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Social media, public relations and education

Varia

Book review

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Facebook Communication and Marketing Influence on Decision-Making and Choice of University Student Representatives: A Student's Perspective

Abstract

Facebook has become the main platform for young adults to sustain their social presence as well as expand their social networks. The impact of social media on youth decision-making has attracted much attention in research and academia. The research setting was at University of Fort Hare, a university located in South Africa. Before and during a student representative council (SRC) election at the university, the six student parties contesting for the leadership office utilised Facebook in communicating and marketing their campaign messages to fellow students. This research therefore empirically investigated how Facebook influenced university students' intention to vote and elect an SRC for the institution. The survey methodology was adopted in collecting data and non-probability sampling, a form of convenience sampling was utilised in selection of suitable participants for the study. A total of 381 students participated in the study responding to questions examining potential drivers of selection of a particular student representative party (SRP). A conceptual model was developed with Facebook constructs that included "medium credibility of Facebook", "peer communication on Facebook" and "user trust of Facebook" among other factors that influence students' choice of an (SRP). The main findings established that identification with peers was observed as having the most significant impact on youths' intention to vote for student representatives. Message credibility was found to have weak impact on student's intention to vote for a particular (SRC) candidate. Implications emerged from the findings and further research suggestions were provided.
Keywords: medium credibility, Facebook, communication, marketing, information credibility

Introduction

The adoption of online communication platforms by universities and faculties when communicating with students has become imperative (Eger, Egerova & Kryston, 2019). Social media facilitates communication among university employees and students as well as the general public though websites (Eger et al., 2019). Understanding the role of social media in

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the context of marketing communications is vital for both researchers and leaders (Fong & Burton, 2008; Kumar, Bezawada, Rishika, Janakiraman, & Kannan, 2016; Schultz & Peltier, 2013). The most popular social media website, Facebook, enables individuals to connect with their current friends, reconnect with people they might have lost touch with and to maintain existing relationships (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Facebook has become the chief medium for young adults to maintain their social presence and extend social networks (Feng, Wong, Wong & Hossain, 2019). The use of social media in marketing is now acknowledged as a research theme; however, there is a lack of theoretical and first-hand research into consumer psychology regarding local usage of social media in political marketing strategies and practices (Aghara, Nwaizugbo, Chukwuemeka & Onyeizugbe, 2015; O'Cass & Pecotich, 2005). In addition, to the lack of literature on social media impact on voting there is also a lack of proper evaluation of its impact on voters (Ediraras, Rahayu, & Natalina, 2013). Facebook is used widely by consumers and in the process influence their purchase decisions (Gupta, 2013). This study, however, views Facebook from the perspective of marketing communications. Most studies that have been carried out on electronic word-of-mouth focused on consumer purchase intention of commercial products (Fuschillo & Cova, 2015; Laroche, Habibi, Richard & Sankaranarayanan, 2012; Lim, Hwang, Kim, & Biocca, 2015). However, the findings from the abovementioned literature do not necessarily address conditions in a developing country such as South Africa. The present research investigates how social media such as Facebook influenced student voting intention. Social media use is becoming popular with the youth interested in governance (Mengü, Güçdemir, Ertürk, & Canan, 2015). Social media platforms such as Twitter are preferred in election propaganda due its ability to facilitate instant messaging and effective communication (Mengü et al., 2015).

Student participation in university governance is considered one of the most fundamental values in European higher education (Klemenèiè, 2012). It dates back to medieval universities and it remerged with the student revolts in 1960ies (Klemenèiè, 2012). The use of social media in election campaigns is not a new phenomenon. During the 2008 US Election, young voters used Facebook to obtain campaign information and or share campaign news with their peers, exchange their political views, and express support for a candidate (Kohut, 2008; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). The present study investigates student politics. Student politics comprises of student representative associations and student activism on political causes (Klemenèiè & Park, 2018). The present research looks at social media's impact on elections help within a student environment. Students who vote, or run for office, in student school elections start to think that they can make decision for the school and possibly pave way for their future political ambitions (Saha & Print, 2010). Student politics refers to the activities associated with power dynamics between students and members of society in and out the higher education systems; more specifically, it pertains to the relationships between students and university authorities, as well as the communications between students and government officials (Klemenèiè & Park, 2018). The main social media platform of interest in this paper was therefore Facebook. Facebook has provided an innovative means of communication to institutions of higher learning (Eger, Egerova & Kryston, 2019). Young adults tend to use Facebook daily for social interactions (Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert, 2009).

Prior research examining the use of Facebook in political campaigns established that Facebook users encounter news online mostly by chance while they are using the Internet for other things (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; Lu, & Lee, 2019; Matsa & Lu, 2016). Past research has assumed that Facebook users believe that their Facebook friends are interested in their lives and activities as well as their problems (Brailovskaia,

Rohmann, Bierhoff, Schillack & Margraf, 2019). This therefore re-enforces the assumption that users of Facebook rely on their friends to make decisions. The importance of the role played by students in university governance and leadership is a relatively neglected area of inquiry (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). Prior research on student voting intention (Morar, Venter, & Chuchu, 2016), defined voting as the likelihood that a person will act in a certain manner. In addition, literature on student participation in university governance has also examined perceptions toward student representatives, in terms of whether they help or hinder their effectiveness as student members of departmental committees. (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009).

Within the context of the present study under investigation, the influence and impact of Facebook on students' choice of student representatives is assessed. This then highlights the relevance that Facebook has to modern communication and public relations. Eger, Egerova and Kryston (2019), who suggested that the usage of social media has changed approaches to communication and publication relations by organisations, support this assertion. In the following sections the literature and grounding theory for the study were provided.

Theoretical Grounding

There are three common theories, which explain why the experience of student governance is related to future political ambitions of students (Saha & Print, 2010). The first theory is the "structural explanation" (Putman, 2000), followed by the "participation explanation" (Hahn, 1998; Print, Ørnstrøm & Nielsen, 2002). The third theory is the "development explanation" (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). Structural explanation assumes political engagement is related to social capital (Putnam, 2000). Social capital can be fostered through institutional structures which facilitate spontaneous collective action of school students who later on develop political ambitions when they become adults (Saha & Print, 2010). According to the participation explanation, participation in school elections improves a student's awareness and experience of how politics works, and therefore increases the likelihood that students will be politically active as an adult (Saha & Print, 2010). Participation explanation assumes that participation in student governments allow students' to have a sense civic identity therefore understand their society better (Saha & Print, 2010).

Social Media, Marketing and Facebook

There is a substantial amount of attention and interest in the effects of social media on university student development and success (Abramson, 2011; Kamenetz, 2011; Junco, 2012). Furthermore, social media is a significant part of the process by which younger voters discuss about their ballot choices (Rainie, 2012). Social media has offered opportunities for organisations to forge close relationships with their customers resulting in customers' engagement with their brands (da Cunha Brandão, Faria, & Gadekar, 2019). Social media users usually discuss consumption matters on sites such as Facebook, which in turn influence their behaviour towards products and services (Boulianne, 2015). Furthermore social media it influences customers' loyalty and satisfaction, and assists in expanding the reach of organisations (da Cunha Brandão et al., 2019. Facebook, the most widely used social networking platform in

the world (Cosenza, 2018), serves as a contemporary medium to study social comparison (Song, Cramer & Park, 2019). When a Facebook user engages with a post on the platform (e.g. leaving a comment on the post), that post will most likely appear the user's friends' News Feed (Choi & Greene, 2017; Khobzi, Lau & Cheung, 2019; Hsu, Wang, Chih & Lin, 2015). This therefore implies that Facebook users are influenced by the activities of their friends on the social media platform. The Internet and social media have changed how consumers and marketers communicate to their target audiences as a result of consumers' access to large amounts of information (Boulianne, 2015).

The influence of reference group peers on consumer behaviour especially in social networks has also been well documented (Crawshaw, 2012; Hofstra, Corten & van Tubergen, 2016; Meacham, 2016; Momoc, 2013). The present study sought to understand how social media affect the intention to vote in the context of electronic word of mouth. The main objectives included measuring the influence of predictor variables such as medium credibility, message credibility, tie strength with peers, identification with the peers, peer communication, user trust, information credibilit on the intention to vote. Consumer socialisation through peer communication using social media platforms is increasingly becoming popular in marketing communications (Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012). Social networking tools have revolutionised interpersonal interaction by greatly facilitating communication between users (Al-kandari & Hasanen 2012; Boulianne, 2015). Peer communication refers to the interactions consumers have on social media with regard to products and services (Bramoullé, Djebbari, & Fortin, 2009; Sarapin & Morris, 2015; Wang et al., 2012).

Tie strength with peers refers to the degree that a person is eager to associate with peers on social network sites, whether close or distant colleagues (Wang et al., 2012). Strong ties on social media leads to the transfer of more helpful information and therefore has larger impact on receivers than do weak ties (Huszti, Dávid & Vajda, 2013; Marder, Joinson, Shankar & Houghton, 2016). On the other hand, Identification with the peer group refers to a situation when a person develops we-intentions and wants to maintain a positive, self-defining relationship with a group, values relationships with the community, and is willing to engage in community activities (Rodríguez-González, Ruiz & Pujadas, 2015; Brundidge, Baek, Johnson, & Williams, 2013; Gromark & Schliesmann 2010). Information credibility is the perception of information received by a consumer being objective and credible (Li & Suh, 2015). The present research assumes that student voter intention is influenced by perception of information received being credible. Message credibility refers to the perceived trustworthiness of the communicated message, such as informational quality, accuracy, or recency (Kang, 2010). Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus & McCann, 2003). Medium credibility refers to user's perceived level of trustworthiness toward a specific medium (Li & Suh, 2015). Social media has its own share of challenges in terms of credibility as highlighted by Li and Suh (2015) who suggested that it suffers from a relative lack of professional fact-checkers to monitor its content. Trust refers to the belief that a person has or how an individual perceive attributes of a product or service (Flavián, Guinalíu & Gurrea, 2006)

Student Participation in University Governance and Elections

Much of the prior research on student participation in school governance has been conducted from a European perspective (Altbach, 2006; Klemenèiè, 2012; Planas, Soler, Ful-

lana, Pallisera & Vilà, 2013). Some of the research on student involvement in university governance was from the perspective of both the professors and the students (Planas et al., 2013). The present research in question looks at student participation in university solely from a student point-of-view. Higher education systems provide a range of formal and informal mechanisms for student participation in school leadership (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). The modern provisions for student involvement in university decision-making have their origins in the wave of university evolution that spread across universities in North America, Western Europe and parts of the British Commonwealth in the 1960s and early 1970s (Altbach 2006; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). Students are now viewed as a collective body are in some way represented in higher education governance in basically every European country (Klemenèiè, M. (2012). Leadership capacitybuilding is a central player in sustainable school development and the leadership contribution of students is an integral part of a genuine distributed conception of school leadership (Lizzio, Dempster & Neumann, 2011). Student politics refers to students organising themselves into representative student associations, such as student governments, graduate student employee unions, party-affiliated student organisations, or other student interest groups (Klemenèiè & Park, 2018). Activism, on the other hand, denotes practices of student collective action through different forms of political engagement, whereby students act in support of or in opposition to specific causes and hold the authorities accountable for their actions (Klemenèiè & Park, 2018).

This study examined student intention to vote and elect representatives, similar to prior research that also investigated the concept of "intention" within the context of elections (Ganser & Riordan 2015). Research on student elections has been receiving much attention (Saha & Print, 2010). The ways in which higher education institutions are governed, and the roles of various parties in this process, are an enduring and often contested area of both practice and inquiry (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). It is widely accepted in most nations across the globe that there is some form of student representation in running of schools (Saha & Print, 2010). Participation in student government varies substantially from country to country (Saha & Print, 2010; Torney-Purta, Lehaman, Oswald & Schulz, 2001). Student leadership is not only limited to universities but also extents to high schools. For example, prior literature established schools in the UK, USA, Denmark and Germany had more than half of the students holding leadership positions on some form of student council, as prefect (or Student Captains), or in student clubs. The following section presents the hypotheses developed for the research. This is then followed by the research methodology section.

Hypotheses Statements

The study consisted of six proposed hypotheses in with potential antecedents of intention to vote for a student representative organisation.

H$_1$: Medium credibility of Facebook is positively and directly related to Intention to vote for a student representative organisation

H$_2$: Peer communication on Facebook is positively and directly related to Intention to vote for a student representative organisation

H$_3$: User trust of Facebook is positively and directly related to Intention to vote for a student representative organisation