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# MARKETING POLITICIANS ON FACEBOOK: AN EXAMINATION OF THE SINGAPORE GENERAL ELECTION 2011

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**Abstract:**

*In recent years, politicians have been using social network sites in garnering votes and supporters. However, marketing on social network sites is distinctively different from traditional marketing as consumers no longer play a passive role on this new marketing platform. This paper examines the use of social network site by two young female politicians in the recent General Election in Singapore and concludes that campaigning on social network sites raises two important issues. First of all, social network sites allows for the electorate to contribute to the discussion on the suitability of the candidate for political office. The online community can shape the image of the politician and affect electoral outcomes by selecting the type of message to propagate within the social network site. Secondly, popularity in social network sites does not translate into political victory as users of social network sites are generally younger than the electorate and popularity online is a reflection of this segment and not of the larger population.*

**Keywords:** political marketing, Singapore general election, social network sites, elections, campaigning

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, social network sites have grown exponentially in popularity, especially among young adults. Many marketers have seen the growth of social network sites as an exciting new medium to reach consumers as social network sites allow for easy access to a well-defined market segment (Dumitrescu, Stanciu, Tichindelean, & Vinerean, 2011).

Politicians are also keenly aware of the opportunities that social network sites provide in reaching to the electorate. The Obama United States Presidential campaign in 2008 had been one of the most successful campaign utilising social network sites. It demonstrated that social network sites can contribute to both in raising political funds and garnering support (Aparaschivei, 2011; Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Macnamara & Kenning, 2011). Subsequently, many politicians including those outside

of the United States have also moved their political campaigns to social network sites (Aparaschivei, 2011; Macnamara & Kenning, 2011).

In the recent Singapore General Election held on 7 May 2011, the use of social network sites to garner support and votes was also evident. Two young female politicians representing different political parties were contesting in the same electorate division. As they were both young candidates, it was not surprising that both have declared their intention to leverage on social network sites to reach out to voters.

However, marketing on social network sites is distinctively different from traditional marketing. The aim of this paper is to study the use of social network sites as a political marketing tool in the Singapore General Election and to draw lessons on the issues in using social network sites in political marketing.

## **2. Literature Review**

Social network sites are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public profile within a bounded system and articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). They allow for people to stay in touch with their friends and maintain existing social relations in a virtual community through the sharing of information and friendship. As members of social network sites are likely to know each other, there is also a high level of trust and communication within the social network sites (Ridings & Gefen, 2004; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002).

Social network sites are most popular among young adults as they are comfortable with internet technology and have a higher need to belong to social groups (Gangadharbatla, 2008). Recent surveys indicate that most young adults have at least one social network account, with many of them logging on to their social network site at least once a day (Cha, 2009; Gangadharbatla, 2008; Kelly, Kerr, & Drennan, 2010; Peluchette & Karl, 2008).

With the increasing popularity of social network sites, many see social network sites as a new marketing channel. Social network sites are organised around people and their relationships (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Gangadharbatla, 2008). Hence, advertising in social networking sites can be effective as advertising messages are sent by trusted friends to specific targets on the basis of disclosed interests and demographics (Ridings, et al., 2002). In addition, as members of social network sites access their account to relieve boredom or to socialise, they are in a relaxed frame of mind and are more likely to be receptive of advertising messages (Kelly, et al., 2010).

However, marketing on social network sites is different from traditional marketing where marketing messages are devised by commercial organisations and driven to consumers. In traditional marketing, consumers play no role in the process and are powerless. In social network marketing, a network co-production model is in place where consumers are able to influence each other, exchange information and contribute to the production of meaning. Advertisers can initiate a conversation among consumers but will not be able to control the direction that the conversation will head. Consumers have as much power as the advertiser in determining the marketing

message and the cultural meaning of the brand (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009; Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). Marketers are thus exposed to the risk that the marketing message or brand will be corrupted by an uncontrolled discussion on the internet especially since more attention is given to negative opinions made online (Sen & Lerman, 2007).

Politicians are also aware of the potential of social network sites in marketing themselves to the electorate. Some political campaigns have successfully used social network sites to establish relationships with the electorate to raise funds and garner volunteers (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011). However, like other marketing campaigns on social network sites, most political campaigns are still in their infancy in leveraging on the potential of social network sites. Political messages are directed at the electorate instead of interactively engaging them (Aparaschivei, 2011; Macnamara & Kenning, 2011). There is also evidence that politicians are moderating critical contributions on social network sites. This supports the observation that politicians are still uncomfortable with the interactive nature in marketing themselves on social network sites (Macnamara & Kenning, 2011; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008).

Besides allowing a politician to connect with the electorate, especially the younger electorate, social network sites allow politicians to make a case of their legitimacy for candidacy by revealing the number of friends or supporters that they have online. The number of friends that a politician has on social network sites indicates the level of appeal or support. It can become a competition parallel to the actual polls and accords status to the politician (Dalsgaard, 2008; Erikson, 2008).

While the politician will like the number of friends on social network sites to translate into votes, this may not be the case for several reasons. First of all, users of social network sites are younger and may not be eligible to vote (Erikson, 2008). Secondly, an incumbent politician or a politician who is expected to have a high probability of winning in the elections may have more friends on social network sites. This is because as the members of the social network sites can be identified, they may decide to be a friend of the politician to avoid repercussions if the politician does get voted in (Dalsgaard, 2008). Thirdly, social network sites facilitate affective political alliance as it allows the public to easily contribute comments and engage with the candidate. However, this affective political alliance may not translate into votes as voting behavior remains a rational choice that requires a deeper level of information processing than the requirements of clicking a "like" button on Facebook (Erikson, 2008; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008; Vitak et al., 2011).

The above discussion suggested that while social network sites are becoming more popular as a platform for marketing activities including the marketing of politicians, it is different from traditional marketing as it involves members of the social network site to contribute to the construction of the meaning of the brand or advertised product. Specific to political campaigns, social network sites also allow for the politician to make a case for their campaign through a demonstration of their appeal as indicated by the number of friends or supporters that they have online. While this may not translate into actual votes, it can accord status to the candidate in the race to political

office. In this paper, the use of social network sites by two young female politicians in the recent general elections held in Singapore will be examined.

### **3. Methodology**

Newspaper articles on the Singapore elections were sourced through the LexisNexis electronic database. Although Polling Day was in May 2011, articles on the elections were published as early as February 2011. By the end of May 2011, there were no more relevant articles on the elections. The Facebook accounts of various politicians were also examined during the same period to validate what has been reported in the newspapers and to gather data that were not reported. The findings are reported in the next section.

### **4. Findings**

Singapore held its General Elections on 7 May 2011. With voters, especially the younger ones, being savvy users of social networking sites, many politicians have used this new platform to reach out to voters in their political campaigns (Feng, 6 May 2011; Khalik, 2 May 2011; Oorjitham, 5 May 2011). For example, the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, hosted a one-hour long Webchat session via Facebook with netizens to reach out to the electorate for the first time (Tham & Teo, 5 May 2011). Engaging the electorate via social media seems to be a step in the right direction as social media chatter increased thirty times between 13<sup>th</sup> April when the online activity was first tracked and Nomination Day on 27 April (Osada, 11 May 2011).

On 28<sup>th</sup> March 2011, the People's Action Party (PAP) which was the ruling political party in Singapore, introduced its youngest candidate Ms Tin Pei Ling at the age of 27 years old (Cai, 29 March 2011). While Tin had been active in community work for several years, criticisms were quickly levied against her that she was too young and inexperienced for political office. Netizens quickly found a picture in her Facebook account showing her striking a cutesy pose with a designer handbag and a video where she was tongue-tied during an interview. These only fuelled further criticisms of her suitability as a candidate.

A feature of the Singapore electoral system is that some of the candidates will contest in multicandidate slates or Group Representation Constituencies (GRC). As Tin stood in a GRC helmed by former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, she was also criticised for riding on the popularity of the veteran politician to be voted into Parliament. An online petition with over 4,800 signatures demanded for her to step out of the GRC and contest in a single-member constituency to prove her mettle (Toh, 18 April 2011).

Against this storm of online criticisms against Tin, another young woman political candidate from an opposition political party announced her intention to stand for elections in the same GRC as Tin. At 24 years of age, Nicole Seah was the youngest candidate to contest in the General Election.

Seah, a candidate from the opposition political party National Solidarity Party, was arguably the most popular politician in the elections. Six days after starting her Facebook profile, she garnered more than 20,000 'like' votes and became the second most popular Singaporean politician on Facebook. The most popular politician at that time was the founder of modern Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew. Lee clinched the title with more than 50,000 'like' votes. On comparison, Tin only managed 2,750 'like' votes (Chang, 28 April 2011; Chua, 26 April 2011).

Seah's popularity online translated into support for her political campaign. Many people read her Facebook postings and joined in her campaigning (Ong, 25 April 2011). This led to perceptions that Seah was doing all the campaigning for her GRC team (Voon, 28 April 2011). By 2<sup>nd</sup> May, she garnered more than 58,000 'like' votes. She overtook Lee and became the most popular politician in Singapore for a while (Oorjitham, 5 May 2011). She was so popular that the acronyms for her political party, NSP, was thought by some to stand for 'Nicole Seah Party' (Chia, 3 May 2011).

Despite Seah's overwhelming popularity, when the votes were tallied, it was the PAP team that won the electoral contest with 56.6% of the popular vote cast. It is not clear how social media had affected the results and by what magnitude. However, noting that the incumbent PAP team led by a popular former Prime Minister had fared worse than the national average of 60.1% of the popular vote, it indicated that the popularity of Seah must have contributed in part to the electoral results (Chua, 15 May 2011). Indeed, Goh himself acknowledged that unhappiness with Tin and support for Seah contributed to the drop in votes (Chow, 9 May 2011). This was made even more evident when after it was declared that Tin won the elections, at least nine Facebook groups were created against her, with the largest 'I Do Not Want Tin Pei Ling in Parliament' having 45,000 members just three days after Polling day (Osada, 11 May 2011).

## **5. Discussion**

The Singapore general elections demonstrated that social network sites allowed the electorate to voice their opinions regarding the suitability of the two candidates for political office. While both Seah and Tin shared the same demographic profile, the reactions that they received from the virtual community were very different. Tin was flamed in almost everything that she did and said during the campaign. She was also the subject of video parodies and there were petitions calling for her resignation. In comparison, despite Seah being younger than Tin, there was almost no mention of her youth and inexperience for political office. Even when it surfaced that Seah used vulgarities in her Twitter account, it did not attract as much attention as Tin's photograph of her posing with a designer handbag.

In part, the difference in treatment between the two political candidates was due to Seah being notably more eloquent, media-savvy and mature when compared to Tin. However, it was also suggested that Seah's popularity simply arose out of a dislike for Tin's political party (Tan, 9 May 2011). Tin was a member of PAP, the ruling

political party. Grievances and frustrations on unpopular governmental policies may have been vented unfairly on her.

In addition, PAP had a long-standing reputation of attracting some of the nation's best including professionals, civil servants and union leaders to stand in elections. Tin was immediately considered a lesser candidate when compared to the other political candidates that the PAP had fielded. As the weakest member of the team, she may have been an easy target for supporters of opposition parties. In comparison, Seah was from an opposition party. Hence, she was considered an underdog and the public may have been more sympathetic to her cause.

Seah and Tin also adopted different strategies in managing their Facebook accounts. Members of social network sites are looking to establish a relationship with the political candidate (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). For Tin, her Facebook account was maintained by an administrator (Chow & Ong, 17 May 2011). Wall postings by the public were also not allowed. As such, members are unable to establish a relationship with the candidate. In contrast, Seah maintained her own Facebook account although she did confess that she did not have enough time to maintain her Facebook account during the campaign. Seah had to leave it to the participants on her Facebook account to disseminate information and participate in political discussions (Oorjitham, 5 May 2011). This may well be a good strategy as a comparison between the two Facebook accounts showed a higher level of activity on Seah's account and may have endeared Seah to the virtual community.

The above discussion suggests that while the personality and political background of the candidates determine the reactions from the electorate to a large extent, social network sites allow the electorate to contribute their opinions as to the suitability of the candidate for political office and concurrently shape an image of the politician in the virtual community. Unlike traditional political campaigning, which relied on the politicians to project an image to the electorate, this new platform allows the virtual community to search and contribute new information on the candidate. More importantly, by selecting the type of information to propagate through the social network site, the image of the politician is re-defined by the virtual community, and not necessarily in a positive light.

And yet, popularity on Facebook did not translate into a seat in the government. The number of friends and supporters on social network sites can indicate the level of appeal or support that a candidate possess (Dalsgaard, 2008; Erikson, 2008). Within six days of her foray into politics, Seah managed to secure 20,000 'like' votes. A week later, the number surged to more than 58,000 'like' votes and she surpassed the most established politician in Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, to become the most popular Singaporean politician on Facebook (Osada, 11 May 2011).

Interestingly, as if there was some kind of competition going on, two days before the Polling day on 5<sup>th</sup> May, the number of 'like' votes increased to 70,000 for Lee Kuan Yew, surpassing Seah's 67,000 'like' votes. This made Lee the most popular Singaporean politician on Facebook again (Oorjitham, 5 May 2011). 4 days after the election, Seah's 'like' vote figure swelled to 96,500 votes, once again surpassing Lee's

votes of 85,000 fans (Osada, 11 May 2011). This drumming up of 'like' votes by supporters of the different political candidates evidences the importance the virtual community attaches to the number of friends as a gauge of political support for the candidate. While anecdotal, wall postings on Seah's Facebook suggest that supporters have gone to the extent of creating fake Facebook accounts to increase the number of 'like' votes on Facebook accounts to maintain the popularity ratings of the political candidates.

Despite her popularity in the virtual community, Seah lost the elections to Tin. Her political party, the National Solidarity Party, as a whole had also garnered the most number of positive posts on Facebook and Twitter of all the political parties, but it did not win a single contest at the polls. The main reason is that the community on Facebook is not representative of the electorate as Facebook users are generally younger. As veteran politician and Minister for Health, Khaw Boon Wan noted, not everyone is on social network sites and it was important to integrate new media with traditional face-to-face campaigning (Khalik, 2 May 2011). This was confirmed by an analysis of wall postings on Seah's Facebook which showed that she was relatively unknown among the older population without a Facebook account.

The younger population is also more likely to be supporters of opposition parties and hence support on Facebook for opposition parties is generally higher. Indeed, it was almost unfashionable to support the ruling party on the internet (Oorjitham, 5 May 2011). As such, it was possible that supporters of the ruling party may refrain from voicing their support in virtual communities hence creating the illusion that there seems to be a larger support base for the opposition than there actually is.

In addition, on social network sites, the behaviour of posting a wall comment or clicking a 'like' vote does not require much thought as there is little consequence to such behaviours. Voting for a representative in government, however, has much more extensive consequence and therefore, require a deeper level of cognitive processing. As such, there may be a larger number of 'like' votes as compared to polling votes because 'like' votes are given for a different set of reasons as compared to polling votes (Erikson, 2008; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008; Vitak, et al., 2011).

The above discussion suggests that while popularity on social network sites can be indicative of the appeal that a political candidate enjoys, it does not necessarily translate into a victory at the polls. The users of social network sites are generally younger than the electorate and as such, popularity on social network sites merely represents the candidate's popularity in this particular demographic segment and not of the larger electorate. In addition, popularity on social network sites is not a true reflection of the support that a political candidate enjoys because supportive behaviour online is not necessarily the same as voting for a political candidate.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this paper, the use of social networking sites in marketing politicians in the recent Singapore General Elections was examined. It was observed that campaigning

on social network sites is different from traditional campaigning as the electorate can shape the image of the politician and affect electoral outcomes by contributing to the discussion on the candidate's suitability for political office and selecting the type of message to propagate within the social network site. In addition, popularity on social network sites does not necessarily translate into a poll victory as popularity on social network sites can be due to a myriad of factors. More importantly, as the Facebook demographic profile is generally younger than the electorate, popularity online is a reflection of this segment and not of the larger population.

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