Online Campaign in Kenya: Implementing the Facebook Campaign in the 2013 General Elections

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Abstract

The study investigated the implementation of the Facebook campaign in general elections in Kenya. The study utilized the mixed methods sequential explanatory design. Quantitative data was drawn, followed by qualitative data obtained from information rich respondents. Politicians who contested at the presidential, gubernatorial, senatorial, women representative and parliamentary levels in the 2013 general elections in Kenya comprised the study population. A sample size of 338 respondents was drawn. The quantitative data obtained from the administration of questionnaires was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Qualitative data obtained from interviews with key informants was transcribed and divided into meaningful analytical units which were coded for content analysis. Findings show that most candidates were at the implementation stage of the Facebook campaign and consequently did not extensively implement the use of the technology. Additionally, candidates used conventional media in their political campaigns, confirming that in as much as the use of social media was on the rise in Kenya, the conventional media still played a key role in elections. The study recommends training politicians and their campaign staff on the strategic use of social media for political marketing.

Keywords: Communication campaigns, Facebook, general elections, diffusion of innovations

1.0 Introduction

Political campaign in Kenya has witnessed changes over time. One of the changes in the past decade is the implementation of the online campaign. One of the key platforms used for online campaign is social media, and Facebook in particular. A number of politicians in Kenya employed social media for political marketing in 2013 elections in Kenya (Odinga, 2013; Freedom House,

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2013; Ndavula & Mueni, 2004; Wasswa, 2013), and even in the previous elections in 2007 (Odinga, 2013).

Implementation of the online campaign in Kenya is in line with global changes in political campaign communication. These global changes have been described as transformations with a typology consisting of three stages; the pre-modern, the modern and the postmodern stage (Farrell & Webb 2000; Plasser & Plasser 2002). The pre-modern campaigns were local, ad-hoc and inter-personal. The partisan press was the primary intermediary between the political parties and the citizens, and the electorates were characterized by stable social and partisan alignments (Norris 2001). The modern stage was characterized by campaign activities being increasingly coordinated at the central party level with the help of professional consultants. Television took centre stage as the primary campaign medium and the electorate became detached from their traditional social and partisan ties (Blumler & Gurevitch 1995; Dalton, 2000; Norris 2001). In the third stage of campaign communication, the postmodern stage, the role of political consultants in political campaigns has increased, the news media has become fragmented into several channels, outlets and levels, and the electorate has even further de-aligned in their voting choices (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Norris 2001). The rise of the Internet in the postmodern era has led to what has been initially referred to as Americanized style of campaigning, where the Internet has been used in innovative ways (Römmele, 2003).

The Obama's presidential campaign of 2008 and 2012 presidential elections demonstrated the use of social networks as powerful tools for governments and political parties to mobilize their supporters. The 2008 presidential election for instance, was a ground-breaking moment in United States history. The success of the Obama campaign was the integration of technology into the process of field organizing. Technology was used as a partner, an enabler for the Obama campaign, bringing the efficiencies of the Internet into the real world problems of organizing people in a distributed, trusted fashion. Obama used Facebook to target the 18 to 29 age group, the age group most reliant on new media for political information about the election (Pasek, Kenski, Romer, & Jamieson, 2006). Poll numbers showed that Obama increased his presence and activity online and this eventually reshaped the form of campaigning. Facebook was focused on message, money, mobilization and relationship building (Silberman, 2009).

Facebook is a type of social media which is a web-based tool that allows users to create and share content and information online. Facebook is 'social' in the sense that it is created in a way that enables users to share and communicate with one another (Bohler-Muller & Merwe, 2011). Facebook, which was one of the first social media tools of its kind, was launched in 2004 and today has over 600 million users worldwide (Bohler-Muller & Merwe, 2011). Facebook is a free social networking website that allows users to add friends, send messages, post updates, share photographs, links and videos, and participate in groups. The total number of Facebook users in the world is 1, 886 560, with the largest user age group being between the ages of 25 – 34. Kenya ranks number 64 globally in the ranking of Facebook use by country, and number seven in Africa (Socialbakers, 2013).

The development of political marketing in Kenya reflects increasing adoption of campaign styles and techniques from Europe and the US, and the use of social media for political marketing is a key component among them. In Kenya, politicians have adopted Facebook in their campaigns (Ndavula & Mueni, 2014), but few studies have researched on the extent of the implementation. This study therefore focuses on how Facebook has been used for political marketing.

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1.1 Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent was the Facebook campaign was implemented?
2. What were the communication strategies utilized in the Facebook campaigns?

2.0 Theoretical Review

The study was informed by the Diffusion of Innovations theory developed by Everett Rogers (1995). Diffusion of Innovations seeks to explain how technology is taken up in a population. Diffusion is defined as the process by which a technology is adopted and gains acceptance by members of a certain community (Rogers, 1995). Given that decisions are not collective, each member of the social system faces their own innovation-decision that follows a 5-step process. According to Rogers (1995) the first step is knowledge where, a person becomes aware of an innovation and has some idea of how it functions. The second step is persuasion, where a person forms a favourable or unfavourable attitude toward the innovation. The third step is decision, which involves a person engaging in activities that lead to a choice to adopt or reject the innovation. The fourth step is implementation, in this stage the individual uses the innovation to a varying degree depending on the situation. During this stage the individual determines the usefulness of the innovation and may search for further information about it. The final step is confirmation, in this stage the individual finalizes their decision to continue using the innovation and may use the innovation to its fullest potential. Facebook is considered the new technology which politicians adopt at varying degrees. The study sought to ascertain the level of implementation of Facebook in the 2013 General Elections in Kenya.

The study was also guided by the social marketing theory. This theory assumes the existence of an information provider who seeks to bring about useful, beneficial change. According to Baran and Davis (2009) social marketing includes methods for inducing audience awareness of campaign topics or candidates during elections. The theory gives such providers a framework for designing, carrying out, and evaluating information campaigns.

Baran and Davis (2009) observe that social marketing theory recognizes the existence of the media, and affords it a role as a conduit through which politicians communicate to the electorate. They further posit that the media are effectively assumed to be tools at the disposal of politicians. Media include both mainstream media like the Television and Radio as well as new media channels such as the Internet and the World Wide Web. In this sense then, the theory provides a framework within which to interrogate the role of Facebook as an online campaign platform that political candidates can utilize.

The third theory that informed the study was Castells' theory of network society (Castells, 1996; 2004; Castells et al., 2004) which was instructive in terms of understanding the contemporary dynamics transforming the practice of politics around the globe. Castell (2004) defines a network society as a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technologies. Applied to political communication, this theory implies that social media produce communicative spaces within which interaction between politicians and voters is possible. Seen in this way then, this theory gives us a framework within which to interrogate the use of social media as a tool for political mobilization in Kenya. It helps illuminate how electronically produced space can be used for political communication in a networked society.

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3.0 Methodology

The study utilized the mixed methods sequential explanatory design. Quantitative data was obtained from respondents, followed by qualitative data obtained from respondents who were found to be information rich. Politicians who contested in the presidential, gubernatorial, senatorial, women representative and parliamentary levels in the 2013 general elections in Kenya comprised the study population. The quantitative phase drew a sample of 338 respondents from a total population of 2807 political candidates. In the qualitative phase, 20 information rich informants were sampled. The quantitative data obtained from the administration of questionnaires was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Qualitative data obtained from interviews with key informants was transcribed and divided into meaningful analytical units which were coded for content analysis.

4.0 Results and Discussion

4.1 Type of Social Media Used

Information was sought on the type of the social media used by the politicians in the 2013 general elections. The results were as summarised in Figure 1. The findings show that 78% of the politicians used Facebook in their elections campaign, while 5.6% used twitter, with a further 3.7% using websites. The findings indicate the popularity of Facebook is on the rise. The popularity of Facebook stems from the fact that it is more affordable to implement. Whereas Facebook is considered as a communication platform for the masses, Twitter is considered as an elite platform. Facebook provides more flexibility in terms of type of messages and size while Twitter is concise. Researches that support this view include those conducted by Evans-Cowley & Hollander (2010), Gueorguieva (2008), and Whitney (2010). Research also indicates that Facebook has more reach than Twitter in Kenya (Kemibaro, 2011; Kenya ICT Board, 2010; Synovate, 2009; Wyche, Schoenebeck, & Forte, 2013; Wasswa, 2013). It follows then that politicians utilized Facebook so as to reach a wider constituency of voters.

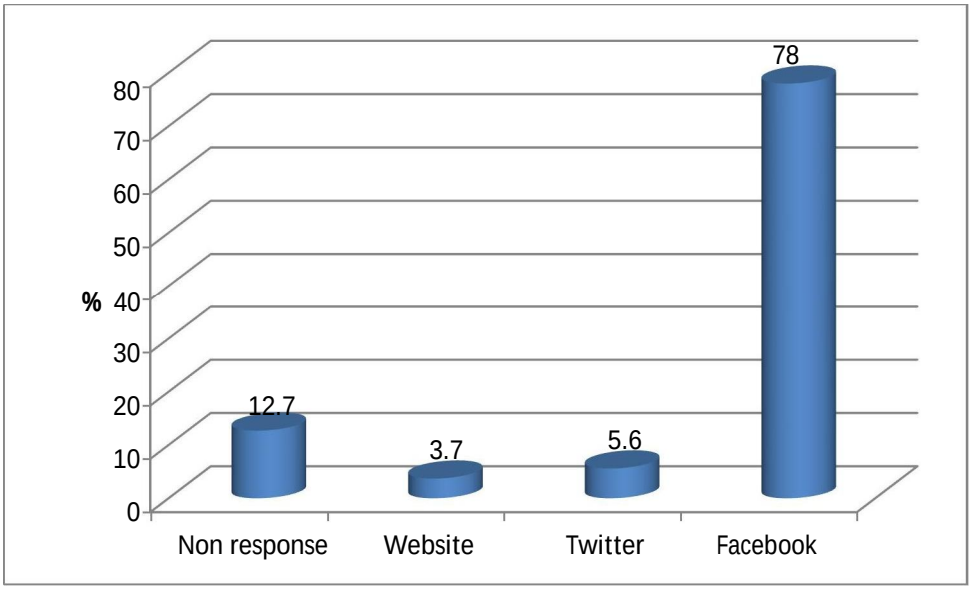


Figure 1: Type of Social Media Used by Politicians

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4.2 Other Types of Media Used by Politicians in the 2013 General Elections

Other medium used for the general election campaigns were as summarised in Figure 2. Findings show that the majority of the politicians used posters (92.1%), and radio (69.1%). This could be attributed to the relatively low cost of advertising associated with these media. Other media used included bill boards (40.3%), newspapers (37.2%), and television (32.5%) which are relatively expensive and a preserve of better financed candidates. Candidates used traditional media in their political campaigns, confirming that in as much as social media use were on the rise in Kenya, the traditional media still played a key role in elections.

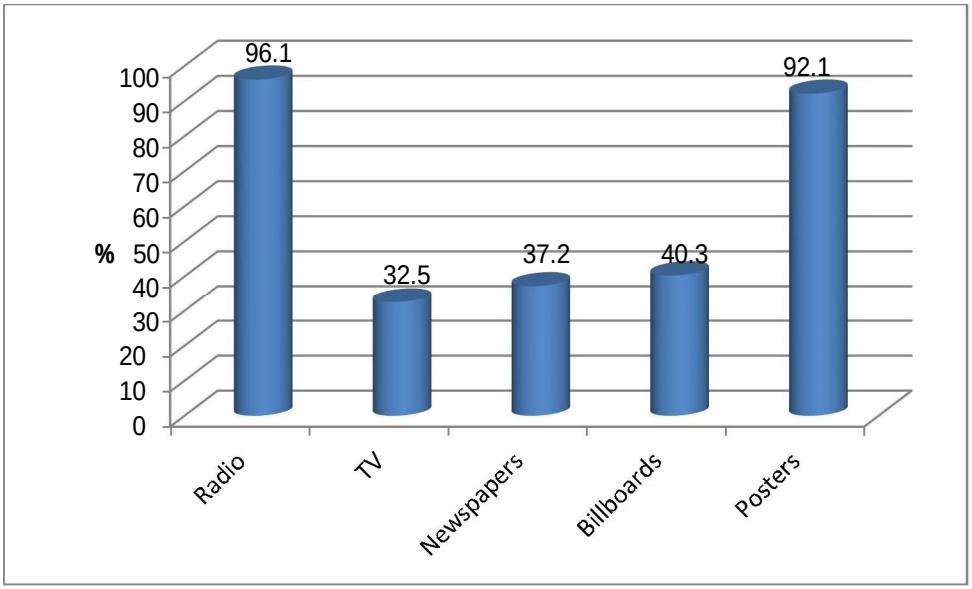


Figure 2: Other Media Used by Politicians

4.3 Frequency of Social Media Posts

To establish the frequency of the social media posts, the politicians were required to indicate how regularly they posted content on their Facebook campaign sites. The results were as shown in Table 1. The findings indicate that 57% of the candidates updated their sites almost daily, 27.7% updated them almost weekly, while 3.6% updated them almost monthly and a further 2% posting almost yearly. Although we found that a higher number of candidates had adopted social media (78%), few of the candidates (57%) had followed through with full implementation by posting content on a daily basis. This implies that 38.2% of the candidates are at the confirmation stage of Facebook adoption for their campaigns, because they are only using it partially. According to Rogers (2003) in this stage the individual uses the innovation to a varying degree as they determine its usefulness, before they make a final decision to use it fully in the confirmation stage.

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Table 1
Frequency of Social Media Posts

	Frequency	Percent
Often/Almost daily	175	57.0
Sometimes/Almost weekly	85	27.7
Rarely/Almost Monthly	11	3.6
Never/Almost Yearly	6	2.0
I don't know	16	5.2
Non response	14	4.6

The findings imply that the potential of social media for political marketing has not been fully exploited by political candidates. One social media consultant for a senatorial candidate observed that: “you need to update your Facebook every 6 hours or so, so that you can manage anything that is going round.”

Another social media strategist for a presidential candidate stated that:

“Updating social sites depends on the activities that you have. Activities that you have during any particular day will set a certain social media agenda, hence how often you post.” It is clear therefore that the potential of social media had not been fully exploited by the candidates who were posting infrequently.

4.4 Time Spent on Social Media

Findings in Table 2 indicate that 35.9% of candidates spent 31-69 minutes on each visit to their Facebook site, while 29.8% of candidates spent less than 30 minutes with a further 16% spending 61-90 minutes. It can therefore be inferred that a majority of the candidates spent around an hour every time they visited the Facebook sites. This practice may not be very helpful because the objective of social media use is to provide regular information so that the audience feel connected to you and to events as they happen. Therefore spending less time on each visit while increasing the frequency of visits, would be more beneficial than spending lots of time on each single visit. Interviews with social media consultants confirmed this view. One social media consultant for a presidential candidate stated:

> “It depends on how active you want people to view you, whether you want to be a dormant politician or a leader who is out there, doing something. Updating content regularly can help improve one’s image.”

Table 2
Time Spent by Politicians on Social Media Site on Each Visit

	Frequency	Percent
Less than 30 minutes	54	29.8
31 - 60 minutes	65	35.9
61 - 90 Minutes	29	16
91 - 120 Minutes	12	6.6
More than 121 minutes	11	6.1
I don't know	10	5.5

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4.5 Nature of Messages Sent

Findings in Figure 3 show that the majority of the politicians sent text messages every time they updated their timelines as confirmed by 88.5% of the politicians. Other posts included photos (77.5%), and photos with captions 71.7%. The least utilized form was video messages with only 36.1% of politicians reporting usage. We can therefore infer that text and photos are the most deployed forms of messages. Interviews with politicians and staff on social media campaign team seemed to support this position. For example one social media staff on a presidential campaign team stated that:

> "Our campaign was structured in such a way that as we moved towards the election, there were different things we were highlighting; from the launches, to the manifestos, to the rallies. Our updates would include both text messages and pictures to make voters follow us constantly."

Although text was the most popular message form (88.5%), some social media strategist challenged the use of text, preferring photos instead. A social media strategist for a gubernatorial candidate stated:

> "I would say photos are more important than text because they speak much. Text may fail to go viral but photos can. Also, a single photo with a small caption for example 'this is where I met several people' adds a lot of value. Photos are worth a thousand words there is evidence that you were at a particular location. For example if you take a photo at a local market or a *bodaboda* [bicycle taxi] stop, people can be able to identify with it. It can establish an emotional connection."

In addition, most candidates posted photos without captions. We can conclude that captioning messages would have helped sell their messages even more. Our interviews with social media experts indicate reveal that the best way to capture an audience's attention is to use a photo with a caption. Therefore social media's full potential as a tool of political marketing has not yet been explored by the candidates and their skill and expertise levels need improvement.

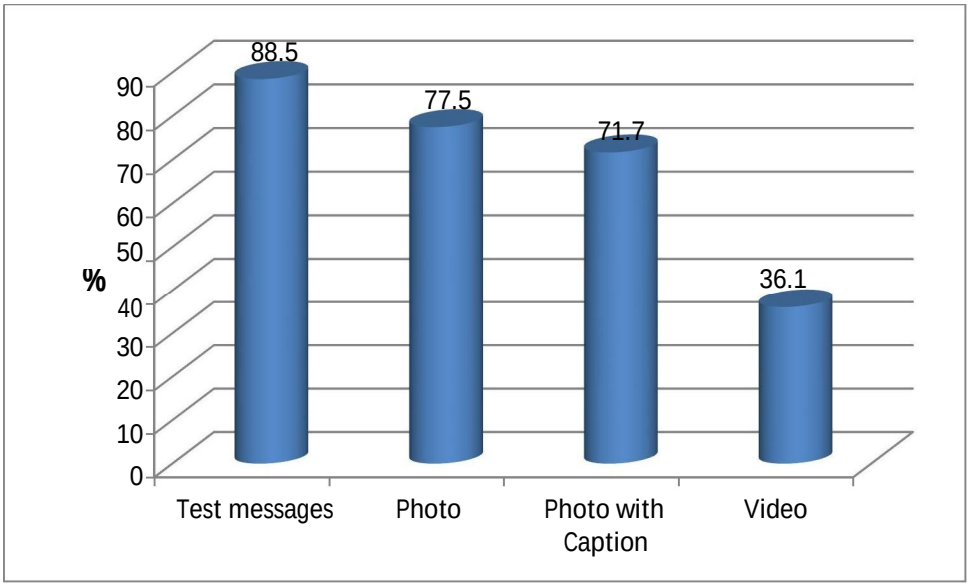


Figure 3: Nature of Messages Sent

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4.6 Content of the messages sent

Findings in Figure 4 show that the majority of the politicians used social media to mobilize supporters to rallies and demos (79.1%), for general communication with supporters (78.0%) and for announcing events (77.5%). Other uses included: sharing party position (74.4%), sharing personal achievements (73.3%), and appealing to undecided voters (69.6%). Least among the uses was soliciting for campaign funds (44.5%), and appealing to voters in diaspora (50.3%).

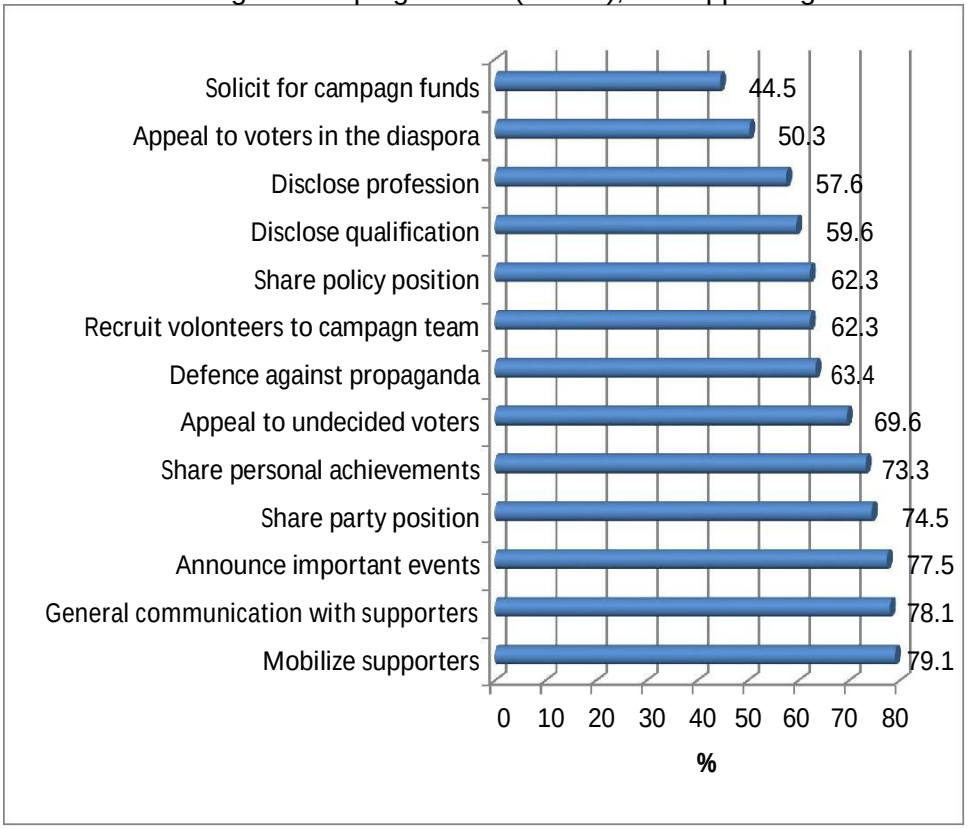


Figure 4: Content of Message Communicated by Politicians

Several inferences can be made from these findings. Firstly, candidates posted a variety of content on social media. A majority of the content was geared towards creating awareness about their candidature. This included content geared towards mobilizing supporters to rallies and demos (79.1%), general communication with supporters (78.1%), and announcing events (77.5%). The strategy to create awareness on candidature, is in line with Baran and Davis (2009) observation that political candidates use the media to induce audience awareness of their candidature during elections.

Secondly, part of the effort of Facebook was dedicated towards candidates' identity formation. Such content included sharing party position (74.4%), sharing personal achievements (73.3%), sharing policy position (62.3%), disclosing personal qualifications (59.7%), and disclosing profession (57.6%). These findings were corroborated with interviews held with key informants. A parliamentary candidate stated that: "…campaigns involve identity formation, where a candidate portrays the image he wants others to see." This view is supported by Hall (1997) who recognizes the pluralizing impact of the Internet on the construction of identity.

Thirdly, it is instructive to note that 63.3% of effort on social media was geared towards defense against propaganda. According to the social marketing theory, one of the potent

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promotional strategies in electoral campaigns is staging negative campaigns, that is, staging a direct or indirect comparative assault against the position of the opponent and/or her personal characteristics (Cwalina, Falkowski, & Newman, 2011; Niffenegger, 1988). The fact that more than half the politicians responded to negative campaign messages shows that a significant number of politicians in Kenya employ propaganda on social media as a marketing strategy. A senatorial candidate observed:

> "If there is propaganda going on via social media, it can negatively affect the politician's campaign and hence influence the election outcome negatively. This is more so if you have opinion leaders who act as influencers. They could to their networks and state a particular negative view and say "even on social media so many people are saying this is true."

This indicates that propaganda emerged as a strategy for achieving political expediency in Kenyan elections.

Fourthly, only half of the politicians (50.3%) used social media to communicate with voters in the diaspora. This shows a remarkable trend in politicians recognizing that their campaign efforts transcended the confines of space and time. Concepts like time, space, and distance obtain new meanings because of the proliferation of networks of electronic communication, which as, Castells (1996) has pointed out, represent the new social morphology of our societies. Indeed, interviews with politicians and staff on their social media campaign team noted that the people living in the Diaspora influenced voting patterns in their home constituency hence the need to use social media to target them. Therefore politicians saw their campaign efforts transcending the confines of space and time.

Fifthly, there is a stark difference in the ways social media are used for political purposes in developing countries and developed countries. Whereas in developed countries social media sites are used mainly for the recruitment of volunteers, organization of the campaign, mobilization and fundraising (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasques, 2011; Davis et al., 2009; Greyes, 2011; Schlozman et al., 2010; Straw, 2010; Sudulich & Wall, 2010). In Kenya, which is an example of a developing country, social media sites are used majorly to mobilize supporters (79.1%), as a platform for general communication with voters (78.0%), and to announce party events (77.5%). A further observation is that while in developing countries social media are used for fundraising, in Kenya it ranks low in the order of priorities coming in last at 44.5%. A possible explanation for this is that it is not a tradition to for politicians to raise funds through their supporters. Another explanation is that there are no established channels for sending money although the mobile platforms, though with the emergence of money transfer systems such as M-Pesa and Airtel Money, this gap may soon close. One other factor that impedes the utilization of the fundraising capability is that there is no legal support for such avenues of fundraising.

5.0 Conclusion

The diffusion of innovation literature served to inform our research objectives, analysis and interpretation of our data on the extent to which campaigns adopted the Facebook tool. The analysis demonstrated the importance of differentiating between the decision to become an early adopter and the extensive implementation and use of the technology once it has been adopted. For instance around 40% of the candidates are not fully utilizing the potential of social media for their campaigns.

A majority of the politicians used text messages. There lesser use of the other available forms such as video and photos. This shows that the candidates did not optimally use social media. This could stem from a lack of knowledge, a lack of expertise or even slow internet speeds both at the point of internet access for the candidate and also for the would be receivers. Yet , photos could

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offer the most advantage because they are an easy hook to a user who has limited time to spend on social media.

The content of messages candidates sent was diverse. Candidates used social media to create awareness about their candidature, for identity formation, for defence against propaganda, and to communicate with voters in the diaspora. We can therefore infer that social media are effective in political communication, and facilitating interaction between candidates and voters and therefore can act as political marketing tools. Even though the nature of political communication and engagement on social media is casual and less formal, social networking sites can still play important role in politics and their potential needs to be fully exploited. Social media go beyond simply communicating the campaign's theme. Active engagement by the candidate and a well-maintained site can make the candidate more accessible and seem more authentic.

There is a stark difference in the ways social media is used for political purposes in developing countries and developed countries. Whereas in developed countries social media sites are used mainly for the recruitment of volunteers, organization of the campaign, mobilization and fundraising, in Kenya, which is an example of a developing country, social media sites are used majorly to mobilize supporters, as a platform for general communication with voters, and to announce party events.

It is instructive to note that candidates used traditional media (such as posters, radio and television) in their political campaigns, confirming that in as much as social media use were on the rise in Kenya, the traditional media still played a key role in elections. We can therefore conclude that though mobilization of voters must be primarily done offline social media must be utilized together with other media to supplement campaigns in complementarity and mutual dependency.

Finally, the difference in utilization of social media between political candidates in the developed countries and those in developing countries can be accounted for by the network society theory. The theory presents an informational paradigm where political actors are seen as having the capacity to act on the communicative network, and thereby presenting a possibility for those actors to reconfigure the network according to their needs, desires, and projects (Castells, 2004). Therefore the ways in which Kenyan politicians use social media differs from those of developed countries shows how politicians in the context of developing countries are adapting social media to suit their own unique needs.

6.0 Recommendations

The first recommendation is that campaign teams should frequently post on Facebook. The essence of social media is its immediacy and any campaign on such a platform needs to reflect this urgency characteristic of online audiences.

Secondly, candidates should explore functions such resource mobilization on Facebook. Subsequent to this is the formulation of laws governing online resource mobilization which would regulate this function.

Thirdly, specialized trainings on political marketing through social media should be conducted. To effectively leverage social media as a marketing platform, candidates and staff on their campaign teams need training. These trainings will help political actors to harness the power of social media to diffuse political messages by establishing a heavy social media presence and saturating the sites with targeted messages for consumption by voters. Training can also help the actors to ensure that their communication with voters is not top-down but horizontal, thus enhancing their relationship with voters and maximizing voter turnout.

Finally, candidates should prefer to have personnel managing their social media campaigns. This would help in professionalizing campaigns. Professional teams would employ a variety of

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form and content for the messages as well as exercise caution to prevent legal challenges for material bordering on defamation and slander. Responsible use of social media is important to protect and guide freedom of expression on social media.

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