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Harris-Trump Debate: What Their Body Language Really Meant, According To An Expert

While the presidential candidates had a lot to say their body language said a lot more, according to the experts

BY PANASHE NYADUNDU PUBLISHED: 11 SEPTEMBER 2024

Kamala Harris and Donald Trump met for the second of the 2024 United States presidential debates on Tuesday night, resulting in an intense 90-minute duel which marked the first time the candidates had met each other, face to face.

Hosted at the National Constitution Centre in Philadelphia and broadcasted live on ABC, millions of viewers from across the US and globe tuned in to watch the debate and to find out who would come out on top.

Right from the beginning, no topic was left unaddressed, from abortion rights and gun control, to the economy and migration. From the memes and soundbites that resulted from the debate, it's safe to say the presidential hopefuls had a lot to comment on and discuss.

However, a lot was said in the unsaid. Between the two presidential hopefuls, their body language revealed a great deal about how they were truly feeling about themselves during he debate, each other and the topics of discussion on offer from the moderators.

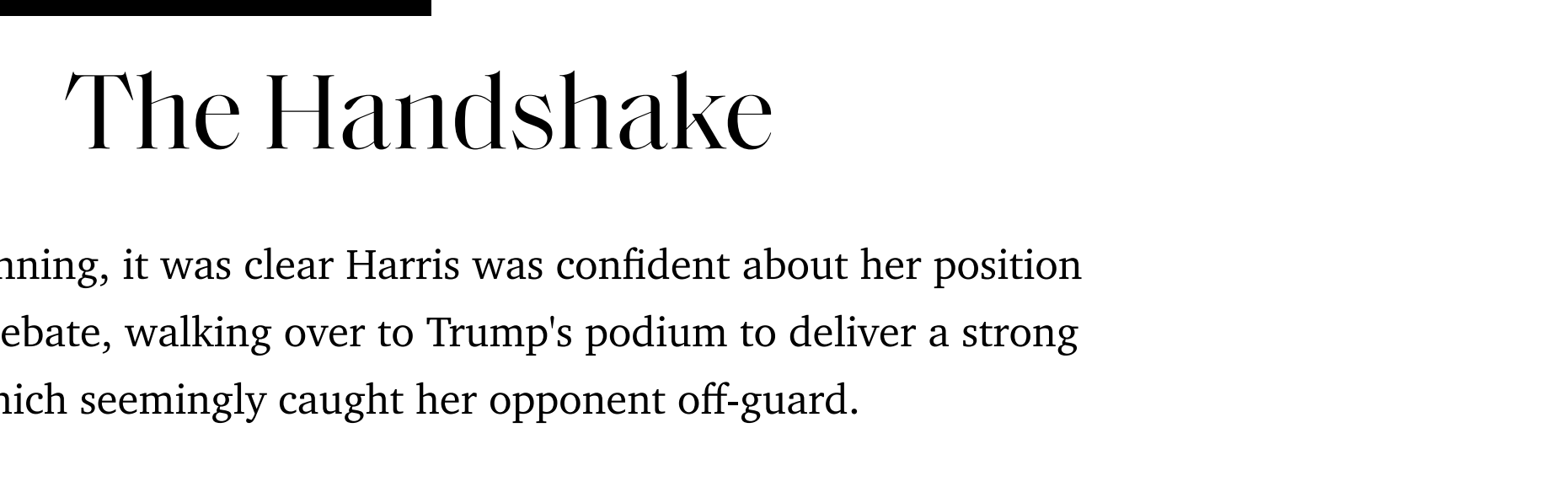
Body language expert and business psychologist Paul Boross tells *ELLE* UK his thoughts and opinions of the body language displayed by both candidates, and the tells both politicians subtly shared.

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The Handshake

From the beginning, it was clear Harris was confident about her position ahead of the debate, walking over to Trump's podium to deliver a strong handshake, which seemingly caught her opponent off-guard.

From a body language perspective, Boross believes that Harris' decision to initiate the handshake was a powerful, calculated move. 'Handshakes signal respect, engagement, and willingness to confront. By taking the lead, Harris conveyed dominance and confidence, subtly positioning herself as the stronger party. Trump's hesitation in reciprocating was telling—his body language appeared briefly unsettled, allowing Harris to assert control early,' he explains. 'This moment wasn't just a gesture of civility; it was an unspoken message of authority, highlighting her readiness to challenge Trump both physically and rhetorically.'

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'By stepping into Trump's space to initiate the handshake, Harris subtly encroached on his personal territory—a classic body language tactic that signals assertiveness and control. This movement shifted the dynamic before a word was spoken, implying she was not just willing to engage, but ready to dominate.'

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'Trump's hesitation in response underscored her command of the situation. Entering his space conveyed that Harris was not intimidated, reinforcing her readiness to challenge him head-on both physically and psychologically, setting the tone for the entire debate.'

Trump's Frustration

Even for the most politically uninitiated, the memeification of Trump's facial expressions (particularly his pursed lips) signalling his frustration have become synonymous with the former president, and were evident throughout the debate. At several times, it seemed he was unable to hide his true emotions of frustration.

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At one point during the debate, Trump paused one of his answers to tell Harris 'I'm talking now', a line Harris used back in 2020 debate against the former Vice President Mike Pence. Boross explains that this rehearsed line was an attempt to assert dominance. 'He tried to inject some levity. However, in the quiet, audience-free studio, it lacked the punch it might have had at a rally. The forced nature of the remark detracted from its intended effect, making it seem unnatural,' he says.

'Harris's composed, almost indifferent reaction amplified this, as her steady gaze and lack of emotional response communicated confidence and control, further diminishing the effectiveness of Trump's attempt to seize the moment.'

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Kamala's Laughter

Throughout the course of the presidential debate, Harris could be seen laughing in response to many of Trump's statements and claims, which the body language expert argues was a tactic used to put Trump down.

'When Donald Trump made the outrageous claim that immigrants were "eating the dogs", Harris's laughter was both spontaneous and strategic. Laughter is a potent tool in humourology—it signals that the claim is too absurd to be taken seriously, effectively dismissing the speaker without direct confrontation.'

Boross states that she laughed to amplify just how outlandish Trump was being. 'By laughing, Harris highlighted the ridiculousness of the comment, positioning herself as calm and rational while subtly undermining Trump's credibility. Her follow-up, "Talk about extreme" cemented her control of the moment, using humour to dismantle the absurdity without engaging in an argument,' he says.

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When Trump later said that he would send Harris a MAGA hat, she once again responded with laughter. 'It diffused the jab,' said Boross. 'Unlike a forced or defensive response, her free and spontaneous reaction demonstrated that she didn't take the comment seriously, subtly undermining its intent to provoke.'

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By laughing, Harris highlighted the ridiculousness of the comment

'Laughter here served as a powerful tool to convey that she viewed his remark as trivial, placing herself above the pettiness of the exchange. This spontaneous humour made her appear more confident and unbothered, reinforcing her poise in the face of his attempted insult.'

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Trump On Kamala's Race

When moderator David Muir asked Trump to elaborate on his previous comments about Harris' racial identity, he backtracked by stating that he 'could care less' about her race. However, Boross thinks his body language proved otherwise. 'The statement was intended to deflect the topic,' he says of Trump's response. 'However, his body language told a different story. His pursed lips—a classic indicator of frustration—denoted anger, while slight shuffling conveyed discomfort, especially when confronted with his past actions regarding race.'

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His pursed lips—a classic indicator of frustration—denoted anger

'Harris's response, marked by a smile that seemed to pity Trump, sent a powerful, unspoken message of superiority. Her subsequent speech on unity and his past racial controversies was a rhetorical masterclass, delivered with poise. Her smile communicated both wit and the humourology principle of disarming an opponent without overt aggression, adding to her dominance of the moment.'

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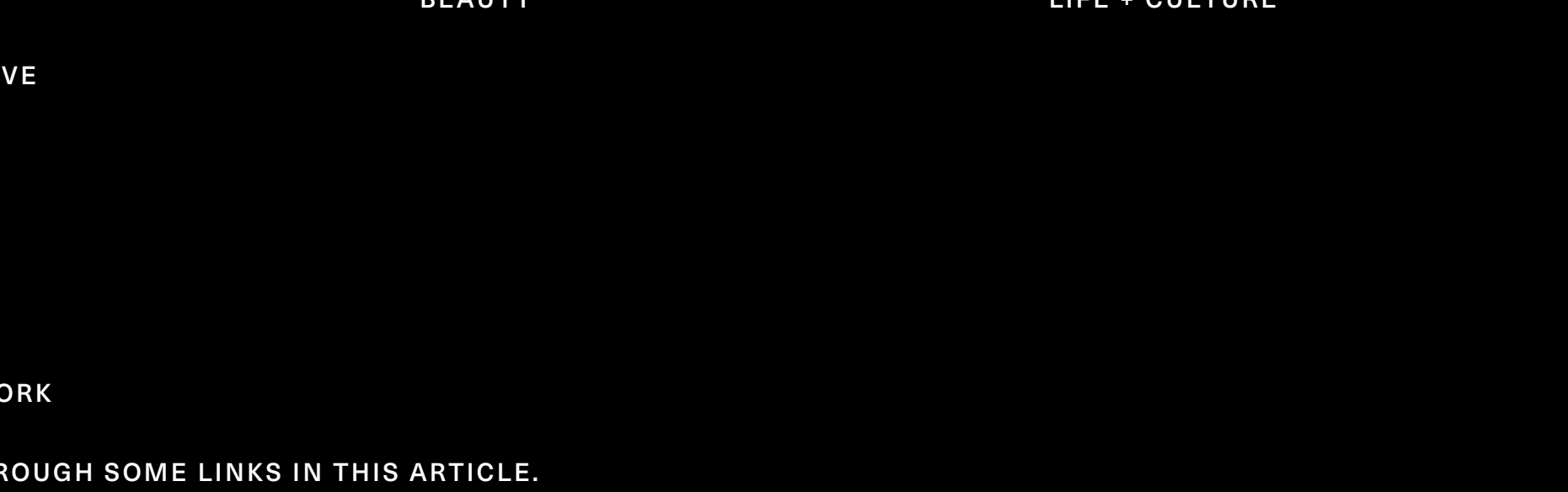
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