

CASE STUDY

Social Media's Influence on Political Marketing: Insights from a Focus Group Study of Experienced Communication Professionals

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamic role of social media in political marketing, focusing on its growing influence in shaping voter perceptions and campaign strategies. Utilizing a focus group methodology with experienced communication professionals, the research investigates key metrics, strategies, and the effectiveness of social media in political marketing campaigns. The findings provide insights into the impact of social media on voter loyalty, the comparative effectiveness of traditional versus digital platforms, and the significance of strategic communication in modern political discourse.

Keywords: Political Marketing, Social Media Influence, Voter Behaviour, Digital Campaign Strategies, Narrative Building, Political Engagement, Traditional vs. Digital Media, Misinformation in Campaigns

In the contemporary digital landscape, social media has become a pivotal element of political communication, with political entities increasingly utilizing these platforms for marketing and public engagement. Political marketing involves the strategic application of marketing principles by candidates, parties, and interest groups to influence public opinion, win elections, and shape policy. Traditional methods of political outreach have expanded to include digital platforms, where social media now plays a critical role in connecting politicians directly with their constituents.

Social media, defined as online platforms that facilitate interaction, collaboration, and content sharing (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009), has enabled a shift towards buzz marketing. Through user-generated content, political messages can achieve viral reach, amplifying initial efforts significantly (Luo & Zhang,

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2013). Despite lower internet penetration rates in some regions, the adoption of social media in India has surged, with the country ranking third globally in terms of user volume (Narasimhamurthy, 2014).

The impact of social media on Indian elections has grown exponentially. For instance, during the 2009 general elections, only a single Indian politician, Shashi Tharoor, was active on Twitter. By the 2014 elections, platforms like Twitter and Facebook had become essential tools for political engagement, with election-related activities generating millions of interactions (Chao, 2014). This shift underscores the increasing importance of digital media in shaping political narratives and influencing voter behaviour in India (Swamy, 2014).

Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook have redefined political discourse, allowing politicians to engage directly with the electorate. The growing follower base of prominent Indian politicians, such as Prime Minister Narendra Modi, reflects the heightened significance of these platforms in shaping public opinion and electoral outcomes (Wani & Alone, 2014). This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the evolving role of social media in political marketing, particularly within the Indian context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, the role of social media in political campaigns has garnered significant attention, underscoring the need to examine its impact on voter behavior and election outcomes. The growing prominence of platforms like Twitter during election cycles has spurred extensive research into their influence on political participation. Notably, studies indicate that politicians with higher social media engagement tend to secure more votes (Effing *et al.* 2011). Research has consistently demonstrated a positive correlation between the volume of tweets mentioning parties or candidates and their electoral performance (Effing *et al.* 2011; Jungherr, 2013; Tumasjan *et al.* 2010a, 2010b).

For instance, Burnap *et al.* (2016) found that Twitter data accurately predicted the Labour Party's success in a hung parliament scenario. However, the predictive power of social media metrics remains a topic of debate. While some studies highlight the strong relationship between social media activity and voter turnout, others report minimal or inconsistent correlations (Gayo-Avello *et al.* 2011; Huberty, 2013). For example, McKelvey *et al.* (2014) observed that a candidate's share of Twitter mentions correlated more strongly with vote counts than hashtag use or direct mentions, suggesting that the volume of attention may be more critical than specific engagement metrics.

Sentiment analysis has been employed to gauge public opinion on social media, revealing mixed results. While volume-based analyses often indicate predictive potential (Bermingham & Smeaton, 2011), sentiment-based approaches have shown varied accuracy in forecasting elections. Huberty (2013) argued that despite the apparent correlation in retrospective analyses, these methods often fail in real-time forecasting. DiGrazia *et al.* (2013) found a link between the frequency of candidate mentions and vote margins, whereas Sang and Bos (2012) concluded that tweet volume alone is a weak predictor of electoral outcomes.

In the context of U.S. presidential elections, Twitter data has shown a positive correlation with pre-election poll trends (O'Connor *et al.* 2011). However, the validity of these correlations has been questioned, as some results appear coincidental rather than causal (Metaxas *et al.* 2011). In contrast, Tumasjan *et al.* (2010a) observed a strong relationship between tweet volume and votes, but later cautioned that social media data should complement, rather than replace, traditional polling methods (Tumasjan *et al.* 2010b).

Further research by Jungherr *et al.* (2012) suggested that the predictive power of social media data is only marginally better than random chance.

The 2014 Indian general election marked a turning point, with a robust positive correlation observed between tweet volume and vote share (Safiullah *et al.* 2016). Similarly, in the 2013 Delhi assembly elections, the number of Facebook likes received by political parties showed a positive relationship with their electoral performance (Safiullah *et al.* 2016). These findings underscore the growing influence of social media in shaping political discourse and voter preferences in India, highlighting the need for more nuanced research in this domain.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Over the past two decades, the integration of social media into political marketing has experienced unprecedented growth, particularly in regions like the USA, Europe, and India. Social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, have transformed the way politicians connect with the electorate, offering direct and immediate access to millions of users. In 2020, Facebook reported 1.73 billion daily active users, demonstrating its vast potential as a tool for political campaigns worldwide (Statista, 2021). In countries like Denmark, where 77% of the population maintained Facebook profiles by 2018, social media has become instrumental in shaping public opinion and mobilizing voters (Statistics Denmark, 2018).

Political figures across the USA and India have increasingly leveraged social media to reach diverse audiences, disseminate their policies, and combat misinformation. The digital shift towards social media allows for real-time engagement, providing opportunities to connect with demographics that are otherwise difficult to access through traditional media channels (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016). This evolution has significantly altered the landscape of political marketing, making social media a core component of modern campaign strategies. Politicians can now directly interact with constituents, shape narratives, and respond swiftly to emerging issues, thereby redefining the dynamics of political communication globally (Kreiss, 2016).

In the Indian context, the impact of social media on political marketing has been profound. The rise in internet penetration, coupled with the popularity of platforms like Twitter and Facebook, has made digital engagement an essential aspect of political campaigns. The increasing social media presence of prominent Indian politicians, such as Prime Minister Narendra Modi, underscores the growing importance of these platforms in shaping public perceptions and influencing electoral outcomes. As social media continues to evolve as a strategic tool for political engagement, understanding its role and effectiveness in shaping voter behavior becomes crucial.

AIM AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The primary aim of this study is to explore the key metrics, strategies, and overall effectiveness of social media in political marketing. By engaging twenty experienced communication professionals with deep expertise in political campaigns, this focus group study seeks to uncover critical insights into the dynamics of social media usage in shaping voter perceptions and campaign strategies. Specifically, the research aims to:

1. **Identify Effective Social Media Strategies:** Examine the approaches that generate the most engagement and influence voter perceptions, focusing on content creation, transparency, and the integration of traditional media with digital platforms.
2. **Analyse the Impact on Voter Behaviour:** Assess the influence of social media activity on voter loyalty, political efficacy, and the development of voting intentions, with an emphasis on understanding the interplay between digital and traditional campaign methods.
3. **Compare Traditional Media with Digital Platforms:** Investigate the comparative strengths of traditional media versus social media in perception management and outreach, exploring how these channels work together to shape political narratives and voter engagement.
4. **Examine Strategic Communication in Political Campaigns:** Evaluate the role of well-structured communication strategies that incorporate branding, persuasive messaging, and social media outreach in building a strong political brand and securing a competitive advantage in elections.

This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolving landscape of political marketing, offering valuable insights into how social media strategies can enhance voter engagement and shape the political narrative effectively.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This study employed an asynchronous, text-based focus group format, often referred to in previous research as “virtual focus groups” (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017). In this context, we use the term “online focus groups” to describe the discussions facilitated via the Zoom platform. Zoom was selected for its widespread use, intuitive interface, and secure features, which ensured a familiar and accessible environment for participants. The platform’s user-friendly tools facilitated effective asynchronous communication, making it an ideal choice for the focus group discussions. The study format enabled participants to engage in discussions at their convenience, minimizing scheduling conflicts and allowing for deeper, reflective responses.

Participant Recruitment

A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to recruit participants for the online focus groups. To meet the inclusion criteria, participants were required to be experienced communication professionals with a minimum of ten years of work experience in political marketing and campaign management. Additionally, participants needed to be fluent in both Hindi and English to ensure effective communication during the discussions. The recruitment process took place in July 2024 and involved a snowball sampling method, initiated through a post shared within the lead author’s professional network.

The initial recruitment post provided details about the study and was further shared by respondents within their professional circles. This method proved effective in reaching a diverse group of journalists and communication experts, predominantly from the northern region of India. Although the facilitator had no prior interactions with the participants, the recruitment process leveraged mutual professional connections within the author’s network to enhance trust and participation (Noy, 2008).

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using Zoom's secure group features, which enabled participants to engage in text-based discussions at their own pace. This asynchronous approach allowed participants to provide more thoughtful and comprehensive responses without the constraints of real-time conversation. The focus group discussions were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol, which included open-ended questions designed to elicit in-depth insights into participants' experiences with social media in political marketing.

The questions covered a range of topics, including the effectiveness of social media strategies, the impact of digital versus traditional media on voter behavior, and the role of content in shaping political perceptions. The discussions were recorded, with participants' consent, and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The data collection process emphasized confidentiality and ensured that participants' responses were anonymized to protect their identities.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the focus group discussions were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed a structured process: initial familiarization with the transcripts, coding of key themes, and an iterative review to refine and define the final themes. The thematic analysis aimed to capture the nuanced perspectives of communication professionals regarding the role of social media in political marketing, highlighting both consensus and divergent views.

The reliability of the analysis was enhanced through researcher triangulation, where multiple researchers independently coded the data and compared their interpretations to ensure consistency. This approach helped minimize bias and provided a more robust understanding of the data. The final themes were then cross-checked with the focus group participants to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations, a process known as member checking, which further validated the findings.

FINDINGS

The focus group discussions provided comprehensive insights into the perceptions and experiences of communication professionals regarding the use of social media in political marketing. The findings are presented thematically, supported by a summary table that captures key aspects identified by the participants.

1. Impact of Social Media on Voter Behaviour

The majority of participants agreed that social media political marketing (PSMM) significantly influences voter behaviour. Sixteen out of twenty respondents indicated that social media campaigns play a major role in shaping voter perceptions and preferences, particularly among younger, urban, and tech-savvy individuals.

2. Experience with Social Media Political Advertising

Most respondents highlighted the strong capacity of social media to motivate voters. The interactive nature

of these platforms was seen as a key factor in their effectiveness. However, two participants noted that some aspects of social media advertising may seem artificial, potentially leading to skepticism among certain voter segments.

3. Development of Voting Intention

Participants unanimously agreed that social media ads have the potential to shape voting intentions. Strategic timing and repetition of posts were emphasized as critical in influencing voter decisions, although excessive repetition could lead to voter fatigue.

4. Comparison with Traditional Marketing

While social media has gained prominence, a substantial portion of respondents acknowledged the continuing relevance of traditional media channels, particularly for older demographics. The findings suggest that an integrated approach combining digital and traditional media is optimal for maximizing campaign outreach.

5. Summary of Major Findings

The following table summarizes the key aspects discussed during the focus group sessions:

Aspect	Major Findings
Social Media's Positive Impact on Voters	Sixteen out of twenty respondents agreed on a significant positive impact.
Profile of Most Affected by PSMM	Young, urban, tech-savvy, and economically sound individuals are most influenced.
Experience with Social Media Political Advertising	Majority confirmed strong capability to motivate voters; two respondents found it artificial.
Development of Voting Intention	Most participants supported the influence of ads on voting intentions, but noted irritation from repetitive content.
Motivation and Perception Change	Unanimous agreement on motivation bridging the gap between ads and intention; cited examples of PM Modi's platforms.
Comparison with Traditional Marketing	Social media is seen as increasingly vital, yet traditional media remains relevant for older demographics.
Social Media Strategy Recommendations	Key strategies include using celebrity influencers, aspirational appeals, addressing voter concerns, and delivering quality content.

KEY STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

Participants identified several strategies for building a strong political brand and enhancing voter engagement:

- ☐ **Celebrity Influencers:** Leveraging popular figures to increase campaign visibility and excitement.
- ☐ **Aspirational Appeals:** Utilizing positive, future-oriented messages to inspire voters.

- ❑ **Understanding Voter Concerns:** Crafting messages that address key issues and resonate with the electorate's priorities.
- ❑ **Emotional Connection:** Fostering emotional resonance to help voters relate to candidates.
- ❑ **Quality Content:** Ensuring high-quality, authentic, and consistent messaging across all platforms.

The table and narrative together highlight the diverse perspectives and shared consensus among communication experts on the role of social media in political marketing.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the transformative role of social media in modern political marketing, highlighting its growing influence on voter behavior, campaign strategies, and political engagement. The results indicate that social media platforms, particularly Twitter and Facebook, have become indispensable tools for political communication, enabling real-time interaction between politicians and voters. This direct engagement has fundamentally changed the dynamics of political campaigns, allowing for more personalized and targeted messaging.

Social Media's Influence on Voter Behaviour

The consensus among participants points to the significant impact of social media on shaping voter perceptions and intentions. Younger, tech-savvy voters, particularly those from urban areas, were identified as the primary demographic influenced by social media political marketing (PSMM). This aligns with previous research that has shown a strong correlation between social media activity and voter engagement (Effing et al., 2011; Jungherr, 2013). The ability of social media to create viral content and facilitate user interaction has amplified its reach, making it a powerful tool for influencing voting behavior. However, the findings also highlight a potential drawback: the risk of overexposure to digital ads, which can lead to voter fatigue and reduced engagement. This suggests a need for balanced and strategic content dissemination to maintain voter interest without causing saturation.

Comparison of Social Media and Traditional Marketing

While social media has rapidly gained prominence in political marketing, the comparison with traditional media methods revealed nuanced perspectives. Most respondents acknowledged the growing importance of social media, citing its ability to engage voters directly and provide instant feedback. However, a notable minority maintained that traditional media channels, such as television and print, still play a critical role, especially among older voters who may not be as active on digital platforms. This finding is consistent with studies that emphasize the complementary nature of traditional and digital media in political campaigns (Jungherr, 2016). The integration of both media types appears to be essential for reaching a broader electorate and maximizing campaign outreach.

Strategic Communication and Narrative Building

The importance of strategic communication in political marketing was a recurring theme in the discussions. Participants highlighted the effectiveness of narrative building, emotional appeals, and high-quality content

in driving voter engagement. The findings suggest that social media campaigns that incorporate relatable stories and address voter concerns are more successful in building political loyalty and enhancing the candidate's brand image. This reflects the broader trend in political marketing, where storytelling and emotional resonance have become key components of successful campaign strategies (Kreiss, 2012).

Celebrity influencers were also identified as valuable assets in social media campaigns, particularly in generating excitement and broadening the campaign's reach. However, the discussions revealed a need for caution when using influencers, as their endorsements may not always translate into genuine voter support. The effectiveness of influencer marketing appears to depend on the credibility and alignment of the influencer with the candidate's values and message.

Challenges in Social Media Political Marketing

Despite its advantages, the use of social media in political marketing presents several challenges. One key issue raised by participants was the spread of misinformation and fake news, which can distort voter perceptions and undermine the credibility of campaign messages. This aligns with existing literature that highlights the negative impact of misinformation on political discourse (Ceron et al., 2014). The rapid dissemination of false information on social media platforms complicates the task of maintaining message integrity and requires proactive strategies to address and mitigate its effects.

Another challenge is the gap between online social media activism and offline political action. While the findings indicate a strong correlation between social media engagement and political activism, several respondents noted that this does not always translate into tangible voter turnout. This suggests that while social media can effectively mobilize digital support, converting this engagement into real-world political action remains a significant hurdle for campaign strategists.

Implications for Future Political Campaigns

The insights gained from this study have important implications for future political campaigns. First, the findings emphasize the need for an integrated approach that combines social media with traditional marketing methods to reach diverse voter demographics effectively. Campaigns that leverage the strengths of both digital and traditional media are likely to achieve better outreach and voter engagement.

Second, the importance of high-quality, authentic content cannot be overstated. The consensus among participants underscores the value of creating transparent, emotionally resonant, and user-generated content to build trust and credibility. Political campaigns should prioritize content strategies that address voter concerns and foster emotional connections with the electorate.

Finally, the study highlights the potential of social media as a platform for narrative building and perception management. Strategic storytelling, combined with timely and relevant content, can significantly enhance voter loyalty and influence electoral outcomes. However, the challenges of misinformation and the disconnect between online and offline engagement must be addressed through comprehensive, well-coordinated campaign strategies.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the dynamic role of social media in shaping political marketing, providing valuable insights into its impact on voter behavior, campaign strategies, and political engagement. The findings demonstrate that social media platforms, particularly Twitter and Facebook, have become essential components of political communication, offering direct, real-time interaction between politicians and the electorate. This shift has enabled political campaigns to tailor their messages more effectively, engage with a broader audience, and respond quickly to emerging issues.

The results suggest that younger, urban, and tech-savvy voters are most influenced by social media political marketing (PSMM), reflecting the increasing digitalization of political discourse. Social media's capacity for viral content amplification and user engagement has made it a powerful tool for shaping voter perceptions and influencing electoral outcomes. However, the study also identified challenges associated with social media marketing, including the risks of overexposure, misinformation, and the gap between online activism and offline political participation.

The comparison between traditional and digital marketing methods revealed that while social media has gained prominence, traditional media channels remain vital for reaching older and less digitally engaged demographics. An integrated approach that leverages the strengths of both digital and traditional media is likely to be the most effective strategy for future political campaigns.

The implications of this study extend beyond the immediate context of political marketing, offering broader lessons for strategic communication in the digital age. High-quality, authentic content that resonates emotionally with voters was highlighted as a critical success factor in building trust and political loyalty. The findings underscore the importance of narrative building, emotional appeals, and strategic use of celebrity influencers to enhance voter engagement and shape the political narrative.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of social media in political marketing, several areas warrant further investigation. Future research could focus on:

1. **Longitudinal Studies:** Examining the long-term impact of social media engagement on voter behavior across multiple election cycles to understand how digital strategies evolve over time.
2. **Cross-Regional Analysis:** Conducting comparative studies across different regions and cultural contexts to assess variations in social media usage and its effectiveness in political marketing.
3. **Impact of Misinformation:** Investigating the influence of misinformation and fake news on voter perceptions, as well as strategies to mitigate its effects in digital political campaigns.
4. **Offline Conversion of Digital Engagement:** Exploring methods to bridge the gap between online social media activism and offline political action, with a focus on converting digital support into real-world voter turnout.

These areas of future research will help deepen our understanding of the complex relationship between social media and political marketing, contributing to the development of more effective and ethical campaign strategies in the digital age.

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