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The use of imagery in the campaign speeches of Barack Hussein Obama and John McCain during the 2008 US Presidential Election

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Abstract

Purpose – The use of imagery in leadership speeches is becoming increasingly important in shaping the beliefs and actions of followers. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the use of speech imagery and linguistic features employed during the 2008 US Presidential Election campaign.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors analysed a total of 264 speeches (160 speeches from Obama and 104 speeches from McCain) delivered throughout the 2008 US Presidential Election and identified 15 speech images used by the two candidates. Both descriptive coding and axial coding approaches were applied to the data and speech images common to both candidates were further subjected to Pennebaker *et al.* (2003) linguistic inquiry methodology.

Findings – The analysis revealed a number of important differences with Obama using inclusive language and nurturing communitarian values, whereas McCain focusing on personal actions and strict, conservative individualistic values. The use of more inclusive language by Obama was found to be significant in three of the five speech images common to both candidates.

Research limitations/implications – The research acknowledges the difficulty of measuring the effectiveness of speech images without taking into account wider factors such as tone of voice, facial expression and level of conviction. It also recognises the heavy use of speechwriters by presidential candidates whilst on the campaign trail, but argues that candidates still exert a strong influence through instructions to speechwriters and that speeches should reflect the candidate's values and beliefs.

Originality/value – The research findings contribute to the emerging stream of leadership research that addresses language content issues surrounding and embedded in the leadership process. The research argues that leaders' speeches provide a fertile ground for conducting research and for examining the evolving relationship between leaders and followers.

Keywords Barack Obama, Leadership, John McCain, Presidential leadership, Speech imagery

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Presidential leadership in the USA has received considerable attention from leadership researchers (Bligh and Kohles, 2009; Williams *et al.*, 2012; Beck *et al.*, 2012). The 2008 presidential campaign forms the particular focus of this study and has

emerged as one of the most analysed and debated campaigns ever. A variety of explanations have been proposed as to why Obama won the 2008 US Presidential Election. These explanations focus on the state of the economy (Fair, 2010), cynicism with politics and dissatisfaction with Republicans, and in particular, outgoing President George W. Bush (Bligh and Kohles, 2009), and the demonstration of charismatic leadership by Obama (Williams *et al.,* 2009). However, the 2008 US Presidential campaign may perhaps best be remembered for its inspiring speeches and striking use of speech imagery. Increasingly, researchers such as Green and Roberts (2012) and Shamir and Eilam (2004) have placed emphasis on the importance of language and imagery in how a leader presents themselves to their followers and wider audience. Indeed, Burdett (1999) argues that language creates imagery and imagery in turn shapes behaviour. He maintains that the creation of new language and imagery is an important signal of change to followers and an indication of a discontinuity with the past order. Research has also revealed the importance of different dimensions of language in explaining perceptions of leadership (Bligh *et al.*, 2004; Fiol *et al.*, 1999; Mio *et al.*, 2005). For their part, Tan and Wee (2002) have argued that leaders use language to create meaning, and align themselves with the values, interest and beliefs of followers. Thus, through the use of language, frames and imagery, leaders are inviting followers to enter a "world of connections, a nexus of values" (MacLeod and Webb, 2009, p. 5).

The purpose of this research is to investigate the use of images in the campaign speeches of Obama and McCain. More specifically, the following research questions were examined:

RQ1. What speech images were used by Barack Obama and John McCain during the 2008 US Presidential Election?

RQ2. Were there significant differences in how speech images common to both candidates were used during the 2008 US Presidential Election?

In the research, we pay particular attention to the linguistic style features of the speech images used by both Obama and McCain. We investigate four linguistic features: the use of images that talk about self and talk about others, the emphasis of positive and negative emotions in these images, the emphasis on past and present vs future, and the focus on family vs friends. We also focused on how frequently these images were utilised over the campaign. We pursue this investigation through analyses of a total of 264 speeches delivered by both candidates during the election campaign. Our methodological approach involves the use of content analysis which we considered appropriate given our focus on phrases rather than words.

Our research makes two primary contributions to the literature on leadership. First, by analysis and comparison of the images used by two presidential candidates within a specific context (a presidential election), we reach some conclusions as to the role that images may have played in determining the outcome of the election. We are however conscious that images represent one of the rhetorical tools that leaders can use. Second, we utilise an inductive approach to theory generation to advance propositions that are derived from our data analysis, therefore extending our understanding of the role and use imagery in leadership speeches. We begin by reviewing what the current leadership literature reveals about the role of language and imagery. We then describe our methodology and the results of our content analysis. Finally, we discuss the contribution of our findings for leadership theory and practice.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Role of imagery in articulating a leader's vision

The capacity to articulate a compelling vision is considered an important component of leadership (Naidoo and Lord, 2008). This vision, in order to be effective in enhancing the perceived qualities of a leader, must create a discrepancy between the status quo; be carefully crafted in terms of content; and be delivered effectively (Howell and Frost, 1989; Davis and Gardner, 2012). Imagery plays an important role in helping followers understand and identify with the vision of a leader. Bennis and Nanus (1985, p. 33) argued that vision represents the "capacity to relate a compelling image to a desirable state of affairs" and that this is an important characteristic of effective leaders. Vision emerges when a leader after much detailed and thorough analysis begins to recognise interesting patterns and new ideas. In this regard, the vision which emerges and the way in which it is presented must be novel and represent a break from establish modes of working (Kotter, 1988). A variety of scholars (Shamir *et al.*, 1993; Bligh and Kohles, 2009; Tan and Wee, 2002) argue that for images to be effective they must incorporate key elements: reference history and tradition; focus on collective identity; reinforce the collective efficacy; emphasise the similarity of a leader with followers; establish values and morals; make reference to faith and morals; and make appeals to the self-efficacy of followers. Thus, imagery offers the leader an opportunity to capture key ideas and thoughts in a simple frame which is easy for followers to remember and retain. Both Densten (2002) and Bass (1985) have emphasised that leaders use mental images to direct followers towards an idealised future in which current challenges have been overcome. They posit that imagery helps move followers towards both greater sensemaking and strategic action. Indeed, Barge and Fairhurst (2008) have theorised that the interaction of leaders and followers leads to a co-construction of the vision and discourse, with followers helping forge the leader's identity. Leaders, with the help of followers, often occupy the role of "reducers" distilling complex ideas and conflicting priorities down into crisp clear images and messages.

Where leaders use appropriate images, these can perform a number of important functions in terms of the efficacy of the image communicated. Scholars have highlighted a number of the important functions of imagery, including: gaining the attention of followers (Bligh *et al.*, 2004; Fiol *et al.*, 1999), eliciting strong emotional reactions (Emrich *et al.*, 2001; Seyranian and Bligh, 2008), enabling the leader to appeal to feelings and intuition (House *et al.*, 1991; De Cremer, 2002) and facilitating high levels of comprehension and memory elaboration amongst followers (Bligh *et al.*, 2005; Naidoo and Lord, 2008).

2.2 Role of imagery in helping a leader frame reality

The concept of framing was proposed by Bateson (1972) and later developed by Goffman (1974) as an important tool that can be used by leaders to help followers focus on problems and challenges as well as structuring solutions. Tannen (2005) proposed that framing is a concept that can explain how leaders signal to followers what they are thinking and doing when they communicate their vision within a particular context. Fairhurst (2011) argued that framing helps leaders become sensitive to the important role of communication and effective leadership. Gliem and Janack (2008) have identified the importance of framing as a mechanism to emphasise issues of importance and create relationships between concepts and ideas that may not have previously existed. Imagery can help leaders promote a sense of psychological proximity to or distance from a particular reality. Implicitly bound up in the concept of framing is movement

from one reality to a new reality. Change often involves unsettling and uncertainty and that an important leadership task is deciding upon how to frame such changes (Thomas and Thomas, 2011). Change needs to be communicated sensitively in a way which invites supporters and critics to engage collaboratively and constructively towards reaching a common goal. Kotter (1999) and Tait (1996) caution however that the imagery and language used to frame current reality should not be overly complex or conceptual, but needs to articulate hopeful aspirations for the future.

2.3 Role of imagery in inspiring followers

Scholars have emphasised the important role that images can play in generating enthusiasm amongst followers (Yukl, 2002) and stimulating followers intellectually (Charbonneau, 2004). Images have a role in conveying emotional meaning and in triggering emotional responses in followers (Kantabutra, 2010). Images can also help a leader communicate important beliefs and values which help followers identify with the character of the leader. In a study of charismatic leaders, Willner (1984, p. 152) found that biblical imagery, folk tales, rhyme and metaphors are crucial in "rhetorical spellbinding". Such techniques respond to the need for intellectual stimulation amongst followers and often elevate the leader's stature to greater heights. The imagery and vision communicated by the leader helps to develop followers; making them more autonomous and competent and helping them uphold higher levels of morality in the pursuit of valued outcomes (McGuire and Hutchings, 2007). A study by Emrich *et al.* (2001) found that the use of imagery in presidential speeches resulted in more positive ratings of the charisma of a president amongst followers. Spreitzer *et al.* (1999) have argued that imagery, when associated with the communication of vision has an important psychological empowerment effect. In this regard, leaders will often use and display deviant emotions to create dissonance and shake followers out of a happy cosy complacency pushing them towards social activism (Sandlin and Callahan, 2009). Consequently, Tait (1996) recognises the importance of reiterating the vision regularly in clear simple terms to reinforce the core elements contained within it. This regular restatement of vision reassures followers and gives them confidence in the unshakeable character of a leader. Therefore speeches that contain more images using appropriate and linguistic characteristics have greater potential to inspire followers because of their power to evoke emotional connections with the leader when conveying a message.

3. Method

3.1 Sample

Our sample included the 160 speeches by Obama and the 104 speeches by McCain delivered during the 2008 presidential campaign. We selected all speeches delivered by both candidates during the period from 10 February 2007 (when Obama announced his candidacy for the presidency) to 4 November 2008 (election night). For information, McCain announced his candidacy on 25 April 2007. The speeches of both candidates were obtained from the websites: www.barackobama.com, www.procon.org and www.politico.com. Most of the speeches included in the analysis were major campaign speeches, speeches associated with candidate announcements, primary and caucus and victories, town hall meeting speeches and speeches that addressed major national issues such as foreign policy, global affairs, energy and the economy. We confined our analyses to speeches delivered to a physical audience rather than radio addresses. We included all major speeches where that speech was listed on the relevant website as

one of the candidates major speeches, and following Bligh *et al.* (2004) where it represented a specific effort by the candidate "to address as many Americans as possible" (p. 564). We only included speeches that had a minimum length of 500 words.

The average length of the Obama campaign speeches included in the sample was 2,721 words, compared to 2,176 words for John McCain. Our study provides an extension of studies conducted by Bligh *et al.* (2004). However, rather than focusing on the choice of words used by the candidate as in the case of Bligh *et al.* studies, we focused on speech imagery.

3.2 Data analysis

In order to identify the speech images used by the two candidates, both descriptive coding and axial coding approaches were applied. Descriptive coding is a first cycle coding method which allows the researcher to assign speech bundles and phrases into particular categories (Saldana, 2009). To conduct the descriptive coding process, an initial stratified sample of 20 speeches was selected from each candidate – with speeches chosen from across the timeframe of the campaign. In doing so, the advice of Krippendorff (1980) was followed who found that increasing the initial sample size beyond 20 does not yield significant changes in categorisation. The descriptive coding process resulted in the identification of 16 speech images for Obama and 17 speech images for McCain. Using these categories, all remaining speeches for each candidates were then coded. In order to refine the first cycle categorisation, a second cycle coding method called axial coding was employed. Corbin and Strauss (2008) view axial coding as a natural progression from descriptive coding, allowing researchers to sharpen up their initial categorisation through relating concepts to each other. The axial coding process reduced the number of speech images to 12 for Obama and 11 for McCain. A total of eight speech images are common to both candidates with four speech images unique to Obama and three speech images unique to McCain. The first and second cycle coding process was supported through the use of NVivo 9 software by QSR International.

To ensure the reliability of our coding criteria, the third author coded a random sample of 15 per cent of all the speeches of both candidates (40 speeches in total) and compared the resulting coding to that of the first author. Cohen's κ was calculated to assess the level of inter-rater reliability. According to Landis and Koch (1977), values between 0.0 and 0.2 represent slight agreement; between 0.2 and 0.4 represent fair agreement; between 0.4 and 0.6 represent moderate agreement; between 0.6 and 0.8 represent substantial agreement; and between 0.8 and 1.0 represent almost total agreement amongst the coders. In the present study, Cohen's κ values were calculated for the 12 speech images used by Barack Obama and the 11 speech images used by John McCain. Following the advice of Cassell *et al.* (2006) and Stemler (2004), nine of the 23 speech images exhibiting a Cohen's κ value of below 0.55 were excluded from the analysis. To assess the consistency of the coding of both raters, the Cronbach's α statistic was calculated for each speech image. All of the speech images exhibiting a κ score of above 0.55 also demonstrated a Cronbach's α score of above 0.7, indicating a high level of consistency and inter-rater reliability. The results of the coding are provided in Table I. We found that 14 of the speech images meeting the desired standards of reliability: five images were common to both McCain and Obama. Table II provides definitions of all the speech images.

In order to achieve a greater level of comparison between both candidates, we utilised a linguistic inquiry methodology (Pennebaker *et al.*, 2003). In their research, Pennebaker *et al.* (2003) argue that speech particles serve as important markers of

	Images used by Barack Obama in speeches							Images used by John McCain in speeches					
	Yes	No	Both	No mention	Cohen's κ	Cronbach's α		Yes	No	Both	No mention	Cohen's κ	Cronbach's α
Significant speech images common to both candidates							*Significant speech images common to both candidates*						
American dream	2	1	5	16	0.68	0.82	American dream	1	0	1	14	0.64	0.79
Wall Street	2	1	4	17	0.65	0.79	Wall Street	0	0	15	1	1.0	1.0
Images of decline	5	0	6	13	0.57	0.78	Images of decline	2	2	4	10	0.71	0.85
Broken politics	8	0	9	7	0.60	0.79	Broken politics	0	2	6	8	0.75	0.87
Personal history	4	1	12	7	0.57	0.74	Personal history	1	1	7	7	0.75	0.86
Significant speech images unique to Barack Obama							*Significant speech images unique to John McCain*						
Religion	1	0	2	21	0.78	0.88	Real examples	1	0	4	11	0.85	0.92
History	2	0	12	10	0.83	0.92	World problems	2	0	3	11	0.67	0.83
Non significant							*Non significant*						
11 September	2	2	4	16	0.56**	0.79**	War and veterans	6	1	5	4	0.2**	0.39**
Globalisation	3	3	3	15	0.33**	0.50**	Values	1	6	9	0	0.52**	−0.38***
Unity	7	2	4	11	0.22**	0.39**	History	2	4	7	3	0.21**	0.36**
Real examples	6	3	5	10	0.23**	0.38**	Globalisation	2	2	1	11	0.18**	0.30**
Convictions about change	6	4	9	5	0.15**	0.26**							

Note: **Removed from analysis due to low Cohen's κ value (<0.55)

Table I.
Inter-rater agreement
and reliability by
speech images

Speech image	Description
American dream	Phrases emphasising the importance of the American dream and encompassing the nation that "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" "regardless of social class or circumstances of birth"
Broken politics	Phrases emphasising the unfilled promises made by the US politicians, the broken system of government in Washington and the corrupt practices of lobbyists
Convictions about change	Phrases exploring the rhetoric of change, the belief that change is possible, the renewal of spirit, restoration of confidence and hope for the future
Globalisation	Phrases expressing concern about the competition posed by China and India through advances in information and communication technology and the requirement of the US to up-skill and improve education standards
History	Phrases making reference to historical examples including pearl harbour, the great depression, Martin Luther King, slavery and examples from presidential history
Images of decline	Phrases expressing concern about providing examples of stagnant economic growth, rising every day costs, job losses, foreclosures and declining incomes
Personal history	Phrases locating examples from candidate and his family, giving background to candidate upbringing, and linking family to struggles of ordinary people
Real examples	Phrases referring to particular citizens from across the US faced with job losses, foreclosures, lack of adequate healthcare or loss of personal entitlements
Religion	Phrases making references to religion including specific scripture passages and bible characteristics
11 September	Phrases referencing values of security, patriotism, loss of innocence, and the need to devise new strategies to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century
Unity	Phrases referencing the need to unite people of all faiths, races, ages, sexual orientations and political affiliations
Values	Phrases referencing values such as freedom, honour, decency, respect, self-reliance, independence, peace, courage, faith and a better future
Wall Street	Phrases referring to the greed of Wall Street and corruption within the financial system
War and veterans	Phrases making reference to the war on terror, Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, First and Second World Wars. Also includes references to veterans and their welfare
World problems	Phrases making reference to issues such as famine, war, drought, instability, lack of education, skill shortages, etc. in different parts of the world

Table II.
Speech images used in Obama and McCain campaign speeches and sample phrases

emotional states, social identity and cognitive style. They maintain that a speaker's linguistic style reveals aspects of the speaker's character, their relationship with their audience and the speaker's own level of self-awareness and understanding. The use of linguistic patterns can also indicate affiliation with particular communities or issues. We analysed the linguistic characteristics of each speech image using content analysis across four categories: first person singular and plural pronouns (e.g. "we" "our" and "us" fall into the first person plural category); the use of positive and negative emotions in the image (e.g. "happy", "good" and "pretty" fall into the positive emotions category whereas "tired", "disappointed" and "broken" fall into the negative category); an emphasis on past, present and future (e.g. "broken failed policies", "economic struggles" and "plan and grow the economy for the future"); an emphasis on family and friends (details of family members, references to family background). In doing so, it is posited that linguistic inquiry can shed light on important psychological dimensions (positive

and negative emotions), relativity dimensions (time, space, motion dimensions) as well as relationship dimensions (personality, family, relationship with others), thus providing critical insights into important leadership dynamics.

4. Results
In the results section, we focus on the five speech images that were common to both candidates and look at the linguistic variation in how these speech images were used by the two candidates. The analysis of the speech imagery is organised under three key themes: describing a positive vision of the future; creating a sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo and increasing the identification of the leader with followers.

4.1 Describing a positive vision for the future
Through the use of imagery, leaders will try to present a more positive view of the future. Seyranian and Bligh (2008, p. 67) have argued that a positive vision can "imbue followers with increased group-based esteem to accomplish the vision". Both Obama and McCain used the speech image of the American dream during the 2008 Presidential campaign to present a positive vision of the future.

4.1.1 American dream. Shamir *et al.* (1993) and Seyranian and Bligh (2008) have proposed that leaders will describe their positive vision for the future with imagery rather than through concepts, and they will increasingly reference the future. Our analyses reveal that both Obama and McCain used the image of the American dream to articulate their vision for the future. Obama uses the speech image of the American dream to encourage inclusivity and togetherness. In contrast, John McCain uses the American dream image in terms of hope and opportunity and the belief that that America enables individuals to transform their future prospects and develop their potential through hard work and self-belief.

Speeches delivered by both candidates do however exhibit differences in language. Obama uses "we" to signal inclusivity and a desire to share the task whereas McCain uses "I" to highlight actions that will be taken by him to restore the American dream. A *t*-test conducted for the use of inclusive language (notably the term "we") confirms that this difference between the candidates is significant ($t = 2.744, p = 0.009$). MacLeod and Webb (2009) contrasts the strict father values (free markets, lower taxes, small government) advocated by Republicans to the nurturing parent values of democrats (broad prosperity, effective government and mutual responsibility) and this distinction becomes apparent in the speeches of both candidates. Through the American dream, Obama was able to emphasise communitarian values and that America is not a collection of "red states" and "blue states" but formed the USA, highlighting that the American dream is a shared collective aspiration for all the people. For instance, in one speech, Obama states: "America is the sum of our dreams. And what binds us together, what makes us one American family, is that we stand up and fight for each other's dreams, that we reaffirm that fundamental belief – I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper – through our politics, our policies, and in our daily lives. It's time to do that once more. It's time to reclaim the American dream" (7 November 2007).

4.2 Creating a sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo
Leaders will sometimes use images that create a sense of dissatisfaction with the current situation. Bligh *et al.* (2004) and Shamir *et al.* (1994) have proposed that in order to generate dissatisfaction amongst followers with the status quo, leaders may reinterpret

what led to the status quo and use language that will arouse emotional dissatisfaction in followers. Both Obama and McCain used three images to communicate dissatisfaction and make reference to the past and present: broken policies, images of decline and Wall Street.

4.2.1 Broken politics. The failure of the political system and a promise to tackle corruption in Washington was a key image deployed by both Obama and McCain to create dissatisfaction with the status quo. The use of these images fitted in with the overall sense of disillusionment with politics experienced at that time by the US public. Winter (1987) argues that the appeal of leaders is often connected to how well their motives fit the motive imagery of the times. Both McCain and Obama worked hard to convince the American people of their ability to reform and repair the political system. Both Obama and McCain demonstrated empathy with the public through highlighting emotions such as tiredness, brokenness and disappointment and the urgency attached to bring about reform of the political system. In relation to the speech image of broken politics, McCain's prescription to followers to fight corruption, special interests and selfishness echoes Seyranian and Bligh's (2008) research that leader's use of action-oriented language is often associated with an attempt to inspire followers towards achieving their vision and goals. In this regard, McCain emphasises his absolute conviction and resolute determination to eradicate corruption and wasteful spending in Washington. In one speech, he says: "In 21 months, during hundreds of speeches, town halls and debates, I have kept my promise to level with you about my plans to reform Washington and get this country moving again. As a senator, I've seen the corrupt ways of Washington in wasteful spending and other abuses of power, and as president I'm going to end them – whatever it takes" (6 October 2008).

In contrast to McCain, Obama used images that placed much of the responsibility for broken politics on the "failed policies of George W. Bush" (28 August 2008). He acknowledges the failure of both republicans and democrats to come together to address political system failures and to end the power of lobbyists and special interest groups. Obama's response to the problem of broken politics was to challenge Americans to come together and fight for change. His language is very inclusive and incorporates a direct appeal for change: "In every election, politicians come to your cities and your towns, and they tell you what you want to hear, and they make big promises, and they lay out all these plans and policies. But then they go back to Washington when the campaign's over. Lobbyists spend millions of dollars to get their way. The status quo sets in. And instead of fighting for healthcare or jobs, Washington ends up fighting over the latest distraction of the week. It happens year after year after year. Well this is your chance to say 'Not this year'. This is your chance to say 'Not this time'. We have a choice in this election" (22 April 2008).

A *t*-test for the use of inclusive language in the speeches of Obama and McCain confirms significant differences between both candidates, with Obama being more likely to promote a joint problem-solving approach ($t = 3.340$, $p = 0.002$).

4.2.2 Images of decline. The fragile state of the American economy represents a second image used by both candidates to create a sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo. In presenting a desired future state characterised by prosperity and improved jobs and living standards, McCain emphasised his plan for the future and how he would tackle the economic problems. In contrast, Obama adopted more inclusive language (use of "we" and "our") which helps demonstrate empathy and builds greater connectivity to followers. Fiol *et al.* (1999) argued that use of inclusive language can help build trust between the leader and followers as well as stress a sense of similarity and communal

social identity. The use of inclusive language can help move followers from a neutral to an active state and reassuring them that moving away from convention is both safe and desirable. In his use of this image, the speeches of Obama show a counterpointing between despair and hope. For their part, Gliem and Janack (2008) argue that the use of light and darkness within Obama's speeches act as a mechanism for posing a choice that needs to be made by the American people. They maintain that the contrast pushes followers towards a decision, leaving little room for hesitancy. This is revealed in the following Obama speech extract: "The credit crisis has left businesses large and small unable to get loans, which means they can't buy new equipment, or hire new workers, or even make payroll for the workers they have. In households across the country, it's getting harder and harder to get a loan for that new car or that startup-business or that college you've dreamed of attending. Wages are lower than they've been in nearly a decade […] I know these are difficult times. I know folks are worried. But I believe that we can steer ourselves out of this crisis because I believe in this country. Because this is the United States of America. This is a nation that has faced down war and depression; great challenges and great threats" (17 October 2008).

A t-test for the use of inclusive language highlighted significant differences between the candidates, with Obama employing a more inclusive approach ($t = 4.818$, $p = 0.000$).

4.2.3 Wall Street. The third image used to create a sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo focused on Wall Street. This was particularly in evidence at the latter stages of the presidential campaign of both candidates. Ford *et al.* (2010) have argued that economic matters took certain stage in Obama's speeches from September 2008 onwards due to eight months of consecutive job losses and the collapse of Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch and AIG bank. Both candidates used the economic crisis as a vehicle for calling for reform of the financial institutions and the imagery used is one of putting an end to corruption, greed and reckless conduct. Naidoo and Lord (2008) have revealed that for leaders in crisis situations, imagery can help shift followers away from anxiety and despair, towards engaging in actions in line with the leader's vision. Linguistically, both candidates acknowledge the pain and suffering caused by the financial crisis, but offer hope for a new future. McCain compared the reform needed on Wall Street to that needed in Washington, whereas Obama prioritised Wall Street over Main Street. Comparing Wall Street to Main Street allowed Obama to connect directly with the experiences of ordinary Americans and his appeal to work together as a community and nation. Savoy (2010) has demonstrated that job creation was a prominent feature of the speeches by Obama and McCain in the latter stages of the election campaign. Typical of Obama's reference to Wall Street and Main Street is the following extract: "What this crisis has taught us is that at the end of the day, there is no real separation between Main Street and Wall Street. There is only the road we're travelling on as Americans – and we will rise or fall on that journey as one nation; as one people" (8 October 2008).

Interestingly, no significant differences were found in relation to inclusive language in relation to this speech image – however, the mean score for McCain was slightly higher than Obama on this category ($t = -0.846$, $p = 0.403$).

4.3 Increasing the identification of the leader with followers
A frequently used strategy by leaders is to emphasise that they are similar in "background, experiences, and values" (Shamir *et al.*, 1994) to potential followers. Seyranian and Bligh (2008) described the efforts of leaders to demonstrate a sense of belonging to collectivity and proposed that they are representative and can act as a role model. We found that both

Obama and McCain used their personal background to communicate a sense of similarity to followers. Consistent with the extensive research (Berscheid and Reis, 1998; Cialdini and Frost, 1998) on the functions of creating a sense of similarly to followers, leaders can increase the extent to which to which they are perceived as alternative and liked by followers and it can also impact their influence.

4.3.1 Personal history. Obama consistently used his personal history as an image to position himself and his family as ordinary Americans connected to the experiences of small-town America. Rowland (2010) argues that Obama used references to family to emphasise core values of hard work, community and service to others. Indeed, Shamir and Eilam (2004) argue that leader's autobiographies should not be viewed as windows to the leader's actual lives or history, but as texts that operate at the time of their telling. In the case of Obama, his discussion of family can be considered as an attempt to show his connectedness to American ideals, the American dream and the experiences of ordinary Americans. In his speeches, we were introduced to the backgrounds of seven family members who come from diverse ethnic backgrounds and illustrate different stands of the American experience. Rowland and Jones (2007) argued that Obama's unique blend of cultural strands allowed him to create and mould a shared identity, thus helping him draw together a diverse audience. In this way, leaders often act as "entrepreneurs of identity", constructing a group identity and highlighting important values (Reicher and Hopkins, 2001). We are thus introduced to Obama's struggles as a community organiser in Chicago, his mother's need for food stamps, his grandfather's service in the army and his father-in-law's diagnosis with multiple sclerosis as examples of how Obama's family life is linked to the experience of ordinary Americans.

In contrast, McCain's discussion of his personal history is limited to his family's service in the US Navy. He made specific references to his grandfather, father and his own service to the navy, emphasising his experience to act as commander-in-chief. McCain also used images that emphasised his experience in the Senate. Williams *et al.* (2012) found that experience was the second most cited reason after "economy" why voters opted for McCain. McCain also used his experience and naval background to emphasise important values. Leaders change the salience or hierarchy of values and identities within the follower's self-concept, increasing the probability that these values and identities will be implicated in action (Shamir *et al.*, 1993). In one speech, McCain uses these images: "When I was in prison in Vietnam, I like other of my fellow POWs, was offered early release by my captors. Most of us refused because we were bound to our code of conduct, which said those who had been captured the earliest had to be released the soonest […] To love your country, as I discovered in Vietnam, is to love your countrymen. Those men and women are my brothers and sisters, my fellow Americans, an association that means more to me than any other. As a private citizen or as your President, I will never, never do anything to dishonour our obligations to them and their families" (28 June 2008).

A *t*-test for the use of the use of inclusive language yielded no significant differences here – however, this is likely due to the personal nature of the candidates background, whereby use of "I" is more appropriate in this context.

5. Discussion
The 2008 presidential election presented a valuable context to study the rhetoric of both presidential candidates and how they used imagery to connect with their potential followers and demonstrate their capability to be effective leaders. Our research

provides tentative support for the notion that the use of images that resonate with potential followers can contribute to their influence. Based on the results summarised above, we advance a number of propositions derived from our data and analyses.

5.1 The role of context in influencing the use of imagery

A complex set of contextual factors surrounded the 2008 election. Williams *et al.* (2012) have argued that the 2008 presidential campaign was a unique moment in US history. These challenges included high unemployment, the subprime mortgage crisis, major problems in the financial system and two major wars. On the political front, there was evidence of major dissatisfaction with the incumbent president, partisan politics and deficits in trust (Bligh and Kohles, 2009). Both candidates were faced with a multiplicity of events, many of which were crisis events. These crisis events provided both candidates with the opportunity to articulate a compelling vision concerning how they were going to cope with these events. In our study, we found that candidates used the image of broken politics to communicate the context of a failing society and the need for change. Second, the American dream image was employed to create hope and reduce uncertainty among the electorate. However, Obama used this image in a different way from the McCain. Obama engaged the imagery of the American dream to build community and cohesion amongst followers in a powerful way. His conceptualisation of the American dream encompasses values of hard work, unity, respect and working towards brighter, more prosperous future. In contrast, McCain's view of the American dream is slightly more individualistic and emphasises success through self-reliance and grasping opportunities as they arise.

Naidoo (2005) found that speeches high on imagery content can make a leaders vision more attractive and elicit from followers a desire to escape a negative situation through going with the vision of a leader. Therefore, we offer the following proposition:

P1. The characteristics of the context are important in explaining the appeal of leader's speech imagery.

5.2 The use of speech imagery in shaping perceptions of the leader

During the campaign presidential candidates have one objective: to establish that they are the best person for the job or president. Therefore the rhetoric of the candidate is important. The 2008 Presidential election took place within the context of a country in crisis. Williams *et al.* (2012) argue that failing public and private institutions, plunging and illiquid credit markets and a crisis of confidence amongst leaders and the general public formed the backdrop to the Presidential campaign. Kiewe (1994) has argued that during a crisis, leaders must initiate a discourse that effectively communicates to followers that they have a vision and course of action to remedy the situation. We found in our analysis that both candidates engaged with the crisis, gave it legitimacy, provided images of decline and dissatisfaction with the status quo, and through such images called on the electorate to support their situations.

Our analysis reveals that Obama, unlike McCain, made repeated use of particular imagery (especially the American dream) over the full duration of the presidential campaign. Numerous studies have emphasised the importance of the meaning behind an image (Awamleh and Gardener, 1999; Bligh and Kohles, 2009). It is equally well established that leaders must have the capacity to explain the context through the use of simple images that have strong emotional appeal. We found that Obama, in

comparison to McCain, used images that emphasised positive inclusive linguistic features. From this analysis, we put forward the following propositions (Table III):

P2(a). Leaders will deploy imagery to describe the context and shape their appeal as an effective leader.

P2(b). Imagery will be used to present a more positive hopeful future.

6. Study limitations

It is very difficult to measure the effectiveness of speech images without taking into account wider factors such as tone of voice, facial expression and level of conviction (Mio *et al.*, 2005). Davis and Gardner (2012) have argued that both the strength of a leader's delivery and their communicative style (including captivating voice, direct eye contact and animated facial expression) can affect follower perceptions of the leader's charisma and likeability. Similarly, Trichas and Schyns (2012) found evidence that a leader's facial expressions can affect the perceptions of the message held by followers – especially where such facial and emotional displays fit an individual's leadership internal schemata or prototypes. A leader's emotional connection with the audience will also elicit a strong affective response from followers. For their part, Sy *et al.* (2005) shows evidence for mood contagion for both positive and negative leader moods. A positive disposition was present among individuals when the leader displayed a positive mood and conversely, a negative disposition among individuals when the leader's mood was negative. Likewise, Barsade (2002) found that exposure to positive moods and tone elicited better task cooperation and less conflict from followers. Thus, speech images alone should not be considered a predictor of follower actions, but need to be considered within a wider contextual situation.

A second obvious limitation relates to the heavy use of speechwriters by Presidential candidates whilst on the campaign trail (Bligh and Kohles, 2009). Mio *et al.* (2005) argue that the use of speechwriters can affect the representation of the leader, but acknowledges that speeches should reflect the leader's values and beliefs. In line with such views, Davis and Gardner (2012) recognise that speechwriters are an inevitable facet of Presidential campaigns but that candidates still exert a strong influence through instructions to speechwriters and their own personal edits. It is however likely that both candidates played an important role in the selection and approval of speech images to be used in their respective campaigns.

7. Conclusion

This research examined the use of imagery and its linguistic characteristics in the campaign speeches of Obama and McCain during the 2008 US Presidential Election. The results reveal that both candidates used similar images, but employed them in different ways linguistically. The use of speech images played an important role in describing a positive vision for the future, creating a sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo and increasing the identification of the leader with followers. In order to achieve these objectives, both candidates used images that emphasised the American dream, broken politics, images of decline, Wall Street and their own personal history. Both candidates differed in how these images were framed, the use of positive and negative images and the language in which these images were captured. Significant differences were proven in relation to the use of inclusive language in speech images employed. Leaders need to demonstrate through their rhetoric that they understand the

Image	Candidate	Frequency of use of image during campaign	Linguistic style features				
			First person singular vs first person plural	Use of positive vs negative emotions	Emphasis on past, present vs future	Family vs friends	t-test for inclusive language (use of "we")[a]
American dream	Obama	Image used throughout the campaign	Use of "we" to signal inclusivity and joint-shared reality	American dream connected to positive emotions of "changing course of history", healing and repair	American dream connected to future better reality	Not applicable	t = 2.744 p = 0.009**
	McCain	American dream imagery not used very often – but mainly used during October/ November 2008	Use of "I" to highlight actions being taken by McCain to restore the American dream	American dream connected to positive emotions of hope and opportunity	American dream connected to future better reality	Not applicable	
Broken politics	Obama	Image used throughout the campaign	Use of "we" to signal inclusion and joint approach to problem-solving	"Tired" and "disappointed" – negative emotions followed by "change" and "choice" – hope for the future	Acknowledges broken failed politics and power (references in particular to George W. Bush) of lobbyists of present – and change and choice for the future	Not applicable	t = 3.340 p = 0.002**
	McCain	Image used throughout the campaign	Use of "they" in reference to American People and use of "I" in relation to problem-solving	Negative emotions of "Broken Politics" and "trust" followed by positive emotions of "repair", "restore" and "serve" politics	Acknowledges special interests, deal-making broken politics, and self-serving behaviour in Washington and promises service to country and fighting vested interests for future	Not applicable	

Table III.
Sample analyses of images used in Obama and McCain campaign speeches and linguistic style features

Table III.

Image	Candidate	Frequency of use of image during campaign	First person singular vs first person plural	Use of positive vs negative emotions	Emphasis on past, present vs future	Family vs friends	t-test for inclusive language (use of "we")[a]
					Linguistic style features		
Images of decline	Obama	Image used throughout the campaign	Use of "you" to highlighting economic decline and "we" to signal inclusivity in problem-solving	Negative emotions of "losses", "prices rising", "struggling", "worried" – following by positive emotions of "choice" and "choose"	Indicates problems and economic struggles of the present followed by "new direction" for the future	Not applicable	$t = 4.818$ $p = 0.000$***
	McCain	Image used from January 2008 onwards	Use of "they" to highlighting economic decline and "I" to signal plan for growing economy	Negative emotions of "worried", "worse" and "cost [...] rising" followed by positive emotions of "more" "better" and "moving"	Indicates the problems and economic struggles of the present followed by "plan to grow this economy" for the future	Not applicable	
Personal history	Obama	Image used throughout the campaign	Use of "I" to discuss personal history and background	Emotions used to portray Obama as man of the people in touch with problems of ordinary citizens	Past experience described	Provides significant detail on 7 different family members including mother, father, wife, grandparents and father-in-law. Limited reference to friends	$t = -1.003$ $p = 0.321$
	McCain	Image used throughout the campaign	Use of "I" to discuss personal history and background	Emotions used to portray McCain as competent commander-in-chief from naval family background	Past experience described	Apart from references to father and grandfather's naval background, most references relate to friends and former naval colleagues	

Image	Candidate	Frequency of use of image during campaign	First person singular vs first person plural	Use of positive vs negative emotions	Emphasis on past, present vs future	Family vs friends	t-test for inclusive language (use of "we")[a]
				Linguistic style features			
Wall Street	Obama	Image mainly used during September-November 2008	Use of "we" to signal inclusion and joint approach to problem-solving	Negative emotions – "hurting" followed by positive emotions of "connected", together", "one-nation" and "one people"	Acknowledges the economic problems being faced and the need to act jointly together	Not applicable	$t = -0.846$ $p = 0.403$
	McCain	Image mainly used during September-November 2008	Mixture of "we" and "I" to indicate shared reality as well as personal experience	Negative emotions of "tough", "strain" and "difficult" followed by "need for a plan"	Acknowledges the economic problems being faced and the need to act as well as his view on a way forward	Not applicable	

Notes: $n = 264$. [a]Independent samples t-test, equal variances not assumed. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$

Table III.

context followers experience and be willing to articulate a hopeful future reality, creating a sense amongst followers that change is both possible and achievable.

Overall, leadership researchers increasingly recognise the importance and potency of speech images and metaphors in the dynamic relationship that exists between leaders and followers. Several researchers have examined the impact of speeches and speech imagery after crisis events such as 11 September (Bligh *et al.*, 2004) and the Oklahoma City federal building bombing (Bucy and Newhagen, 1999), discovering that emotional displays can motivate followers and solidify the leader-follower relationship. Other research has examined the speeches of organisational leaders, examining the use of self-depreciating humour in speeches (Hoption *et al.*, 2013) and the use of motivating language (Sarros *et al.*, 2014). Thus, it is posited that leader speeches provide a fertile ground for conducting research and for examining the evolving relationship between leaders and followers. Techniques such as linguistic inquiry methodology, thematic content analysis and word pattern analysis can help shed light on how leaders construct their own persona and an appealing narrative for followers. It is hoped that future research will continue to investigate speech images used by both organisational and societal leaders and how these images resonate and fit with the leadership prototypes of followers.

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