforce traditional values, and project an image of strong leadership. Again, the creation of those themes, are with a sense of gaining support and influence those that come close to their beliefs. This is how the candidate creates the message and makes it more appealing for specific groups of voters.

The rhetorical style underpinning this framework can be usefully contrasted with other models of communication to highlight its specific function. For example, research into academic discourse has observed that in some contexts, female speakers tend to utilize more 'standard forms of language,' pay closer attention to the 'correctness of grammar,' and 'explain everything with all details,' while their male counterparts may not prioritize such precision (Jarrahzade & Hashamdar, 2022). While avoiding any generalization from such a specific study, the comparison is analytically illuminating. The political rhetoric analyzed here diverges sharply from a communicative style centered on detail, grammatical convention, and considerate explanation. Instead, it favors broad, emotionally-charged, and often non-standard assertions. This choice is not incidental but is integral to the efficacy of vilification. A simplified,

repetitive rhetorical style, unburdened by the nuance and details observed by Jarrahzade and Hashamdar (2022) in a different communicative setting, allows vilifying labels to be transmitted more forcefully and memorably to a mass audience, prioritizing impact over precision.

This is done by presenting, for example, social issues such as family roles, as is seen in Week's research, and the way those things are presented will have a strong and direct influence over the audience that feels related to those. As such, in recent studies it has been seen how "the way" those ideologies are conveyed, is what also makes that vision of a desirable future. In turn, this leads the listener to have a sense of security. It may also give the speaker what seems to be a certain degree of power.

The VT, now is to demonstrate how to better understand these mechanisms when they are all seen together as building blocks. It is not that there is one sole part of an ideology that should be emphasized. It is rather, the proper construction that combines all these elements. It is a complex but effective method to create support. The most important thing for the receiver is to gain trust, to show moral, ethics, and honesty (Baviera et al, 2019), and to generate a political engagement. This also plays out in the context of how it has been related to an "elite" and the way the speaker can change his tone to build specific things. It highlights how the speaker can build something that it is also a more powerful means to get its message across (Nguyen, 2019). Another great thing about all these elements, is that they also allow to challenge previous ideas, and create a point of view that is not always the best way, but rather the most appropriate one (Odzuck & Günther, 2022).

Extracts from the debate excerpts show how VT can be applied to understand the persuasive impact and the emotional impact. The VT, now, it brings the study of this point, for the public to take into account those details. It becomes the key of analysis, so audiences can build their own arguments, ideas, and thoughts, instead of just "following blindly what the rest does." The "us vs. them" framing and demonization of out-groups are explicitly tied to VT's understanding of vilification as a performative act that constructs social realities and reinforces power relations. The observed use of derogatory labels, negative stereotyping, and incitement of fear in Trump's rhetoric all align with VT's indicators of vilifying speech acts. Furthermore, the analysis of how these acts function to mobilize support, discredit opponents, and justify discriminatory policies provides strong support for VT's core argument.

This research also reveals how the strategic combination of DST, ProxT, and AFs contributes to the overall persuasive power of vilifying rhetoric. By constructing a specific discourse world, bringing distant

threats closer, and painting starkly contrasting visions of the future, Trump effectively amplifies the emotional impact of his message and reinforces the "us vs. them" dichotomy.

6. Conclusion

This analysis of Donald Trump's rhetorical strategies during the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign has illuminated key persuasive pragmatic structures and ideological underpinnings central to his approach. By relying on specific tools for both, the focus was to better see how certain political figures can "sway" the emotions of certain groups and gain support and validation of their actions and thoughts. This investigation into political discourse highlights, and strengthens, the "us vs them" narrative, making those that relate with that "us" build and create their own idea. This is done all while disregarding the idea that there is an outside world that may not think the same, or at the cost of "harm." This study contributes to the field by emphasizing vilification as an essential function of political communication, a dimension often overlooked in existing frameworks. In addition, by the addition of corpora it has been demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach, and the negative role that this has for the audiences involved.

While there has been extensive research on political communication, framing, and persuasion, this study contributes to the field by examining the ways in which language is designed to influence and how that process leads to, or even requires, vilification as an essential function. The results highlight the use of certain methods, and techniques in the world, that require more attention and consideration, as this can be one of the driving factors for political issues. By understanding what is happening through the lenses of the VT, it means that there can be a more aware population, and thus, better prepare to take a stand.

However, several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The qualitative approach, while providing rich insights into the nuances of language use, is limited in its generalizability. The focus on a single political actor, Donald Trump, restricts the scope of the analysis. Furthermore, the analysis is culturally and linguistically specific to the American Anglophone context; findings may not generalize to non-Anglophone political environments or to political figures who do not employ a populist style. Future research should test the applicability of VT in different cultural settings. Future research could benefit from a broader corpus of data, including speeches and debates from other political actors across the spectrum. It is also helpful to use those methods and analyses in other parties, so see what their structures are too. For the

most effective understanding, one must know that not all will share or have the same point of view. Finally, the interpretation of rhetorical strategies is inherently subjective, and further research could explore the perspectives of audience members to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the reception and impact of vilifying rhetoric. Based on these limitations, the following avenues for future research are recommended:

1. Supplement the qualitative analysis with quantitative methods to measure the frequency and distribution of specific linguistic features associated with vilification. This could provide further empirical support for the VT framework.
2. Extend the analysis to include visual and audio elements of political communication. Examine how body language, tone of voice, and imagery contribute to the overall persuasive effect of vilifying rhetoric.
3. Apply VT to analyze the rhetoric of political actors in different contexts and countries. This could reveal cross-cultural patterns and variations in the use of vilification.
4. Conduct surveys or focus groups to assess how different audiences perceive and respond to vilifying rhetoric. Explore the cognitive and emotional processes involved in the reception of such messages.
5. Track the use of vilifying rhetoric over time to identify trends and changes in political communication strategies.
6. Design experiments to test the causal effects of exposure to vilifying rhetoric on attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.
7. By understanding those points, a more well rounded VT can be built. Ultimately, the findings from this study and the potential for future research suggest that it is not a thing that someone does in an individual aspect, but a process.

6.1. Practical Applications and Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study offers the following concrete recommendations for key stakeholders:

- For Educators: Media literacy curricula should incorporate modules specifically designed to help students identify VT patterns in political news, social media, and advertising. Exercises could involve deconstructing speeches to map out "us vs. them" framing and labeling vilifying speech acts.
- For Journalists: When reporting on political rhetoric, journalists can move beyond simple quotation and use analytical frameworks

like VT to contextualize vilifying language as a strategic tool. This involves explaining *how* the language functions to mobilize a base or discredit an opponent, rather than merely repeating it.

- For Platform Designers and Policymakers: Social media platforms could explore more nuanced content moderation tools that flag or provide context for content that systematically employs multiple VT indicators, informing users about persuasive and potentially harmful rhetoric without resorting to outright censorship. Policymakers could support initiatives that promote digital literacy and critical thinking skills to build a more resilient public sphere.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Excerpt from Researcher's Reflexive Journal (September 11, 2024):

Today, while coding the ABC News Presidential Debate transcript, I encountered the segment where former President Trump claimed that in Springfield, Ohio, immigrants were "eating the dogs... eating the cats, they're eating the pets." My initial reaction was one of shock and immediate dismissal, as the claim is extreme and has been fact-checked as unsubstantiated. I had to pause and consciously separate my personal reaction to the content's veracity from the analytical task required by Vilification Theory (VT).

*My objective is not to fact-check the claim itself, but to analyze its **rhetorical function**. This statement is a powerful example of vilification through **dehumanization** and **incitement of fear**. By associating a migrant group with such a taboo and "uncivilized" act, the rhetoric aims to frame them as a dangerous, sub-human "other," thereby justifying extreme policies like mass deportation. I noted this as a prime example of ProxT (bringing a distant threat into the home by targeting pets) and a core function of VT (mobilizing support through fear and disgust). Acknowledging my own incredulity was crucial to refocusing on the statement's strategic purpose within the discourse, rather than getting sidetracked by its factual basis.*

Appendix 2. Transcript Sources and Timestamps

This appendix provides the sources for key quotations that exemplify the indicators of Vilification Theory (VT) as analyzed in this study.

Source 1: CNN Presidential Debate

- **Event:** CNN Presidential Debate (Biden vs. Trump)
- **Date:** June 28, 2024
- **URL:** https://edition.cnn.com/politics/live-news/presidential-debate-biden-trump-06-28-24

Timestamp	Quotation (Donald Trump)	VT Indicator(s) Exemplified
12:05	"And I'd love to ask him, and will, why he allowed millions of people to come in here from prisons, jails and mental institutions to come into our country and destroy our country."	Negative Stereotyping, Incitement of Fear
14:10	"We are living right now in a rat's nest. They're killing our people in New York, in California, in every state in the union, because we don't have borders anymore."	Dehumanization (Metaphor), Incitement of Fear
14:20	"We call it migrant crime. I call it Biden migrant crime. They're killing our citizens at a level that we've never seen before."	Derogatory Labeling, Negative Stereotyping
15:45	"This man is a criminal. This man – you're lucky. You're lucky."	Derogatory Labeling
16:20	"You have the morals of an alley cat." (In response to Biden)	Derogatory Labeling, Ad Hominem
20:00	"The only person on this stage that is a convicted felon is the man I'm looking at right now." (Spoken by Biden, but a key part of the rhetorical exchange framing Trump)	Derogatory Labeling
20:55	"He's got a lot of cases around the road coming around... I do know he has a real problem." (Spoken by Biden, framing Trump as inherently criminal)	Vilification (Implying Criminality)
22:15	"This guy has no sense of American democracy." (Spoken by Biden)	Accusation of Disloyalty (to democratic principles)
23:45	"He's a whiner... Something snapped in you when you lost the last time." (Spoken by Biden)	Derogatory Labeling

Source 2: ABC News Presidential Debate
- **Event:** ABC News Presidential Debate (Harris vs. Trump)
- **Date:** September 10, 2024
- **URL:** https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/harris-trump-presidential-debate-transcript/story?id=113560542

Timestamp	Quotation (Donald Trump)	VT Indicator(s) Exemplified

06:05	"...millions of people pouring into our country from prisons and jails, from mental institutions and insane asylums, and they're coming in and they're taking jobs..."	Negative Stereotyping, Incitement of Fear
15:00	"She's a Marxist. Everybody knows she's a Marxist. Her father is a Marxist professor in economics and he taught her well."	Derogatory Labeling (Ideological)
29:29	"In Springfield, they're eating the dogs, the people that came in, they're eating the cats, they're eating the pets of the people that live there. And this is what's happening in our country."	Dehumanization, Incitement of Fear/Disgust
34:10	"They allowed criminals, many, many millions of criminals. They allowed terrorists... drug dealers to come into our country... they're destroying the fabric of our country."	Negative Stereotyping, Incitement of Fear
35:02	"Crime here is up and through the roof. Despite their fraudulent statements... We have a new form of crime. It's called migrant crime..."	Derogatory Labeling, Negative Stereotyping
36:42	"Every one of those cases was started by them against their political opponent... It's called weaponization."	Accusation of Disloyalty (to justice system), Framing Opponents as Corrupt
54:46	"Viktor Orban, one of the most respected men… He said, 'The most respected, most feared person is Donald Trump. We had no problems when Trump was president.' But when this weak, pathetic man that you saw at a debate just a few months ago..."	Derogatory Labeling (of Biden), Appeal to Authoritarian Strength
01:44:28	"What these people have done to our country, and maybe toughest of all, is allowing millions of people to come into our country, many of them are criminals and they're destroying our country. The worst president, the worst vice president in the history of our country."	Negative Stereotyping, Derogatory Labeling, Incitement of Fear