

The Power of Opinion Leaders: A Study on First Time Voters of the University of Colombo

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Abstract— A Qualitative Research done on first time voter attitude formation in Sri Lanka finds that influence occurs through the need to identify with expert opinion leaders, who are perceived to have credibility (expertness and trustworthiness). These influencers were more politically and socially engaged than others, had better political knowledge, and were disciplined in word, and thought, which agrees with extant research findings.

Keywords- opinion leaders, social media marketing, political attitude formation, first time voters

I. INTRODUCTION

Opinion leaders are defined as individuals who transmit information to other people, in terms of the extent to which information is sought by those people (King & Summer, as cited in Sun, et al., 2006). Going back to its roots, opinion leadership is the process by which people (the opinion leaders) influence the attitudes or behaviors of others (the opinion seekers).

Literature finds opinion leaders to be individuals who obtain more media coverage than others and are especially educated on a certain issue. However, Opinion leaders are seen to have more influence than the media for a number of reasons, and this is especially because they are seen as trustworthy and non-purposive (Coleman, Katz, & Menzel, 1957). Indeed, literature states that media is often seen by people as a ‘forcing concept’ and thus less influential. In comparison with general media, opinion leaders tend to have a more changing or determining role in an individual’s opinion or action, which is relatively long lasting.

II. INFLUENCER MARKETING

The use of opinion leaders in marketing activities is a separate mission in itself. Opinions leaders are extensively seen in ‘influencer marketing’. Brown and Hayes (2008) define an influencer as a third party who significantly shapes the customer's purchasing decision, but may never be accountable for it. As Keller and Berry (2003) note, influencers are activists, are well-connected, have impact, have active minds,

and are trendsetters (early adopters). Usually identified as Influencer Marketing, this is increasingly practiced in a commercial context, comprising of four main activities: identifying influencers, and ranking them in order of importance, marketing to influencers, to increase awareness of the firm within the influencer community, marketing through influencers, using them to increase market awareness of the firm amongst target markets and finally marketing with influencers, turning influencers into advocates of the firm (Brown, et al., 2008).

• OPINION LEADERSHIP IN POLITICAL MARKETING

Opinion leaders are the filters of ideas and information. Each industry, issue, interest and ideology has its own opinion leaders. It’s certainly no exception for the world of politics.

The current study conducted was based on first time voters in Sri Lanka, who represent Generation Y individuals (born after 1980) surrounded by tools of the digital age. It is found that a political candidate should receive broad support from the youth population, since many of them are first-time voters and since first time voters often have a tendency to remain faithful to the party they initially choose. The age group of young adults between 18 – 24, is also known to be the dominant active user group of social media networks in Sri Lanka (e.g. 43.99% from total Facebook user population), which further justifies the researcher’s need to base her study on the first time voter group.

The study conducted emerged under a qualitative research approach, with semi-structured in-depth interviews as the main source of data collection. The case study method was selected as the research strategy, upon being justified within Yin’s (1994) conditions for the use of the method. A non-probability sampling procedure was selected to gather data, using a purposive sampling technique. Out of the 26 in-depth interviews conducted, 21 were selected as

the data set, to be used for data analysis; along with this several other sources of data has been used.

- **OPINION LEADERSHIP THROUGH PEERS IN SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING**

The term ‘e-fluentials’ was created by Burson-Marsteller and Roper Starch Worldwide (1999), to describe opinion leaders who spread information via the Internet. Each e-fluential was then found to potentially influence up to 14 people (Burson-Marsteller, 2001). Given a much greater Internet penetration, higher rate of computer literacy, and more user-friendly tools, e-fluentials are likely involve a much larger portion of society today.

Literature observes that the youth, during their adolescent years, spend more time with their peers, where they can be both connected and independent as they start to develop identities of their own. Past literature discusses how the youth may learn the expressive aspects of consumption from their peers and as a result of participants’ online discussions, attitudes and behaviors are altered (Owen, 1999). The growing trend of social media has made it a meeting place for people to share comments and reviews about services, products, ideas, concepts and even politicians. It is indeed worth knowing how the presence of peer interactions can fuel opinion leadership through social media and affect perception and attitude about political messages on social media.

- **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Two distinct groups of first time voters were identified during the data collection process of this study. The first group consisted of a majority of university students who were influenced politically, through exposure to social media campaigns and online peer interactions; the second group included a set of students who directly worked for politicians during the presidential election, and who acted as political coordinators between their peers in the university and the political party they were supporting. This section attempted to identify these influential youngsters as opinion leaders who have a powerful presence on social media networks.

In a discussion held with a professional political marketing body for the 2010 presidential election in Sri Lanka, it was revealed that in organizing a social media political marketing campaign for the governing party, the organizers intended to use the urban youth (who were frequent users of social media), as opinion leaders (influencers) to spread favourable messages among the rural population. Thus, as a first step, social media was used to expose the urban youth to the political campaign launched, in order to increase political awareness, with a secondary purpose of using them as advocates to increase political awareness among other rural youth markets.

The findings suggest that peer interactions that take place on social media networks lead to an influence situation of identification for the first time voter in two forms. Namely, the need for the first time voter to ‘identify with others’ and the ‘need to maintain relationships’. In their ‘need to identify with others’, the first time voter depends on two sources of influence within the context of the university system. That is, ‘the need to identify with undergraduates who directly worked for politicians during (the 2010 presidential) election’ and ‘the need to identify with senior peer groups’.

As suggested by the data findings, students who directly work for politicians and act as coordinators (opinion leaders) between the politician and university undergraduates have been able to successfully induce first time voters through social media interactions, to accept their views. The need to identify role relationships with such politically active peers may materialize from different sources. Since active social media users are found to use social media networks for 2-3 hours a day and 4-5 days a week (interview data), frequently occurring social media interactions can facilitate the identification of these role relationships.

As the second source of influence, senior peer groups also played an important role in persuading first time voters to identify role relationships with them. This becomes apparent in research findings as first year students are always targeted by senior undergraduates as a ‘profitable’ audience to spread political messages offline and online. The obvious reason behind this would be the need for new students to be accepted by their seniors and to be involved in the social circles of the university. A first year student normally goes through a considerable ‘induction’ period where he or she is introduced to the working patterns, culture and norms of the university system. Findings show that senior peer groups, acting as strong opinion leaders, especially make use of this induction

period to persuade their juniors to accept certain political beliefs. The Facebook is increasingly being used as a social media network here, by sending invitations to join political fan pages, tagging junior students on political news posts, pictures and videos, and inviting people to join discussion forums / chats.

Furthermore, it was also found that one's need for identifying with another person strengthened when a particular individual had no fixed political ideology / political opinion of their own. Simply termed as 'on-the-fence' political attitudes, the findings of this research suggest that first time voters are largely ignorant (politically) and lack the political knowledge to form strong political attitudes of their own. Thus, it was seen that first time voters were easily persuaded through social media interactions, to identify role relationships with politically influential peers and senior peer groups, thereby adopting the political attitudes of these influencer groups. As explained before, the frequently and regularly occurring interactions through social media networks easily facilitate the identification of role relationships.

As the second form of being influenced through the identification process, first time voters are seen to form political attitudes through their need to maintain relationships with peers within the university system. In this situation, they are especially interested in maintaining favourable relationships with their senior peers and joining social circles which will help them to fit in easily with the university culture and system. With the latest technology bridging the geographical distance between people, social media offers numerous facilities and options for building and maintaining relationships; indeed, networking is one of the biggest features of social media sites. This may be manifested through actions such as participating in online political discussion forums, emailing, chatting, accepting invitations to join political fan pages and even by helping out peers with social media political activities (such as playing 'administrator' roles). In fact, this study finds that *the need to maintain relationships* with peers can lead to *the need to identify* with the interested party. Associations with senior students, who coincidentally work for politicians as well, can reflect a hidden expectation of first time voters, to get access to other personal rewards such as job opportunities. Thus, the two forms of influence observed through the identification process, 'the need to identify with others' and 'the need to maintain relationships' are seen to be inter-linked.

Strong observations were made on influential university students, who succeeded in inducing politically inexperienced peers; these influencers were more politically and socially engaged than others, had better political knowledge, and were disciplined in word, and thought. This seems to agree with extant research findings indicating that influencers are more likely to promote products or services than others, going out of their way to make recommendations (GreenhoSw, Christine, & Reifman, 2009).

The use of online influence transmission is bound to provide a powerful multiplier effect to politicians, by targeting socially influential youngsters to spread political opinions among their peers. In further support of this connotation, online influencers are more likely than the average youth, to participate in social media activities such as updating their online status frequently or spending more time chatting with people. The study findings show that the time spent online is used to induce peers either on behalf of politicians or through self-created political beliefs. Tagging peers on political news items, displaying political pictures and videos, and inviting peers to join politically supported fan pages, profiles, and blogs are some actions taken by peer groups, to induce people in to joining or supporting a political group (Research data, 2010).

While it is already been practiced by some young politicians (as seen in the 2010 presidential election), this provides a suggestion to political marketers in general that peer groups can be used to influence the youth, in directing them towards various activities on social media (e.g. creating fan pages, political blogs, posting comments related to politics, inviting online discussions, sharing political related information, pictures, videos, tagging others in pictures and videos etc.), and thereby facilitating the process of political attitude formation.

On a broader level, organizations worldwide are becoming acutely aware of the power of the word of mouth that is created through opinion leaders. Products and brands as diverse as Body Shop, Red Bull, Starbucks and Amazon.com provide strong evidence for this. Sri Lanka is still far behind in making strategic use of this powerful marketing channel. Opinion leadership is on a growing trend, especially with the fast growth of social media networks, where its potential can be maximized. The time has come for businesses to ask the question how customers can communicate with each other, in addition to how a business should reach its customers and how customers can communicate with a business. It is during this process of communicating with each other that the power of opinion leaders will emerge, and it undoubtedly has huge potential as an effective advertising medium.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper is based on the research done in partial fulfillment of the writer's Master of Business Administration program. The writer wishes to gratefully acknowledge her supervisor in this endeavor, Dr. M.P.P.Dharmadasa, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Colombo, and mentor Dr.Dinuka Wijethunga, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Colombo.

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