



HAS WORD OF MOUTH ADVERTISING IN CYBERSPACE AFFECTED IRAN'S 2017 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS?

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ABSTRACT

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The main objective of political marketing is to facilitate the exchange and benefit for political groups. In this process, special tools and techniques are considered that political marketing seeks to increase the power of political groups in political conflicts, especially in the electoral constituency. Unofficial consumer communications bring many opportunities and opportunities for marketers. The most serious issues that arise for election parties are the negative damage caused by the rumors. Optimistically, political marketers can use word of mouth (WOM) communications for voters in a variety of ways. A total of 110 questionnaires were distributed electronically among the participants in the Iranian presidential elections of 2017. In this questionnaire, the effects of WOM advertisements on the image of the party and its effect on voter turnout were examined. Demographic information was analyzed by using the SPSS software. Data were analyzed by using LISREL software. Results showed that WOM advertising (intensity, positive valence, negative valence) has had no effect on the image of the parties, and the positive or negative behavior (recommendation to others / lack of advice to others).

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the effect of cyberspace and word of mouth advertising on the behavior of voters. The focus of this paper was on the two main parties of the election (The Right Party / The Left Party) in Iran. Before the elections in the cyberspace, there was a lot of hunch among the supporters of the two parties. In this study, the questionnaires were distributed one month after the election, we examined the psychological propaganda on the behavior of voters.

1. INTRODUCTION

The most effective way of implementing democracy in today's societies is the election in which the rivals do not hesitate to try to be elected. In recent years, many parties and constituencies have used marketing techniques to compete in this field. Political marketing is the attempt to preserve or change the attitudes and perceptions of competitors and society (voters) towards the individual, the party or a group (Ahmadinejad and Najafi, 2017).

One of the issues ahead of governments, especially those that claim democracy, is to raise the level of participation of the people in the election. All countries are monitoring the number of voters and increasing the number of voters. Political parties use marketing tools as part of electoral campaign activities (Parasuraman, 1997).

WOM¹ marketing is more prestigious than other marketing techniques, as only 14% of people are trusted to read or hear what they see in commercials. More interestingly, 90% of people trust their family, friends or colleagues who approve a product or service because they know that there is no benefit to them in this confirmation (Alire, 2007). In the present era people like to talk privately, 80% of WOM communication takes place in a live conversation and 20% of the conversations are online (Balter and Butman, 2005). Goyette *et al.* (2010) stated that WOM is also probably the oldest means of exchanging opinions on various services (Graham and Havlena, 2007).

Nowadays election campaign is being handled by advertising agencies. Advertising agencies considered voters are as customer, Political parties as a company that attempt to attract customer to vote them. Political parties offers customized promises through online social media in every election like business houses do (Safiullah *et al.*, 2016). The new media has created a new chapter in the campaign for each candidates like the trademark, can create sales opportunities (Rival and Walach, 2009). The aim of this article is to measure the effect of WOM on vote gained by political parties and thus predicting the popularity of political parties to the 2017 Presidential election in Iran. This study examines the effect of WOM advertisements on public behavior and image of the party, its significance as a measure of popular opinion and how it predicts popular opinion with the help of an evaluation of WOM advertising in online social media and its relationship with electoral outcomes.

1.1. Why WOM Advertising is a Powerful Force?

WOM is connection to services between people that are perceived to be independent of the company providing the service, in a medium perceived to be independent of the company (Silverman, 2001) while online WOM is any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a service or company which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the social media (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004).

The source of the consultation is probably familiar, speaks our language and is able to show our favorite subjects. It may be possible to ask questions about this person, approve or change the thought formed and allocate additional information whenever required. No propaganda media will provide such an arrangement of strong advantages to the customer and that is the main reason why WOM counseling is such an extraordinary force of the market (Silverman, 2001). The effect of WOM advertising on the behavior of voters can be expressed in three phases: 1. Knowledge Stage: The primary goal is to inform people on factors affecting the behavior of voters, the design of the message and the nature of the communication between the sender and receiver of the message. 2. Interest Stage: At this stage, message recipients have the primary purpose of the message and if they have more interest, they will enter the stage of development. 3. Final decision: This stage has a significant difference in politics because they decide to choose in this step.

It should be remembered that the ultimate goal of WOM marketing is to impress voters' perceptions of the candidate they want. This marketing technique affects voters with low educational levels or those who are not interested in politics. It should be noted that those who have low political opinions and lacking high loyalty may choose their candidate with a limited image and very little information (Bruyn and Liline, 2008).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF RESEARCH

For scientific and systematic research, a scientific and theoretical framework is required. In this study, we used Jalilvand and Samiei (2012) and Goyette *et al.* (2010) study.

Jalilvand and Samiei (2012) in their research examined the effect of online WOM presentations on buying intention and brand image in the Iranian automotive industry, and their results showed that WOM advertising is one of the most effective factors affecting the purchase of car customers and brand image (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012). H1: WOM advertisements have a positive effect on the image of the parties in the election. In another study

¹word of mouth

by Goyette *et al.* (2010) on 218 online shoppers, they have been able to measure the scale of electronic WOM advertising Goyette *et al.* (2010).

H2: WOM advertisements have a positive effect on the behavior of voters.

Table-1. Word-of-mouth advertisements

The Authors	Subject	Findings
Goyette <i>et al.</i> (2010)	E-WOM Scale: Word-of-Mouth Measurement Scale for e-Services Context	A battery of statistical tests reveals that the WOM construct encompasses four dimensions: WOM intensity, positive valence WOM, negative valence WOM and WOM content. Our proposed e-WOM scale can be used as a strategic tool for business managers aiming to improve their word-of-mouth marketing strategies.
Argan and Argan (2012)	Word-of-Mouth (WOM): Voters Originated Communications on Candidates during Local Elections	The findings indicate that personality, party situation, social integration, and demographics, background and attributes, party affiliation, promotional efforts, and communication and modesty are positively associated with encourage, discourage, to be influenced by interpretations, and to be influenced of election decision.
Safiullah <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Social media in managing political advertising: a study of India	The findings suggest that there is a positive correlation between the volume of tweet and vote share.
Basil and Bassey (2016)	Repositioning Nigeria: Application of Marketing Communication Tools by Political Parties in Campaign Programs	The results show that marketing communication tools such as advertising, word-of-mouth marketing, and public relations enhance political campaign programs

Source: Fieldwork (2018)

3. METHODOLOGY

This research is a descriptive research that describes the characteristics of the sample and generalizes it to the statistical community. Also based on the purpose, it is an applied research and since it deals with the effect of Word-of-Mouth advertising on the behavior of voters in a multivariate model, it is a correlation type based on the method. The statistical population of the study was voters in the presidential elections in 2017 in Iran. An online questionnaire was used to collect data. In order to analyze the data and test the hypotheses, structural equation modeling was used. In general, the sample size for determining the structural equations can be determined from 5 to 15 observations per measure variable ($5q \leq N \leq 15q$). Since the questionnaire has 14 items, so we need 98 samples with 7 views per item. 130 questionnaires were distributed randomly among virtual space users, 20 of them were incomplete and finally 110 questionnaires were used for the study. The questionnaire used in this study was a standard questionnaire provided by Goyette *et al.* (2010) and Asayesh *et al.* (2011). The first section included demographic information that included three questions about gender and education and age that was analyzed by SPSS 22.0 software. In the second part of the questionnaire, 14 special questions were used to measure the variables of the research that was analyzed by LISREL 9.30 software.

3.1. Normality Test of Data Distribution

Before using the structural equation modeling, two basic assumptions should be considered: 1 - Sample size sufficient. 2- Distribution of data is normal. Due to the large size of the sample the first condition is observed. Then, the normal distribution of data must be ensured. Non-parametric Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was

used to test the normal distribution of data in this study. The results are shown in the table (4). According to the table (4), the data for all the variables in the research have a normal distribution.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

The results of the descriptive statistics presented in the below table (2) show that 58.2% (64 men) were male respondents and 41.8% (46 persons) were female respondents. 33.66 percent (37 people) had the highest number of bachelors. Most of the respondents were 45.5 (50 people) between the ages of 30 and 40 years.

Table-2. Demographic characteristics of respondents

	Factor	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Men	64	58.2
	Women	46	41.8
Age	Under 20	8	7.3
	20-30	45	40.9
	30-40	50	45.5
	40-50	4	3.6
	Above the 50	3	2.7
Education	Diploma	11	10
	Assistant	21	19.1
	Bachelor	37	33.6
	Master's degree	33	30
	Doctorate	8	7.3

Source: IBM SPSS Statistics 22.0

Before the second part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked about their favorite party and they were asked to answer the questions according to their favorite party. The following are the responses provided by the respondents.

Which party did you choose in the 96th presidential election?

Table-3. Answer to question 2 of the questionnaire

	Frequency	Percent
The Left Party	49	44.5
The Right Party	48	43.6
Other Parties	13	11.8

Source: IBM SPSS Statistics 22.0

Iran has two major political parties with the highest tendencies towards this party. The Right Party² has its roots in the *Shiite* tradition and the governing of religious rulers over the country plays a central role in its thinking. According to them, credibility of the whole political system, more than any other factor, is based on the decree and ideas of religious rulers. The Right Party is traditionally conservative and emphasizes traditional social relationships but the Left Party³ emphasizes the implementation of the constitution in order to respect the rights of the people and attempt to increase political freedom. These parties believe the guarantee of legal and political freedoms is the most important component for social and political growth and they emphasize these values in relation to other political and social issues. The Left Party gets its support among the middle class, lower class, religious groups of the political body and among the middle class layers of bureaucracy (Asayesh *et al.*, 2011). In the present study, they participated almost equally from both parties.

² fundamentalist

³ reformist

Table-4. Descriptive statistics, factor load and Cronbach's alpha coefficients

variable	Question	Mean	Standard deviation	factor load	Cronbach's alpha
intensity	(In the cyberspace) I talked to many people about this party before the election.	3.66	2.1	1.04	0.879
	(In the cyberspace) than other parties, I talked more about this party before the election (The Right Party / The Left Party / other parties).			0.98	
Positive valence	(In the cyberspace) I talked about the positive aspects of this party before the election (The Right Party / The Left Party / other parties).	7.77	3.85	0.97	0.899
	(In the cyberspace) I would feel proud to tell others that I am a supporter of this party (The Right Party / The Left Party / other parties).			0.86	
	(In the cyberspace), I often told others the positive points of this party (The Right Party / The Left Party / other parties) before the election.			0.86	
	(In the cyberspace) strongly encouraged others to adopt this party (The Right Party / The Left Party / other parties) before the election.			0.98	
Negative valence	(In the cyberspace), I often reminded others of the negatives of this party (The Right Party / The Left Party / other parties) before the election.	8.02	2.03	0.92	0.877
	(In the cyberspace) before the election, I did not define and praise the party (The Right Party / The Left Party / other parties) in dealing with others.			0.92	
Party image	This party (The Right Party / The Left Party / other parties) has a more legitimate background.	3.88	1.93	0.95	0.843
	The supporters of this party (The Right Party / The Left Party / other parties) have more confidence.			0.86	
Behavior	(In the cyberspace) I would eagerly recommend this party (The Right Party / The Left Party / other parties) to others.	5.7	2.9	0.90	0.843
	In spite of other parties, I would prefer the party (The Right Party / The Left Party / other parties).			0.90	
	(In the cyberspace) I was eager to recommend to this party before the election (The Right Party / The Left Party / other parties) to others.			0.96	

Source: IBM SPSS Statistics 22.0

The mean, standard deviation, factor load and Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the variables of the research are shown in the above table (4). It is noted that the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for all variables in the research is higher than 0.70 and considering that the minimum required reliability coefficient for research questionnaires is 0.70, it can be claimed that the validity of the research questionnaire is desirable and is reliable. It is also observed that all factor loads are above the acceptable level of 0.5, which indicates the suitability of the convergent validity of the measurement tool.

5. RESULT

The first step in the research model test is to estimate the fit or fit of the model. Therefore, in the present research, the research model was first tested using fitness indicators, the results of which are presented in the table (5).

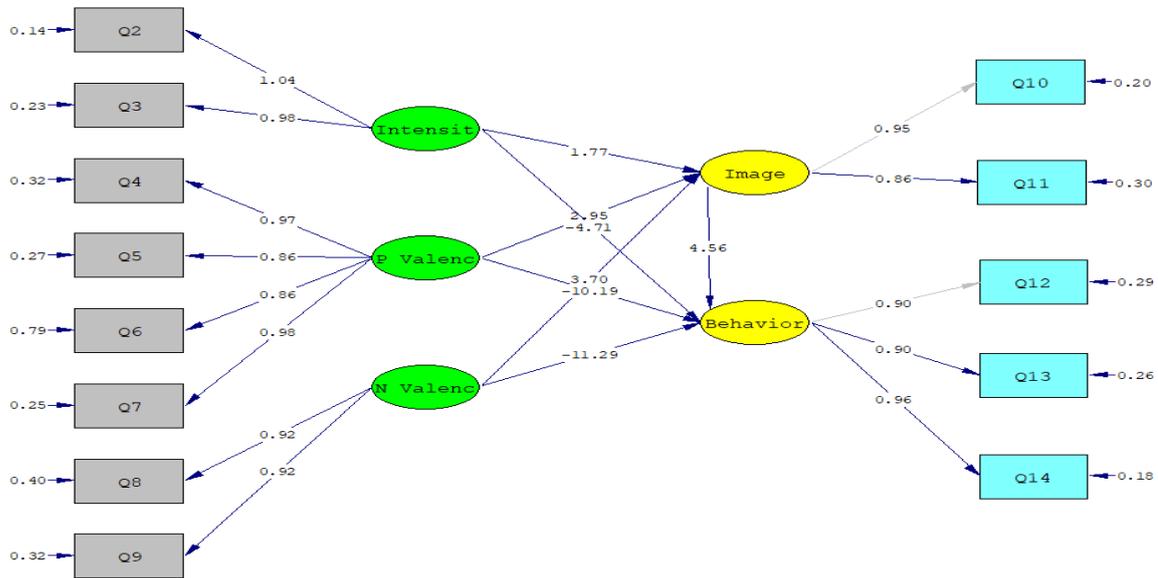


Fig-1. Structural Equation Model

Source: LISREL 9.30

Table-5. Model fit indices

Fit indices	value
Chi-Square	91.22
DF	55
RMSEA	0.077
RMR	0.027
GFI	0.892
NFI	0.947
NNFI	0.969
CFI	0.978

Source: LISREL 9.30

The LISREL software provides various indicators for fitting the model, one of the most important of which is presented in the table (5). With the help of these indicators, it is possible to decide on the acceptability or non-existence of the whole model. The value of χ^2 should be greater than 0.05. With a large sample, the best indicator of model suitability is the RMSEA index and this is much more accurate than other indicators and the value of this index should be less than 0.08 in order to evaluate the appropriate mediation. The values of the GFI, NFI, NNFI and CFI should be equal to or greater than 0.9 to be considered. Considering the values of the calculated indices, the research model can be evaluated appropriately. The research model is suitable for data.

The t-test statistic and t-value were used to examine the significance of the relationship between the variables. Because the significance is checked at the error level of 0.05, so if the observed factor load is calculated with a T-value of less than 1.96, then the relationship is not significant and is shown in red in the following figure (fig2).

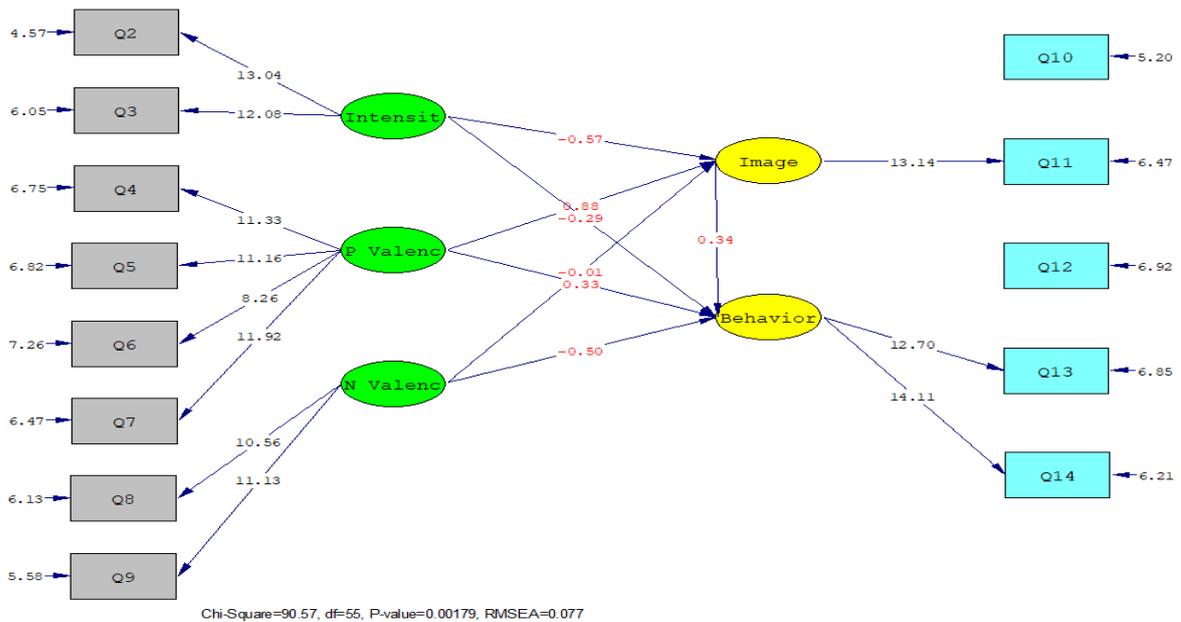


Fig-2. T-Value Structural

Source: LISREL 9.30

Because the T-value is smaller than 1.96, it can be concluded that the research hypotheses are rejected. Therefore, it can be concluded that in the above-mentioned research, WOM advertising (intensity, positive valence, negative valence) has no effect on the image of the parties, and the positive or negative behavior (recommendation to others / lack of advice to others).

6. CONCLUSION

Political advertising can increase citizen engagement with political issues. Jaeho (2007) for example has observed that the volume of campaign adverts in the media increases the citizens' use of the news media, suggesting that when there are more political adverts in the media, citizens become more inclined to discuss political matters. Brader (2005) argues that campaign adverts encourage voters to participate in elections by appealing to their emotions.

The simplest form of political participation is to vote citizens for parties, individuals and politics. Free competition and elections are an integral part of electoral democracy. In addition to the traditional tools of political marketing the use of modern political marketing tools will be useful for increasing political participation and the use of modern political marketing tools to promote political participation is recommended. Among these tools, broadcasting of television debates and symbolism has become the most commonly used modern marketing tools for increasing popular participation in recent years. The results showed that word of mouth advertising does not affect the image of political parties and thus and thus has no effect on voters' behavior, but in Perloff study stated that almost all political advertisements, whether negative or not are likely to be perceived as socially undesirable because of their persuasive nature (Perloff, 1999). Wei showed that political advertising on social media may have some positive effects; voters seeing this type of advertising might be motivated to engage not only in political discourse but also in the distribution of advertising to their peers and finally the potential influence of perceived influence of political advertising via social media on self may lead to attitudinal and behavioral responses (Wei and Golan, 2013). Many of the advertising tools available on social networking sites allow voters to post comments and publish them (Trammell, 2007).

Researchers at the Pew Research Center stated that political tweets on Twitter often were a call to action, encouraging citizens to vote (Skoric *et al.*, 2012). Romero showed that the Twitter hashtags⁴ (Word of mouth Advertising) for politically controversial topics were persistent across time and people use hashtags when publishing content (Romero *et al.*, 2011). Ahmadinejad stated that the buzz in cyberspace before the 2017 presidential election in Iran, including sending photos and video, advertising slogans, and the content will not change anything (Ahmadinejad and Najafi, 2017).

Ultimately, it's important that using marketing techniques should observe ethical principles. Eventually, campaign executives carry out appropriate programs, put propaganda into propaganda programs through the design of specially designed television channels, the creation of radio networks, the launch of a particular newspaper party or candidate, the creation of special social networks for participate parties and candidates or participate actively in social networks and advertise web site addresses and party online email addresses in their online marketing campaigns. Ahmadinejad *et al.* (2017) stated that curiosity is the emotion most wanted by the respondents in cyberspace and it can be a reason for people to follow political events and why officials must care about what is going on social media (Ahmadinejad *et al.*, 2017). The role of propaganda in social networks is very important as political propaganda contributes to winning political parties, as well as the failure of a party to be elected, it may also depend on negative political propaganda. Advertising on social networks at a time may be beneficial for the parties and use it to win but when it publishes and spreads content against the same party, they are filtering out the social network for example filtering some of the social networks after the victory of the 2017 presidential election is seen in Iran.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has some limitations. The major limitation is that the questionnaire was distributed electronically, it was found that only people that have been evaluated were familiar with cyberspace and the applications used that many people were refusing to fill it. Perhaps this questionnaire was distributed to traditional manually this limitation be wiped out and this study was based solely on the WOM propaganda of Iran's 2017 elections and on two particular parties but having different campaigns in divergent political contexts would enhance the generalizability of this study. Thus, more studies replicating our case study are needed. Finally, this study is limited to Iran and it can be considered in other countries due to the spread of these types of propaganda campaigns. In Iran, at a wider level or in other elections the results of this study can be generalized.

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