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Social media marketing in politics

Publication summary

New digital technologies, including social media, create a new paradigm in political campaigns. Movements powered by the social media have toppled governments and helped others to win elections, giving it a role in the new generation of political marketing campaigns. The research presented explores the use of social media in political marketing campaigns. The empirical study focused on a gap analysis by evaluating how a political party in an emerging economy is currently using social media to propose a social media political marketing framework. The results indicated that a high percentage of the respondents are Internet and mobile technologies literate and utilise social media daily.

Abstract

The focus on political marketing increased after the \$2.23bn expenditure on the 2012 US presidential election campaign and the use of a multitude of marketing techniques. The main objective of this research study was to develop a framework for the use of social media in political campaigns with reference to the South African context. In order to develop this framework, literature from marketing, political marketing and social media were reviewed which culminated in a questionnaire which was sent to members of the main opposition party to identify possible areas of political conversation to evoke voting and participation. The results indicate that the respondents utilise the Internet, mobile technologies and social media and a number of respondents could play a pivotal role in the social media strategy of the political party.

Key words: political marketing, social media marketing, emerging markets.

1. Introduction and objectives

The rise and adoption of the social media as a means of communication to develop and maintain social relationships has ushered in a new paradigm with numerous possibilities within the political system (Himmelboim, Lariscy, TinkHam and Sweetser 2012). The number of active South African individual users' and corporate organisations' presence on the different social media platforms show that it has come of age in South Africa. As at the end of 2012, there were more than 8.6 million South Africans with access to the Internet. It is noteworthy that about 1.3 million of this population earn less than R5000 (\$500) per month and 84% of them are less than 45 years old (Goldstuck2012c). In the South African political landscape, it appears that the citizen would be willing to engage the political structures actively to address the myriad of issues facing the nation. However, it can be argued that the political structures and parties in South Africa are not harnessing the power of the social media. Previous research has addressed the use of social media in politics in the context of developed markets (Himmelboim, et al. 2012; Zuniga, Veenstra, Vraga and Shah 2010) and where movements powered by the social media have toppled governments and helped others to win elections (Abdelhay 2012).

The concept of political marketing, branding and communication goes beyond winning an election in today's democratic and political processes. Strategic communication, in many forms, is considered as a key success factor in political campaigns and processes. The communication includes:

- micro-targeting, where highly customised emails are sent to would-be voters, based on carefully gleaned personal information;
- the campaigns' use of social media to motivate action and involvement; and
- the use of social network platforms, such as Facebook for communication, fundraising, etc. and the ability of political marketing to market ideologies, values and vision as well as political candidates (Baines 2012).

The main objective of this research is to develop a framework for the use of social media in political campaigns with reference to the South African context. In order to develop this framework, literature from marketing, political marketing and social media were reviewed which culminated in a questionnaire which was sent to the members recorded on the database of the opposition party in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine the use of social media amongst the members and to identify possible areas of political conversation to evoke voting and participation.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Political Marketing

The focus of political marketing is to market values, ideologies and candidates of a political party in contrast to the conventional marketing of products and services in commercial organisations (Baines 2012). Savigny (2003) however, argues that marketing managers in the commercial sector and political campaign strategists are fundamentally faced with the same issues. However O'Shaughnessy, Baines, O'Cass and Ormrod (2012) elude that marketing in politics is the political offerings of the party, policies, leaders and issues that the electorate can relate to based on the chosen strategic position of the party and what is perceived to be the orientation of the public and the electorate. This application of core marketing concepts is applicable for winning elections and for nation building, whereby the communication and relationship between the political parties and the other stakeholders allows for dialogue, feedback and participation in the political system (Lilleker 2006).

Political organisations around the world are investing increased time, effort and money in marketing efforts during the election period than ever before. An indication of how huge the spending of political marketing could get is evident in the 2012 presidential election of the USA. It has been reported that the total cost of this election could be as much as an unprecedented \$2.23 billion (Baines 2012).

The political terrain in most of the countries in the world is characterised by intense competition. In part, this can be attributed to the increasing demand from the public, the ease of access to information by the electorate, the evolving behaviour of the voters, the use of technology in politics and the methodical and scientific approaches by competing organisations (Thrassou, Vrontis and McDonald 2009). The application of strategic marketing techniques in politics could offer competitive advantage and a structured framework for success in political campaigns and processes.

2.2 Political communication management

After the creation of a suitable identity that represents the ideology, campaign or candidates of a political party, the organisation needs to design a communication strategy that takes the message to the electorate that wins their vote. Gurau and Ayadi (2011) suggest that this flow of information from the political system through different channels to the electorate and the public can be described as political communication. Communication has been described as a critical element that helps to establish interaction and develop relationships between the political system and the stakeholders (Gurau and Ayadi 2011; Emmer, Wollin and Vowe 2012).

Emmer, et al. (2012) suggest that the design of the right communication strategy would not only help a candidate or political party to win an election, but can also provide the platform for all the stakeholders to engage and participate in the political processes. The political communication landscape experienced a paradigm shift at the turn of the century with the exponential growth of the internet and communication technologies (Howard 2006). Between 1999 and 2007, the use of websites and e-mail to engage the electorate was prominent and some campaigns especially in the USA started to target different parts of the electorate with information that is relevant to them only. The remarkable development in the digital communication technology space from the middle of this same period to date has however opened new opportunities for the political system and the electorate alike. The possible level of participation by the electorate has changed from a consumer of information to active participants in the electoral processes.

2.3 The role of social media in politics

The rise and adoption of the social media as a means of communication, developing and maintaining social relationships has ushered in a new paradigm and unending possibilities within the political system (Himmelboim, et al. 2012). It could be argued that social media might gradually be changing the concept and the degree of political participation. Earlier research describes political participation as the efforts made by citizens to try and influence political processes (Himmelboim, et al. 2012). It can be deduced from the descriptions that the participation of the electorate in the political processes could be from a much lower influence standpoint because their efforts are not organised and the politicians have a louder voice that project the image of their choice.

New digital technologies, including social media, create a new paradigm in political participation. Recent studies show that through new media, bottom-up communication has found its way into political circles in many countries where electorates are more empowered to express and enforce their political views (Zuniga, Veenstra, Vraga and Shah 2010). It has also been observed that social media can be used in the organisation for the efforts of the electorate to gain enough momentum that can affect the political system and structures. Moreover, it is interesting to note that even the minority and previously ostracised groups can now have a meaningful influence in politics (Howard and Park 2012). This can be seen in the increased participation of young adults in political processes, which is directly induced by their use of the social media (Baumgartner and Morris 2010).

The unprecedented wave of political change seen in the Arab nations, especially in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and some other has been accredited to the social media (Howard et al. 2011; Abdelhay 2012). The political structures in the region, underestimated the influence and effectiveness of the social media as a platform for active political participation (Zuniga et al. 2010; Howard and Parks 2012). As a result, the dictatorial rules in the region were replaced by democracy through the use of social media as a platform for political participation (Howard and Parks 2012). This was achieved by the

use of social media and networks like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube as a platform for internal education, political discussions, mobilisation and seeking the attention of the international communities to tell the true and undeniable stories (Howard and Hussain 2011).

Movements powered by the social media have toppled governments and helped others to win elections, giving it a role in the new generation politics, which cannot be ignored. The unprecedented political change in several countries shows the ability of digital technologies to facilitate discussions and induce collective actions (Abdelhay 2012). Other aspects of this new paradigm in politics is the direct link that exists between discussion of politics and political participation (Zuniga et al. 2010) and the connection between technology diffusion, digital media and political change (Howard and Park 2012). The evidence of this is the involvement of a new generation of digitally connected people in political participation. Social media is effective because it creates the illusion of a personal connection which makes it appear 'apolitical'.

2.4 Uses of social media in politics

The place and role of social media as a strategic marketing tool in politics is becoming increasingly important and inevitable. More specifically, it is becoming the tool of choice in political communication and has notably been used successfully to drive collective action in social movements with unprecedented goals. Howard et al. (2011) explained how the Arab spring made use of social media. Twitter was used for mobilisation, Facebook was used to create, maintain and nurture the network of people, while YouTube and other video oriented social network sites enabled the ordinary citizen journalism that broadcasted the stories beyond any form of borders. The social media were used by the ordinary citizens during the Arab spring to engage the political structures; however, literature also shows that political structures that have engaged their citizens with the social media follow the same pattern. Social media have been used in the political context in the following ways:

- *Building relationships* - the traditionally non-social relationship between the political structures and their citizens have been noticed to have become less effective in political campaigns and driving collective actions (Dale and Strauss 2009). The social media allows for the building of such relationships and also provides the opportunity to leverage existing networks in establishing credible and trust based relationships (Harfoush 2009), hence increasing political participation and collective actions;
- *Campaign organisation and communication* - perhaps the most important usage of social media found in literature and practise is the influence it can have in organising the actual campaign and its usage as the new age communication tool. The building of communities on social media has become a norm for almost all political organisations and figures. The use of social media can be used as an online means to organise and drive offline action (Harfoush 2009). In the views of Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011), the Obama campaign's strategy was not to use the social media for disseminating information. The campaign team built a host of communities in a single virtual community where every member felt the sense of belonging to something special and was willing to participate in the entire process;
- *Political engagement* - political engagement refers to the level at which a person or constituency is mobilised and inspired to participate in political processes (Dahlgren 2009). Literature describes social capital as the link between or among people within organisations or institutions based on a shared identity or objective. It can therefore be argued that the amount of social capital possessed by a political structure, party or candidate amongst the citizens would determine its social connectedness among the citizens as described by Dale and Strauss (2009).

Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011) found that there is a direct link between the use of social media and social capital;

- *Political crowdsourcing* - crowdsourcing is the “talent-mining” act of completing tasks through community efforts in a public domain (Garrigos-Simon, Alcamí and Ribera 2012). It allows for the participation and contribution of the public in solving problems or achieving a task that would have required the services of a few highly trained professionals or employees of an organisation only. Crowdsourcing allows people of different skills, talent and information to add value tasks and solve problems in the public arena by showcasing what they have to offer freely (Greengard 2011) for different type of motivations (Garrigos-Simon et al. 2012).

2.5 Factors that affect the use of social media in politics

One of the most important findings in literature about the role of social media is that it is an enhancing platform cannot of itself guarantee success. Social media can play a significant role as a communication tool in politics, but the application of the marketing concept of strategic fit and alignment could determine success or failure in the use of social media in politics or any business endeavour (Harfoush 2009). Aligning the use of social media to the overall objective of the organisation and the prevailing environmental factors is therefore very important (Harfoush 2009; Schaefer 2013).

The following are factors to watch in the use of social media in the field of politics:

- *Penetration of the Internet and Social Media* – The usage of social media is predicated on the accessibility of the internet. Hence, the success of social media as communication tool would depend on the penetration of internet in the target population;
- *Cultural behaviour and orientation* – Studies have shown that there is a positive link between social media usage cultural orientation and the behaviour of the citizen. The power of the social media to influence cultural behaviour and orientation was amplified during the revolution in the Arab world. Its power as a communication tool has the power to influence opinions and views, thereby extending values and cultural orientation (Salem and Mourtada 2012);
- *Demographics* – The social connectivity and interpersonal nature of the social media makes it important to understand the target market, especially in political communication. The network in social media can be traced with demographic attributes. This correlates with the fact that issues faced by people and motives for political participation can also be traced to demographic variables (Phillips, Reynolds and Reynolds 2010). It therefore suffices those demographic factors such as age, gender, geographic location, race etc. be considered in the use of social media in political communication.

2.6 The South African context and opportunities

The number of active South African individual users and corporate organisations presence on the different social media platforms shows that it has come of age in South Africa. As at the end of 2012, there were more than 8.6 million South African with access to the Internet. It is noteworthy that about 1.3 million of this population earn less than R5000 (\$500) per month and 84% of them are less than 45 years old. Reports also show that the cost of the internet has continued to decrease making the service accessible to users across different categories (Goldstuck 2012a). The usage of the cell phone and smartphones to access the internet has been a major driver of the penetration of the internet in South Africa. According to (Goldstuck 2012c), 7.9 million South Africans access the internet on mobile phones with 2.48 million only accessing the internet on mobile phones as at the second quarter of 2012 (Goldstuck 2012c).

100% penetration of mobile phones is experienced in South Africa. Accessing the Internet service via the mobile networks is improving and the cost of accessing the internet via the mobile phone is decreasing. It can be argued that the use of social media will continue to grow in South Africa, presenting an opportunity for it to be used as a platform for marketing and communications (Goldstuck 2012). In the South African political landscape, it appears that the citizen would be willing to engage the political structures actively to address the myriad of issues facing the nation. However, it can be argued that the political structures and political parties in South Africa are not adequately harnessing the power of the social media.

3. Research Methodology

The objective of this study was to develop a framework for the use of social media in political marketing in the SA context. In order to develop this framework, literature from marketing, political marketing and social media were reviewed. A questionnaire was developed and used to collect data for this study. It predominantly contained multiple choice and Likert rating scale type questions. Section C of the questionnaire was designed to measure how frequently the respondents make use of the Internet in different scenarios. Data were obtained through a self-administered questionnaire which was sent to members recorded in the database of the opposition party in the Eastern Cape Province. The questionnaires were distributed and administered by the provincial office of the Democratic Alliance in the Eastern Cape among its members. The response rate is a critical factor in determining if the conclusions from a survey are representative of the population. In order to ensure proper representation of the study, the survey targeted 400 members of the party. Although several factors like the length, the structural design of the questions and layout of the questionnaire were taken into consideration, only 82 fully completed responses were received after 2 months signifying a 20% response rate.

This rate of response on its own could be used as the level of political mobilisation within the party. Whether this is considered from a general perspective or the readiness for engagement on issues of social media, it remains a subject that should attract the attention of the party leadership. In order to ensure the integrity of the survey, the questions used to measure the dependent and the independent variables in this study were subjected to a reliability test. This is to ensure that if responses received will remain the same if another survey is carried out at a different time (Collis and Hussey 2009). The internal consistency method was adopted using the Cronbach alpha coefficient as a measurement of reliability of the measuring instruments used for each of the scales in the survey. Nunnally (1978) recommends that instruments used in basic research have reliability of about .70 or better. As a result, this study ignored questions within each of the scales that reduce that Cronbach alpha coefficient for each scale.

4. Research findings

The questionnaire used for this study was designed to collect the following data that can be used to measure the following:

- Demographic data;
- Internet awareness and usage among the respondents;
- Mobile technology awareness and usage among the respondents;
- Social media as marketing tools;
- Level of political engagement;
- Perception on the use of social media for political activities;
- Level of political activity on social media.

The demographic data were collected to understand the demographic distribution and the representation of the respondents. The findings show that only 31% of the respondents are 30 years old and younger, while as many as 40% of the respondents are above the age of 40. It also shows that the percentage of the male respondents were more than female respondents and that the white population group could be more dominant with the party. The possible demographic distribution of the party as shown in the results above is not in sync with the official demographic data of the Eastern Cape Province. This could mean that the level of penetration and political engagement is demographically skewed. According to the demographic data released by Statsa (2013), people above the age of 40 years old form only 24% of the population, but the data collected shows that 40% of the party belong to this group. The same fact is reflected in the gender and population group distribution.

The results indicated that more of the respondents belong to the affluent or at least mid-income earning South Africa citizens. While the official unemployment rate is 25.2% of the economically active population, which arguably would fit the age distribution range of this study, the data collected shows that only 6% of the respondents are unemployed. However, 51% of the respondents indicated that they own the property where they reside. It is expected that they have a vested interest in what goes on around them and might be more active politically for this reason. Therefore, one could infer that there is an opportunity for the opposition party among the younger population and other represented groups.

The participants of the survey were asked questions that measure their awareness and usage of the mobile technology. This is in line with the discoveries mentioned in the literature review that the mobile technology is a major driver of the Internet penetration and the growth in the amount of people using the social media. The results show that 37% of respondents use a Blackberry phone that is known for its unique always-on Internet service. This is followed by the Nokia and the Samsung brand with 26% and 29% respectively. The data showed that 87% of the respondents mobile phones have internet access, 62% with touch screens, 72% with GPS facilities and 92% of the respondents phone have a camera. One could infer that the majority of the respondents have Internet access on their mobile phones. It therefore means that they can be engaged via their mobile phones and they are likely to participate in discussion. Moreover, the availability of facilities like camera and video players could also indicate that they can consume and create video format contents. The harnessing of these features can aid an effective two way communication between the political parties and the electorate.

The results show that 84% of respondents have a Facebook account, 48% a twitter account, 76% watches video of YouTube and only 11% is on Mxit. The latter is common among the younger people and none of the respondents over the age of 40 has an account on Mxit although this category forms 40% of the respondents. Further, the population group that the respondents belong to seemed not to affect whether they own a Facebook account or not. The results show that 30% of those that own a Facebook account belong to the Black population group, 13% of them are Coloured and 57% are Whites. This result aligns with the population group distribution of all the respondents.

The results show that the ownership of a Facebook account and probably accounts in other networks is not dependent on factors such as age, gender, population group and even social economic factors. It can therefore be deduced that the popularity, desire to use or at least find out about the concept of social media cuts across different spectrums making it a phenomenon that has

come to stay. This makes it necessary for organisations such as those in politics to explore the possibility of making use of social media.

It was interesting to note that more than 65% of the respondents agree that the social media provides them with useful information and that 54% of the respondents agree that the social media have the ability to bring them closer to their friends. This agrees with previous research cited in the literature review section of this study that the Social media provides social connectedness and it is now seen as a source of useful information rather than a place to while away time.

The results presented in this section indicate that the majority of the respondents are politically active. The results of the level of political engagement is as expected because the questionnaires were distributed among the members of the party and probably it is the members that are very engaged that cared to participate in the survey. More than 90% of the respondents agree that the government should focus on the major issue of job creation, service delivery, dealing with corruption, crime and inequalities that the country is faced with. 87% of the respondents voted during the last election and 91% of the respondents will vote in the next election.

The data provides a good indication that the respondents are willing to engage the politicians and be engaged by them using the opportunity presented by the social media platform. Furthermore, 74% of the respondents do not have a problem bringing their political orientation to the social media platform and 50% indicate that they will honour invitations sent via the social media. This amplifies the opportunity to take advantage of the social connectedness on social media where well-crafted marketing campaigns can be designed so that people can influence the decision of their friends politically.

Beside the demographic data that were collected, the independent variables identified and measured include the Internet awareness and usage of the respondents, the mobile technology usage among the respondents and the general social media awareness, penetration and usage among the respondents. The other independent variables were more politically related and include the level of political engagement of the respondents and their perception on the use of social media for political activities. The identified dependent variable measured and analysed is the level of the political activities of the respondents on social media. The results further showed that the party members are also interested in social media and that social media account ownership is independent of the demographics of the respondents. Political marketing, branding and strategic communication are considered as key success factors in political campaigns.

5. Limitations

Although statistical testing was done for reliability the response rate could be seen as a limitation of this study. A further limitation is that this study was only done in one Geographic area with the data base of one of the political parties- the official opposition. Further research needs to be conducted nationally.

6. Further Research

Further research needs to be done in terms of the micro targeting of groups. These results indicate that there is an association between the population group of the respondents and their political activity on social media. This would imply that the activity of a population group in terms of race might be different to those of others. It will therefore be necessary to target the different population

groups differently when developing a political mobilisation or engagement strategies. Research should be conducted with the politicians to determine their understanding of social media.

7. Managerial implications

As with the use of social media and business, managers of political campaigns need to align the choice of media to the market segment. They need to integrate social media with traditional marketing methods. Social media can have unanticipated reach but its effectiveness depends on accurate dissemination targeting. This implies a substantive understanding of the structure of virtual and real social networks and an understanding of the value and salience of specific political messages. Social media supplement rather than supplant traditional methods of political campaigning. The new media can facilitate political messages entering the political debate sidestepping traditional media routes. Traditional media creates the conversations, while social media amplifies and sustains it (Christopolous 2012, Van Spronsen 2012). The findings of this study show that there might be a mismatch between the perception of the people and the way the politicians and political parties in South Africa are using the social media. This would imply that there are yet untapped opportunities for the use of social media for politics in SA.

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