

The Daily: How Kamala Harris's embrace of BRAT is fueling her marketing strategy

Audio



On today's podcast episode, we discuss what "Brat" means, the significance of the vice president of the United States Kamala Harris putting social media front and center of her

campaign, if riding the "Brat" wave is replicable, and whether it might backfire. Tune in to the discussion with host Marcus Johnson, vice president and analyst Jasmine Enberg and vice president of content Paul Verna.

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Episode Transcript:

Marcus Johnson (00:00):

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Jasmine Enberg (00:18):

Because X and Facebook are the two social platforms that we associate the most with politics, and Republican nominee Trump of course is very popular on X, but it's on TikTok where Kamala is really shining.

Marcus Johnson (00:38):

Hey gang, it's Monday, August 5th. Jasmine, Paul, and listeners, welcome to Behind the Numbers Daily an EMARKETER podcast. I'm Marcus still. Today I'm joined by two folks, let's meet them. We start with our vice president and principal analyst who covers everything social media, based in California, it's Jasmine Enberg.

Jasmine Enberg (00:55):

Hey Marcus. Hey everyone.

Marcus Johnson (00:57):

Hello there. Also joined by one of our vice presidents of content, who covers everything advertising, media and technology. He's based on the other coast just north of New York City, it's Paul Verna.

Paul Verna (01:09):

Great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Marcus Johnson (01:11):

Hey, fellow. Yes, indeed. Today's fact: how Americans average height and weight has changed over time. So my [inaudible 00:01:21] party data, which is the final segment of our Friday show, was about athletes this past Friday, and how their bodies have changed in the last 50

years. Last five zero years. And Susie, who's on the show, asked how does that look compared to average people? So here are those numbers. According to the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics, the average height of people aged 20 to 74 years old. Here it is. We'll do height first, 1960 to 2018, so basically 60 years. Men, same height. So 5'8" on average. The average height for a woman has also stayed the same, 5'3". Meanwhile, the average weight for men has significantly increased from 1960 to 2018, going from 166 pounds to 200. So 34 pounds heavier. The average weight of women increased by nearly as much, 30 pounds from 140 to 171.

Jasmine Enberg (02:23):

Wow.

Marcus Johnson (02:24):

Yes. Staggered that the height's not changed though.

Jasmine Enberg (02:27):

I am too.

Marcus Johnson (02:27):

Because in athletes I think for basketball players it had gone up the most. I think it was they used to average 6'2", they now average 6'5". Same as swimmers, I think swimmers had gone up by quite a lot as well. But yeah.

Jasmine Enberg (02:39):

I'd be curious to know how this compares to other countries.

Marcus Johnson (02:42):

Oh, yeah. All right, that's my next one.

Paul Verna (02:44):

Yeah.

Marcus Johnson (02:44):

Jesus.

Paul Verna (02:45):

Absolutely.

Marcus Johnson (02:45):

Never get off this topic.

Paul Verna (02:47):

I'd also be curious to know how it compares maybe if you go back 100 years if there's really been a change in height.

Marcus Johnson (02:54):

Hmm, yeah. Anyway, today's real topic we're talking all about Kamala Harris and brat. Don't panic, we'll explain.

(03:08):

In today's episode, first in the lead we'll cover brat. No "in other news", we need all the extra time to explain what the hell brat means. All right, let's do it folks. Jasmine, do you want to start by telling me... because this was your idea for an episode. Do you want to tell me why? Why this episode? Why did you feel like this was the right topic for this moment?

Jasmine Enberg (03:30):

Yeah. So Paul and I have both been covering political advertising and political marketing from somewhat of a different lens. I've been focused on social media and Paul has taken a much more broader approach to it. But once Kamala Harris announced her candidacy, I felt there was a market shift in political marketing strategies that really needed to be addressed, and so I suggested it to you because I think it has a broader impact in the way that people are engaging with political candidates.

Marcus Johnson (04:02):

So what does brat mean?

Jasmine Enberg (04:04):

Would you like me to explain?

Marcus Johnson (04:09):

I have an idea, but I think I'm wrong. I did some reading, so I might not be wrong, but I'll let go.

Jasmine Enberg (04:13):

So Brat is the name of Charli XCX's album. And in the words of Charli XCX, I'm quoting directly, "Brat says some dumb things sometimes, and is honest, blunt, and a little bit volatile". And so the way that I would explain it is that being brat is about being unapologetically yourself. And these are all different themes that she explores on the album, and Gen Z in particular have really taken to this album and they've renamed this summer "Brat Summer".

Marcus Johnson (04:46):

Okay. So President Biden pulls out of the 2024 election, VP Kamala Harris stepped in, and that's what triggered all this. Folks on social media started mixing songs from musician Charli XCX's album Brat. So she's a 31-year-old Brit from near where I'm from, actually. She's from Cambridge, I'm from down the road. With clips of Kamala Harris. And then it seems like Charli XCX appeared to endorse Harris by writing, "Kamala is brat". And then Harris's campaign embraced the moment, reposting the show of support using the album's signature green color and font in a social media profile posting brat themed memes. And Kat Tenberge and Daysia Tolentino of NBC I think explained it quite well, Jasmine. They were saying, "Brat, which touches on womanhood, insecurity, competition, motherhood, relationships, partying, and other topics debuted June 7th. Since then, social media users have declared that they are celebrating", as you said, "a Brat Summer, meaning they're embracing being earnest and unapologetically themselves". And then Mia Sato of the Verge said "the Brat Summer concept is all of this rolled into one chaotic club energy, mixed with existential questions about life. Brat Summer includes, but is not limited to: annoying your boyfriend, not working, alternating between crisis and unadulterated joy. It's tender and vulnerable, but also a little cocky and snotty. It's called Brat for a reason".

(06:10):

So I think that hopefully sums it up for folks. Jasmine, how significant is it that Kamala put social media front and center of her very recent one, two week old presidential campaign?

Jasmine Enberg (06:22):

Yeah. I mean I started to talk about this already, but it is really significant. I mean social media was already an important part of political marketing strategies, but she's really supercharged that. And for me, just the fact that she needed to introduce herself to voters as quickly and as splashily as possible, and she chose to do a lot of that on social media, really underscores the importance of the channel. And I say that because I think that a lot of times people, including marketers, still underestimate the value and the power of social media and really bringing a message forward clearly and directly to consumers. But even the fact actually that Biden chose X to announce his departure from the race I think is more evidence of that.

Marcus Johnson (06:22):

Mm-hmm.

Jasmine Enberg (07:05):

But what is really interesting here for me is looking kind of at the platforms, because X and Facebook are the two social platforms that we associate the most with politics, and Republican nominee Trump of course is very popular on X, but it's on TikTok where Kamala is really shining. And back in January I wrote that this election was going to be the "TikTok election", and that was for a lot of reasons that had nothing to do with Kamala, but I think it's now truer than ever. And you talked about these already, but within just hours of her announcing her candidacy, I mean TikTok was really flooded with memes and with videos of memorable moments and soundbites from Kamala set to Charli XCX songs from the Brat album. And just to put some numbers on how powerful this really was, Kamala Harris's account gained over 1 million followers within six hours after launching. And then the Biden HQ account had about 405,000 followers in July, but it rebranded to the Kamala HQ account, and today it has 2.7 million followers, which is almost a sevenfold increase in just about 10 days.

Marcus Johnson (08:20):

Wow. I'd read that she'd, in a couple of days, had more followers than he had over five months, and this speaks to that. It does feel like, and I saw this reference, kind of an Obama's social media strategy 2.0. And there was George Washington University Professor Imani M. Cheers saying that so far Harris's digital strategy has felt like an evolution of former President Obama's 2008 campaign, which has been credited with harnessing digital media in novel ways to fundraise and empower volunteers. So that's part of it.

(08:50):

But Paul, another part of it seems to be Harris just being plugged into pop culture. And there was Abigail De Kosnik, an associate professor of Berkeley Center for New Media at the University of California, Berkeley was saying, "Harris is plugged into pop culture in a way that other democratic candidates in the past haven't been. That is a refreshing change for voters who often view Democrats as stayed".

(09:12):

And Allie McCormick, a senior in political communications at George Washington University, was saying, "Kamala brings in such hope and light because she's having fun, and we haven't really had that in politics for a while. I feel very hopeful". It seems like this idea of a breath of fresh air.

(09:26):

That in contrast to something Jamie Cohen, a media professor at Queen's College in New York, saying, "The video mashups seemed to flourish by offering a lighthearted counter to the divisive rage baiting dumpster fire that has grown to characterize political discourse online". So part of it just seems to be the lighthearted nature of this.

Jasmine Enberg (09:43):

Mm-hmm.

Paul Verna (09:44):

Yeah. I mean I think Harris comes through with a lot of authenticity, which is something we haven't seen, certainly among democratic candidates. And I think if you look back to Hillary Clinton's campaign in 2016, it felt very scripted. And in moments when she tried to leverage celebrity culture, like she did with a rally late in her campaign featuring Beyonce, it was very awkward. She mispronounced her name and it felt very pandering.

Marcus Johnson (10:13):

Mm-hmm.

Paul Verna (10:13):

Whereas I think Harris really has owned the space. It's ironic too, because this is maybe a commentary on the age of the other candidates, but Harris is 59 years old. She's not a kid, she's not a Millennial, but she's really tapping into Millennial and Gen Z culture through social media in a way that other candidates haven't since probably Obama.

Marcus Johnson (10:37):

Yeah. I mean it's a 20-year gap between Trump-Biden age and Kamala.

Paul Verna (10:37):

Right.

Jasmine Enberg (10:42):

Yeah. And I mean I would agree with all of that. I mean she comes off as really authentic and genuine as brat, as Charli XCX has said. And while I don't know that she herself is necessarily plugged into internet culture, but she definitely has a team that is, and she's clearly prioritizing that. And so it doesn't feel ingenuine to see this kind of content. She's also really memeable, right? In a good way. And her team, as well as people online really have taken her awkward moments and some of those sound bites like, "you just fell out of a coconut tree" and embraced them and made them into something fun and lighthearted in the earlier point that you were making. And I think the celebrity part is really important too. I mean I think Paul you can talk probably more about what's happening beyond social media with her campaign. But I was watching I think it was her first TV ad, and Beyonce had come out in support of Kamala, and she then used one of Beyonce's songs called Freedom in her first television advertisement. And again, it felt like it was done in a very genuine, authentic way.

Marcus Johnson (11:52):

So to pick up on that point you said she's very memeable, because there's this question of can or should another candidate replicate her approach? Part of me thinks that it's going to be very hard to replicate, and University of Delaware senior Ryan Long who went viral for posting a Charli XCX and Harris mashup says, "Brat is one of the top albums in the world, and it's been huge online. Kamala does such a good job at embodying what people call Brat Summer. The way she presents herself, she's happy, laughing, she'll dance, she's a walking content farm". That seems like these two things coinciding is going to be hard to replicate.

But Jasmine, do you think that this could be possible for this to be recreated in the future by another candidate, or by herself again?

Jasmine Enberg (12:30):

Sure. I do think it's possible. I do think that Kamala Harris is in a unique position to do so and take this approach because of a lot of the reasons that you mentioned. But I mean I think there is a lot of different factors that are playing into this right now. I mean we're seeing the importance of social media and marketing, not just within the political arena, but more broadly. And all of the sort of big things that have happened, including the launch of Brat album, have really helped kind of spur all of this. But it has to be the right person at the right time with the right "trend or content".

Marcus Johnson (13:04):

Yeah. There could be some lessons here in terms of replicating her approach, or doing more with social media. There's a Washington Post article where Jules Terpak, a content creator and digital strategist, was quoted saying, "Trump's campaign had won viral success on TikTok by offering of fly on the wall content of the former president's life. Harris's team could work to provide more raw material for fans online to create their own". So that's one thing they could do. Jasmine, what does this approach say about the campaign's target audience?

Jasmine Enberg (13:34):

I mean clearly she's trying to mobilize young voters. I mean if you look at our estimates, over 70% of Gen Z and almost half of Millennials in the US use TikTok on a monthly basis. It's also where many of them go for news and breaking events. Back in my politics and social media report, I cited a stat from Kagan that said that 77% of Gen Zers, for example, get breaking news and events from social. So it's clear that this is a strategy that is specifically targeted at young people. And then of course the fact that she is leaning on the things that are happening in the world of the internet, embracing Brat Summer. And not just Brat Summer, Femininomenon for example. All of those things taken together makes this a clear play for the youth vote.

Marcus Johnson (14:19):

Mm-hmm. Can this backfire? Is there a world where this has the reverse effect?

Jasmine Enberg (14:25):

Sure. I mean right now Gen Z loves it, there's a lot of enthusiasm. There's always the risk though of over saturation or missing the mark and annoying young people in particular, and trends move very quickly online. And her team is now tasked with all of the same things that brands that work in social media are tasked with, which is keeping up with the pace of social media and then determining what's appropriate to jump on. And it can also be kind of a toxic place and the tide can turn really quickly. And I also think that this strategy isn't necessarily going to be for everybody. She's clearly mobilized young people, generated a lot of enthusiasm, but there's still a lot of undecided voters in swing states who are not Gen Z and who may not be as receptive to this kind of approach.

Marcus Johnson (15:13):

Mm-hmm. Part of the problem here could be that social media it is about the moment, and things happen quickly and it's only just August. So we've got to get through August, September, October, and then start of November. So we've got just over three months left to try to keep up this momentum in social media. Things happen so quick, I can see that being quite difficult to do. And Charlie Warzel of the Atlantic was saying, "The past few weeks have been both an argument over, and an education in, the importance of style and image in the eyes of voters, the press and lawmakers". Should it be about image and style? Maybe not. Does it matter to people? Yes, it seems to. And so maybe that's going to be part of the challenge here is keeping that interest going forward. Paul, what channels or platforms do you think are going to be the big winners in political ad spend because of the Harris campaign?

Paul Verna (16:08):

Definitely CTV is going to... I think a lot of spending is going to shift there. I'll also say that we are not changing our overall political ad spending forecast despite this development, partly because the election was always going to be contentious, it was always going to be fought largely through advertising. So that was sort of priced into the forecast, and we did update it a couple of months ago from the earlier one in December. But within political ad spending, well first off the fact that we're not changing the forecast doesn't mean that spending won't increase, and spending is obviously a function of fundraising. And if you just see the amount of fundraising that's happening right now on the Democratic side, it is much more than I think Biden was on track for. And actually a lot of donors had basically frozen their funds as Biden was deliberating what to do.

Marcus Johnson (17:06):

I saw that in a week the campaign raised \$200 million and signed up close to 200,000 new volunteers.

Paul Verna (17:12):

Yeah. Which is a lot, and that is going to spark more spending. So we may come to a point where we look at the overall forecast differently, but I think the key thing now is looking at CTV. And what's interesting about CTV is that the targeting is much more precise, not just by nature of the medium, but because a lot of ad tech companies have really leaned into CTV targeting and developed much better tools. And this becomes important because there are now some constituencies like the Men for Harris or White Dudes for Harris. So these are targetable groups. If you think about a Biden campaign, because men are the default in the political realm, there would've never been a Men for Biden campaign, much less a White Dudes for Biden. So now you have these groups that are very important to reach because they are either persuadable as far as getting people to change their votes, or persuadable in the sense of just getting them to turn out to vote. So I think CTV is going to be a key factor there.

(18:19):

I also want to cite an opinion from Kara Ullmann, who is head of political issue advocacy in government advertising at Seedtag, which is a contextual advertising company. She's saying that, "We will see a huge increase in ad spending promoting Harris across CTV over the next few months as the Democratic National Committee and her campaign work to unite and rally the party". So I think there's a wide spread perception that CTV is going to be a big beneficiary for the reasons I mentioned, and also just for demographics. I think the Harris campaign has already invigorated the youth vote, but they will do even more of that. I mean they've done it through social media, but they can push even further into that priority or push that agenda even more by advertising on CTV, which as we've talked about before, has a much younger demographic than linear TV.

Jasmine Enberg (19:15):

And the other thing that I would add to that too is I mean I've been talking obviously a lot about TikTok, but the activity that we're seeing there is organic not paid. TikTok doesn't allow political advertising, and so it certainly isn't going to be a beneficiary here. I anecdotally have seen more ads, paid ads, on Instagram for Kamala Harris in the past 10 or so days than I saw throughout Biden's campaign. So obviously I'm an audience of one, but I do envision more

investment from her side into Meta. But if you think about how little a share of Meta's total ad revenues come from political ads, if we're thinking about what platforms are going to benefit the most, it's not going to move the needle all that much for Meta. I think in our estimates, and Paul correct me if I'm wrong, but about 1% is what we're expecting Meta to generate from political ads out of its entire ad revenues for 2024.

Marcus Johnson (20:14):

Interesting. All right folks, well that's where we have to leave the episode for today. Thank you so much for hanging out with me. Thank you to Jasmine.

Jasmine Enberg (20:20):

Thanks for having me.

Marcus Johnson (20:21):

Yes indeed. Thank you to Paul.

Paul Verna (20:22):

Thank you.

Marcus Johnson (20:24):

And thank you to Victoria who edits the show. Stuart runs the team, Sophie does our social media. Thanks to everyone for listening and we hope to see you tomorrow for the Behind the Numbers Daily. That's an EMARKETER podcast.

Paul Verna (20:33):

Have a Brat Summer.

Jasmine Enberg (20:35):

You too, Paul.