

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA POLITICAL COMMUNICATION CONTENT ON VOTING BEHAVIOR OF THE YOUNG GENERATION

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Abstract

Currently, the intention of use social media is drastically different from the use of social media in past. In 2015 Sri Lankan presidential election, a large-scale political communication campaign was conducted through social media, and its role is highly emphasized by politicians and supporters. The main purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of social media political communication content on the voting behavior of young voters. The population of this study was young voters who use social media and data were collected through online distributed self-administrated structured questionnaire. The study was conducted by selecting 120 young voters based on convenience sampling method. Social media political communication content was the independent variable whereas dependent variable was voting behavior. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and regression analysis were applied to analyze the data by employing SPSS 21.0. The results of the correlation analysis and regression analysis showed significant positive relationship between the independent and dependent variable. Findings of the research emphasize that social media has great power to influence voters' behavior as a communication tool in the political context of Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Political communication, social media, voting behavior.

Introduction

Nowadays, the world depends on technology and it makes the world a global village by connecting people from all over the world. Technology has become one of the most important components in today's society and it changes lives of people in every aspect of political, educational, religious, professional, social, and economic.

Social media is a collection of applications and websites that link people together which allows them to share information and make aware about any incident through social networking (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In past few years social media have rapidly spread over the country and social media like Facebook has perceived as a good communication tool that is able to bring closeness among friends and families.

Social media attracts people, especially young generation. Usage of information technology in social media, increase its popularity in the youth especially in students of universities. In most of the cases it seems that the younger generation trend to use social media for communication with friends and families (Ali, Iqbal, & Iqbal, 2016). Meanwhile, social media provides many opportunities for gaining attention from others and it helps to build a better and more harmonic society as well as relationship between people.

Sri Lankan society is categorized into three main divisions; Urban, Semi-urban, and Rural. Inherent characteristics and factors in each division have a huge impact on the voting behavior of its residents. An election year is like no other year in any country practicing democracy. Politicians and their respective political parties have long striven to reach out to eligible citizens with persuasive messages in order to convince the electorates to vote for them. No stratum of the electioneering; market women, working class, traders, artisans, students, professional bodies, youths are all targeted in order to secure their votes.

The social media has become a new trend of Sri Lankan politics as political communication platform. This research focused to study how the use of social media political communication had influenced the voting

behavior of the young generation and how it significant for all the political parties. Additionally, this study will also benefit to the politicians to decide their electoral campaigns strategies and identify most effective method of communicating compare other media and formulate their strategies for upcoming elections. Furthermore, this study will help to improve the public understanding on what is role social media plays in political campaign in today. Beside this study provides better guideline for future researchers who are interested in similar topics.

Background

Politicians and their subordinates consider the social media as modern election campaign tool since they help to spread political messages, discover the areas of interest, as well as needs of voters and the general public.

In the election cycle, 31% of Americans had used the Internet to get political news and information. Moreover, when comparing any given day in the spring of 2008 with a similar period in 2004, it can clearly identify that the proportion of Americans getting political information and news through social media has more than doubled with the time (Smith & Rainie, 2008).

Somehow in the earlier Sri Lankan elections we didn't see the social media political communication vastly but in recent year it was spring up in 2015 presidential election. It could be rapid rise of social media users, and effectiveness of online adds causes to these effects. However, as a result of this propensity major political parties totally involve social media communication campaigns. It makes easy step to close voters to generating and opening new political contest among community. Some of Sri Lankan people believe social media role in Sri Lanka politics canvass is very important. Social media created a new discussion, it's the best way to give comments and make action, it gives a rapidly response due to this immediate feedback people thing this is a way to broader communication channel move forward canvass and campaign effectively more than traditional media.

Moreover, experienced users have learned to filter online information more effectively and efficiently which are supported in their search and sorting of a new social media application that helps build a process for accessing information and dissemination. This affects the relevance, quality and concentration of the information available to users and, consequently, to their voting behavior (Heblich, 2016). Additionally, politicians can use online platforms to directly interact with voters and discuss on effects of decisions taken by the governors, problems arisen because of reform projects, root causes and possible solutions to those problems. For example, labor market reform can be adduced. Such important reform projects could gain credibility if voters are better informed about the political process and feel involved.

In 2015 Sri Lankan presidential election, there was a large political communication campaign done through social media and its role was very much highlighted by the politicians and supportive parties. However, the election campaign in Sri Lanka has been waged especially by traditional methods since independence (Ukwatta, 2017). In addition to the traditional electoral campaign mode, the use of social media for electoral campaign purposes was introduced in 2010 mainly as a modernized method in politics. The 2015 presidential election in Sri Lanka has confined the public's imagination in various ways. As a result, several unrealistic things have happened against all probabilities. Above all, the candidate has become a "newsworthy" primary use of Facebook and YouTube for electoral purposes. In the Sri Lankan context, the main political parties and organizations used several strategies for electoral campaigns. The effectiveness and success of campaign strategies depended on the media they used. The electoral campaign through Facebook was an innovative method that was used for the 2015 presidential election. It was a platform to openly and freely criticize each party and their actions.

Problem Statement

Social media is becoming more and more popular among politicians, political parties and their subordinates as an indispensable tool for broadcasting political messages, mobilization and federation of voters. The political institutions have also started to use Facebook pages, groups, and events in order to enter into direct conversation with citizens by encouraging them for more political discussions and activities. Facebook can be identified as a medium for freedom of speech and the consent of people of different ethnicities, religions and backgrounds to share information directly without any restrictions. Consequently, the young generation has involved in different political communication activities during the electoral process. (Ukwatta, 2017).

Social media is very significant tool in new era of advertising to be success in political movements. It can apply in the election process to give political message directly to target audience in different mechanism. There are no barriers to upload any true or false informal messages to social media. It is a confrontation challenge for both voters and electors. This implies first time voters and existing voters how they get the message and engage with it, could they identify the correct messages throughout duties, before the turnout and the political communication campaign have it enough capability to fulfill the gap of true, actual information and give sufficient political knowledge.

This study aims to examine the influence of social media political communication content on voting behavior of young voters. However, there are very limited number of studies related to impact of social media political communication content on young voter's voting behavior in Sri Lankan context.

Literature Review

Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and internet blogs are progressively developed and became popular as social media. The evolution of public relations through social media has transformed the role of traditional media in the electoral process and political communication. Facebook is one of the most popular and widespread social media and is used for elections in various nations of all over the world. Recently, during the 2015 presidential election, a remarkable political communication campaign was launched through Facebook which was at the focal point of the history of the social media movement in Sri Lanka (Ukwatta, 2017). In 2015, most of the presidential candidates have initiated their official social media pages, and their supportive parties communicated political messages, news and share every important event through their own social media pages. It was the first election held in Sri Lanka with extensive communication and discussion through social media. Youth participation in political affairs via social media was highlighted here and the coverage of all the events during the presidential election was undoubtedly impacting on the final outcome. Previous elections in Sri Lanka has experienced extraordinary campaigns using banners, posters, public meetings and traditional media (Ukwatta, 2017).

Social Media

Social media is a wide range of internet and mobile based services which allows users to participate in online exchanges of ideas, subscribe to user-generated content or connect to online communities (Dewing, 2012). Additionally, social media uses mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms for sharing, co-creating, modifying, and discussing user-generated content with individuals and communities. (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silverstre, 2011).

Social media is one of the primary sources of information. Using text mining approaches, a large amount of unstructured text data collected through social media can be displayed and converted into real-time user relationships. Due to its popularity, social media can be used as a leading channel for ideologies including agenda setting and public opinion. (Wani & Alone, 2014).

Social Media and Politics

Social media enables the individuals to share knowledge, opinions, experiences and ideas among each other. When considering on political sector, social media can be an enabler for democracy and participation among citizens. As the 2008 presidential campaigns of United States have shown, political actors can successfully use social media platforms to disseminate information to voters, as well as to engage and negotiate with them (Stieglitz, & Dang-Xuan, 2012).

Facebook is one of the modern communication mediums used by politicians and their subordinates to promote their views, influence people's opinions, induce them to adopt their ideas and persuade them to vote for them in elections. As one of the most popular social media, Facebook provides access to targeted audiences through advertising messages to active personnel in the field of political marketing; It provides Facebook users with a variety of means to receive political promotional messages, interact with and share information. This is why active personnel in the field of political marketing advertise on political events, provide personal information about candidates and politicians, and pay attention to Facebook in order to create a positive image about them and to promote and contribute to them and their ideas in the process of political change (Youship & ALsamydai, 2012).

The social media network sites allow the people to share photos, ideas, videos and links to create a network of people with common interests using a variety of tools by targeting different audiences. Technology and social media were an integral part of the strategy of the Obama's campaign, a key component of its strategy, raising money and developing a territory of empowered volunteers who felt they could make a difference (Vonderschmitt, 2012).

Political Opinion

When measuring the opinion of people, social media can be identified as a substantial platform. Through this media, issues of public importance can be raised by the government with their views (Madueke, Nwosu, Ogbonnaya, & Anumadu, 2017). Additionally, social media can increase the exposure to a person's political information and social mobilization when family and friend express political views (Keating & Melis, 2017).

Political Discussion

Political discussions are defined as episodes of discussions with political content that take place between the non-elite members of a political community (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). Political discussion originating a way to promote political participation, by providing information on how to get involved and a sense of duty to serve the local community (Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010).

Television channels, newspapers and tabloids facilitate the exchange of news and links and pre-scripted messages via social media. The social media structure as a platform for political discussion combines classical democratic values such as freedom of speech with a new framework for political discourse (Brenne, 2016).

Political Propaganda

Internet and social media have opened the entrance for citizens to contribute to public debate and bereaved journalists of their previously strong gatekeeper role. In the early years of internet suffusion, science and politics discussed this development as a promising chance to empower citizens to participate in politics and make democracy work better (Emmer & Paolillo, 2017).

Youth and Political Participation

There are many ways that young people can participate in politics. Political participation in democratic countries is not just voting and there are several indicators that show the social responsibility of young people. These indicators include knowledge of the political process and understanding of it, information technology skills, ways of thinking, media participation, interaction and negotiation skills and participation in volunteer activities. (Schusler & Krasny, 2008).

Politicians and candidates also use social media to reach voters, especially the younger generations. The new trend is to link directly with voters and social media has stimulated young voters, which have a profound impact on the election (Ramos, 2015).

Voting Behavior

Voting behavior and decisions are driven by environmental dynamics, including demographics, political parties and leaders, government policies, offline and online information, feelings and emotions. There are similarities between consumer behavior, marketing, politics and advertising. Voters are considered consumers of services provided by political parties, so the way they choose political parties is similar to how consumers make purchasing decisions and has been the subject of much research. (Ahmed, Lodhi, & Shahzad, 2011).

The voting process provides a concrete example of how a single voter responds to a stimulus, makes a decision, and ultimately acts or does not choose. It provides a useful and revealing case study of political behavior. Many political studies also assume that the voting process treats the individual citizen as an active participant in the political system. (Sinnott, 2003).

When politicians fail to fulfill the expectations of voters, they are dissatisfied with political candidates and the intentionally vote them out in the future election (Dalton, 2006). When a voter engages with a political party via social media, that interaction can build trust as a counterpart. In addition, citizens can acquire the knowledge and information they need to make their own assessments and evaluate political parties and leaders (Dabula, 2006).

When voting for the same political party in different consecutive elections, voters favor a loyal party. People who identify with and favor a party, there is a tendency to support it in the elections (Chiru & Gherghina, 2012). Furthermore, trust is essential in making voting decisions because the voter must necessarily strengthen their intentions to vote for the candidates and party they trust (Rachmat, 2014).

Research Methodology

The objective of this study is to examine the influence of social media political communication content on voting behavior specially focusing young voters. The explanatory research design was applied for this study because this study was carried on finding out what are the social media political communication content, that influence on voters' behavior.

Population and Sample

The population of this study was registered young voters in Ratnapura district whose age is between 18 to 35 years. The reason why the lower age limit is 18, as it represents the legal minimum age to vote in Sri Lanka. The upper age limit has been set at 35, as this age group has been comfortably accepted as the younger generation. Meanwhile, the sample of this study was 120 selected voters among them based on convenience sampling method.

Data Collection

This study used data from both primary sources and secondary sources. The primary data was collected through a self-administrated structured questionnaire which has distributed online. Secondary data for this study has been adopted from already published researches, journals, related articles, books and websites.

Conceptual Framework

It has developed an own conceptual framework based on the knowledge gathered from relevant literature and theories. Social media political communication content is the independent variable of the study and this variable has three dimensions namely; political opinion, political discussion, and political propaganda. Voter behavior is the dependent variable of the study and this variable has three dimensions which are; voter trust, voter loyalty, and voting intention.

The conceptual framework of the study is shown in Figure 1.

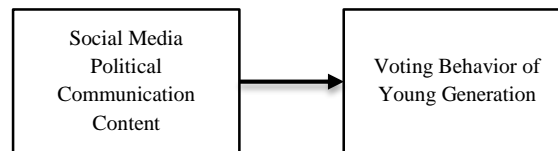


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

In line with the above, it has developed following hypotheses to be tested in this study.

H1: There is a significant and positive relationship between social media political communication content and voting behavior of the young generation.

Conceptualization of Variable

Voter behavior can define as voter's reaction according to an effect of social media political communication content to their trust, loyalty, and intention. Voter trusts, voter loyalty, and voting intention are the three dimensions used to analyze voting behavior.

The voters' confidence and expectations in the reliability and positive intentions of the political party or leader to keep its words and promises can be identified as voters' trust (Chinomona, 2013). Voter loyalty is the positive attitude that voters have towards the political party and the leaders, which leads them to vote again and again for that party and those leaders during the elections (Chinomona, Mahlangu, & Poee, 2013). Voting intention is an individual's desire and intention to for a particular political party and leaders (Chinomona, Lin, & Wang, 2012).

Social media is increasingly used in political context recently both by political institutions and citizens (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012). The social media political communication content is highly effect user's behaviors, it is analyzing with three main dimensions; political opinion, political discussion, and political propaganda. Political opinion or expression on social media has been found to positively affect other political behaviors such as traditional types of political participation. (Valasquez & Rojas, 2017). Politicians in modern democracies across the world have eagerly adopted social media for engaging their voters, entering into direct conversation with citizens, and enabling vivid political discussion (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012). The elements of the political promotion play an important role in delivering information to the target audience (Youship & ALsamydai, 2012).

Method of Data Analysis and Evaluation

Collected data was analyzed using both descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. Regression analysis were employed for the purpose of analyze the relationship between dependent and independent variable while correlation analysis was done for the purpose of determining whether there is a relationship between social media political communication content and voting behavior of young voters. All the analysis was done using SPSS 21.0 as the statistical tool.

Data Analysis and Presentation

Firstly, it has analyzed the demographic factors. Then it has conducted reliability test, descriptive analysis of the variables, regression analysis, and finally the hypothesis testing.

Among all the respondents 48.3% were male respondents and 52.7% were female. When consider on age groups, 43.3% respondents were from whose age between 18-24 years, 54.2% respondent from 25-30 range of age while respondents with age between 31-35 years were 2.5%. In consideration of education level of the respondents, more than 95% of them have gone through their secondary education and around 50% has degree level qualifications. Majority of the respondents access the internet using their smartphones and as a percentage, it is 86.7%. Meanwhile, 1.7% of the respondents access the internet using desktop computers. Among the total, 6.7% of the respondents are used laptop computers and 5.0% are used tablets access to the internet.

The relevancy of the variables that used to the research was measured by reliability test. The Cronbach's alpha value of independent variable was 0.941 and dependent variable was 0.856, it fulfills the relevant accepted level of the reliability.

Table 1 shows descriptive information about dependent and independent variables.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness
Social media political communication content	2.1955	0.99646	0.676
Voting behavior of the young generation	1.9858	0.70963	0.475

According to Table 1, the independent variable, social media political communication content measured by political opinion, political discussion, and political propaganda takes relatively low value ($M=2.1955$, $SD=0.99646$). When considering the skewness, it is 0.676 and that means it is positively skewed. Voting behavior is the dependent variable of this study and statistical results on the responses indicated that participants of the study shows relatively low level with voting behavior ($M=1.9858$, $SD=0.70963$). Dependent variable also positively skewed and it is 0.475

To identify the relationship between key research variables, correlation analysis was used. Correlation of independent variable with dependent variable is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlations Analysis

		PC	VB
Social media political communication content (PC)	Pearson Correlation	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
Voting behavior of the young generation (VB)	Pearson Correlation	.577**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

According to Table 2, the Pearson correlation value for voting behavior and social media political communication content was 0.577 and it implies that there is a positive relationship between above variables. According to the above table, the significant value is 0.000 ($p < 0.05$) hence both variables are significant at 0.05 level. Therefore, it can be statistically said that there is significant and positive relationship between social media political communication content and voting behavior of young voters. Hence the result is supported for given hypothesis.

Model summary of the regression analysis is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Regression Analysis - Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.577 ^a	0.333	0.328	0.58184
a. Predictors: (Constant), social media political communication content				

According to the obtained results from regression analysis, R^2 value is 0.333 and it implies that, 33.3% of the variation in the voting behavior of young voters is explained by the variation in the social media political communication content. The remaining 66.7% is unexplained. However, here the R^2 value is relatively low and therefore, it cannot say that better the model fits the data.

The summary of ANOVA is given in Table 4.

Table 4: ANOVA^a Table

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	19.979	1	19.979	59.015	.000 ^b
Residual	39.947	118	0.339		
Total	59.926	119			
a. Dependent Variable: voting behavior of the young generation					
b. Predictors: (Constant), social media political communication content					

According to the results of ANOVA table, F value is 59.015 and the significant value 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). It represents that there is a significant relationship between social media political communication content and voting behavior of young voters.

Coefficients of this analysis is shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Regression Analysis - Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.083	0.129		8.398	.000
social media political communication content	0.411	0.054	0.577	7.682	.000

The regression coefficient of social media political communication content indicates that, it has a positive impact on voting behavior of young voters ($\beta = 0.411$, $p < 0.05$). This result further supports the hypothesis of the study. It literally means that, for each additional political communication content in social media, the voting behavior of young voters' increases by an average of 0.411. Expressed more simply, the slope tells us that for each additional political communication content in social media, the voting behavior of young voters' increases by an average of 0.411.

Conclusion

This research was conducted to study the influence of social media political communication content on voting behavior of young voters. Analysis were done by selecting 120 young voters in Ratnapura district who are using social media.

When considering the demographic factors, most of respondents are female and Facebook was the most popular social media platform of them. In addition, considerable respondents are in age between 25 to 30 years. Among the respondents, majority are using their smartphone for internet access.

Before run the major functions, first the reliability test has been done and the results were up to recommend level. After completing reliability test, the correlation analysis was done. According to the correlation values, the hypothesis was significant ($p < 0.05$) and verify that, there is a positive relationship between independent and the dependent variables. Finally, the regression analysis was done and according to the results, the hypothesis was significant ($p < 0.05$) with the regression values and further verify the positive relationship between independent and dependent variables.

By considering the research findings, the researcher can convey that, social media political communication content is affected to the voting behavior of young voters, and there is positive relationship between social media political communication and voting behavior of young voters.

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