Savera Shami [*]
Sana Naveed Khan [**]
Ayesha Ashfaq [***]

Crafting Political Images on Twitter: Analysis of Public Relations Strategy of Politicians of Pakistan

Abstract

Social media has emerged as an "essential element of public dissertation and communication in the modern era" (Muntean, 2015, p. 6) and gives an absolutely new perception about how people engage in political discussion with one another. Majority of politicians now vigorously use social media to improve their public image and relations and stimulate political ideologies and preferences. The politicians are now the producers of their own internet based content and engaging far more consumers of information than ever before, especially in terms of their political gains. They can shape and share the political messages with greater freedom. Normatively, it should be done in a positive and respectful manner but it has been observed that the prevailing situation is quite opposite as social media are also being used as propaganda tool to defame others. The politicians many a times entirely supersede the social standards and democratic norms. In this scenario, it is considered important to explore how the politicians are building their images on Twitter, what type of language they are using to communicate their messages and what type of content they are posting on Twitter? Therefore, this study intended to explore the significant factors of public relations strategy of the politicians of Pakistan. It attempted to discover the types of language politicians embed in their tweets and tactics they use to make their place on Twitter? The study in hands is motivated by the usage of Twitter by the Members of National Assembly of Pakistan in last democratic regime (2013-2018). As per findings, MNAs are busy in creating negative image of others with the use of critical language.

Keywords: Social Media, Language, Usage, Politicians, MNAs of Pakistan, Twitter, Political Communication, Political Public Relations[1]

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[*] *Dr. Savera Shami, Assistant Professor, Institute of Communication Studies, University of the Punjab Lahore. Email: saverashami@gmail.com*
[**] *Sana Naveed Khan, Assistant Professor, Institute of Communication Studies, University of the Punjab Lahore. Email: sananaveedk@gmail.com.*
[***] *Dr. Ayesha Ashfaq, Assistant Professor, Institute of Communication Studies, University of the Punjab Lahore. Email: ayeshaashfaq.ics@pu.edu.pk*

Introduction

Social media has emerged as an "essential element of public dissertation and communication in the modern era" (Muntean, 2015, p. 6) and gives an absolutely new perception about how people engage in political discussion with one another. This is claimed that development in new communication and information tools has reformed and modified the present political communication approaches (Kurt & Karaduman, 2012). Social networking platforms like Facebook and micro-blogging services like Twitter have the prospective of optimistically persuading the political dialogue and engagement as discussed in the work of Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2012).

Majority of politicians now vigorously use social media to improve their public image and relations and stimulate political ideologies and preferences. Social media has provided novel opportunities to the politicians, like personalized communication and self-commodification. Social media has offered widened freedom of speech and extended opportunities of creativity. The politicians are now the producers of their own internet based content and engaging far more consumers of information than ever before, especially in terms of their political gains. The politicians can shape and share the political messages with greater freedom and consistency by creating their own individuality, nurture the life long relationship with the public and administer their repute themselves without relying on any PR specialist. Normatively, it should be done in a positive and respectful manner but it has been observed that the prevailing situation is quite opposite as social media are also being used as propaganda tool to defame others. It's all about a brawl to authenticate themselves right and others wrong. In this struggle politicians many a times entirely supersede the social standards and democratic norms. In this scenario, it is considered important to explore how the politicians are building their images on Twitter, what type of content they are producing on Twitter and what type of language they are using to communicate their messages? Therefore, this study intended to explore the significant factors of public relations strategy of the politicians of Pakistan. It attempted to discover the types of language politicians embed in their tweets and tactics they use to make their place on Twitter? The study in hands is motivated by the usage of Twitter by the Members of National Assembly of Pakistan in last democratic regime (2013-2018).

1.2. Rationale for Selecting Twitter

There are around 336 million people who have their own Twitter handles worldwide (Brockmann, Steiglitz, & Xuan, 2012). Twitter is considered to be a powerful vehicle for self-flattery by providing political actors the capacity to connect with large numbers of people and give them updated information

regarding their political activities nearly promptly, hence linking themselves in direct political PR (Aharony, 2012). Like other western democracies, the use of micro-blogging service (Twitter) by the politicians of Pakistan is also increasing day by day. Their presence on Twitter shows that they are very much aware of the importance of this medium as a perfect carrier of their message. According to a study almost 25 % of Members National Assembly were using Social Media to communicate with their potential voters (Shami, 2017). It has been observed that in Pakistan, the politicians are relying on twitter to a great extent to disseminate any information, thus involving themselves in direct communication with the audience. The politicians are now able to construct and destruct the images, they can post anything without going through any selection or evaluation process, thus minimizing the role of the gatekeepers. In the light of importance of Twitter and its use for political communication by the MNAs, the following research questions have been formed:

R.Q.1. What type of content MNAs are sharing on Twitter?
R.Q. 2. What kind of language style do MNAs of Pakistan employ in their political tweets?
R.Q. 3. Which tactics do MNAs use more for developing public relations i.e. self-promotion or attacking opponents on Twitter?

2.0. Strategic Political Communication: Theoretical Framework

The theoretical groundwork of under discussion scholarship revolves around Strategic Political Communication and Political Public Relations through Social Media, where the politicians are creator of their message and the voters are their clients or consumers. "It's strategic for the politicians to use political rhetoric to convince public to react in the manner they (the politicians) desire" (Alvi & Jalilifar, 2011, p. 44), hence, Twitter provides politicians, an opportunity to inform large numbers of public about the political doings instantly, involving themselves in political public relations (Aharony, 2010). Political public relations provide more wide-ranging and comprehensive opinion of political strategic communication. That is the reason, since few years, social media is considered as ideal platform for strategic political communication and political involvement is continuously snowballing via social networking sites. Nowadays, majority of the politicians handle their personal Twitter accounts to directly interact with the public. The rapidly growing popularity of Social media has changed the panorama of public relations. The politicians are seen altering and modifying the communication strategies thus making social media as an imperative cut of it. Since political public relations is studied as a branch of strategic political communication, the emerging usage of social media and web has a vital space in this discipline.

The very description of social media is based on the theory of two-step flow of information, which can support in disseminating and promoting democracy by incorporating contribution of citizens, information of various government goals, and wider aspects for political engagement. Social media focusses on "interaction, co-creation of content, subscription-based information services, and third-party application development" (Toledano, 2017).

2.1. Political Public Relation and Twitter

The political public relations is a rising dimension of scholarship by inclusion of conventional public relations and political communication. The chief importance of this new dimension orbits the examination of the public by communicating opinion and concerns to the news media. However, Rudiger and Froehlich (2006) explained that key aim of political public relation is the extensive use of media platforms to explain particular political viewpoints, declarations, and explanations of matters to collect public backing to support political policies and election campaigns. It is worth mentioning here because of the uprising inclination of personal publication, the people who are involved in political public relations don't rely much on traditional media to communicate and approach their target public.

Strategic public relations can be taken irregular or even unscrupulous if despite being strategic, the results are not satisfying the objectives of an organization, mainly or exclusively (Toledano 2017). Most of the people in Public Relations field (Heath, 2001; Heath, Pearce, Shotter, Taylor, Kersten, Zorn & Deetz, 2006) argued the necessity of discourse (Kent & Taylor, 2014) as a main component for the construction of dependability and principled relationships (Paquette, Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015) between the organizations and the stakeholders (Stewart & Zediker, 2000; Pieczka, 2011, 2015). The public relations specialists have started considering the function and power of uprising web tool, weblogs or blogs for short, as a method to explain and approach the key public (Hannegan, & Blackshaw, 2005) and construct relationships (Kelleher & Miller, 2006).

On Twitter the whole interaction depends upon the rules of social interaction and multidirectionnel communication which enables the public to form and sometimes impose their own agenda rather than the agenda of media. Since response in conventional media is postponed and most of the times even absent, the communication is fixated on broadcast or unidirectionnel communication, the flow of which is just top to down. Therefore, the construction of communication intermediated by social networks experienced considerable alterations from the one explicated in this third phase of development of political communication. Chun, Shulman, Sandoval, & Hovy (2010) claimed that the political leaders and the government use Twitter to upsurge the impression of conventional practices of

press notes, press releases and press conferences. They also use these social networking sites to send their messages to unlimited number of audience (Chun & Warner 2010; Bertot, Jaeger, Grimes 2010; Chun et al. 2010; Jaeger & Bertot 2010). In the study, Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, and Glaisyer (2010) further enhanced the study by adding that Twitter would be an effectual platform of freedom of expression and impartiality. Shogan (2010), in his study also highlighted the fact that these social networking websites have an ability to modify essential communication strategies.

Steiglitz, Brockmann, and Xuan (2012) said that this new developing technology concerned tool like Twitter is cogitated as less funded means of direct constituent communication which escapes the high cost and huge budgeted political campaigning of conventional political publicity on television. In last few years, social media has developed as most prevalent form among all other forms of media. People use social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Linked Inn, etc. to communicate with one another. These sites are studied as a medium for sharing happenings, attitudes, approaches and behaviors and also, they are the medium for dialogue and discourse (ibid). Keeping the world scenario and the existing literature in view, this research is focused to explore that how the legislators of Pakistan are making use of this highly interactive and inexpensive medium to communicate with their audience. A well planned strategic communication can aid the politicians to achieve their political goals easily and effectively and they can build better image of themselves without the intervention of any third party. In this work, the language used by the MNAs is taken into consideration, believing the fact that language is the most important and crucial element and the success or failure of any communication depends on its language and the tactic used for image building.

3.0. Methodology

In this research, the quantitative content analysis is employed. The data from Twitter accounts of 34 politicians is collected. The content of Twitter accounts is core concern of the scholarship as to distinguish what they are posting on Twitter and how they are using it deliberately. The data is gathered from the official twitter accounts of the Members of the National Assembly of Pakistan (MNA). In order to avoid the possibility of selecting any fake account, the official information was obtained from the Research Cell of the National Assembly of Pakistan. As per list provided, 84 members claimed that they use both Twitter and Facebook. Twitter accounts of 84 members were then traced, finding many of them are not tweeting anything since long. So, 34 members were selected out of 84 on the basis of consistency in their daily Twitter usage. In this research, purposive sampling is employed to select Twitter accounts of MNAs. To fulfil the objectives each and every tweet is selected which was posted by the member in November, 2016. Total

1930 tweets are collected from the Twitter accounts of selected members during the month of November, 2016. The study is conducted in non-election time period to see that how MNAs are using Twitter in routine considering the fact that election is a time when everyone wants to be connected with the audience in every possible manner. Therefore, it would be interesting to see what they are doing on Twitter during non-election period, as this time period can be the most beneficial in terms of generating social capital because the audience would take their opinion more seriously and believe in their statements whereas in election days everyone knows that it's a winning tactic.

3.1. Categories, Sub-Categories and Indicators

The nature of content, PR tactic and Language is further divided in to sub categories for the detailed analysis. The sub categories and indicators are stated below:

Nature				
Sub-Categories				
Link/sharing	**Meme**	**Giving news**	**Opinion**	**Blessed words**
MNAs sharing any link to newspaper, TV program, article etc.	Any image or piece of text distorted, animated, humorous and sarcastic in nature with slight variations	If MNA is breaking some news to the audience or giving information about any incident which is just happen or updating about any incident.	O Opinion includes the personal statement of the MNA, his own view point on some issue.	Any verse from Quran, poetry, quote of any famous personality or proverbs
PR Tactic				
Self-Promotion	**Party Promotion**	**Opponent Attack**	**Self-Promotion + Opponent Attack**	
Any content which promotes his own personality, praising himself, sharing pictures in which sleeping or eating with the workers, presenting himself as hero	Any content which promotes or praises his party, party leader or other members, presenting party leader or members as hero, using words like Moses, man of steel etc.	A Any content shared by MNA which criticizes the opponent party or leader e.g. prime minister would be in the jail for the first time, calling other person corrupt	Any content shared by MNA which criticizes the opponent party or leader and praises themselves or their party, e.g. calling their leader Moses and other Pharaoh.	

Language				
Insulting for Others	**Appreciation for self**	**Appreciation for other**	**Criticism on others**	**Threatening**
Any tweet containing derogatory words or foul language, like dacoit, donkey	A Any content in which the MNA is praising and admiring himself	A Any content in which MNA is praising and admiring any other person	Any tweet containing teasing stuff or words like "Ijaz Ch. Bringing 5000 people", "At least he didn't get married this time". The post or tweet shared to condemn or criticise any one or his/her actions.	Any tweet containing threats like if our condition will not be fulfilled we will shut down the city

Table 3.1. **Sub- Categories and Indicators**

4.0. Results and Discussion

In order to fulfil the objectives and answer the research questions, the content analysis of Twitter accounts of 34 MNAs is conducted according to the categories mentioned in table 3.1.Keeping in view the results shown in Table 4.1, regarding the nature of tweets, it can be observed that highest percentage i.e. 50.2 % of the content is based on sharing some links to article or videos. This means that they are not producing much content themselves but using the already produced/shared content with their audience. Then 36.4 % of the content is based on the opinion of MNAs, and it can be said that its is their own content, they are giving their point of view on any issue and showing picture of their side to the potential voters. Only 6 % of the content is giving some new information or news to the audience.

Nature of Content						
	Link/Sharing some image, video, article	Memes	Giving News	Opinion	Blessed Words	Any other
Tweets N=1930	50.2 %	2.0 %	6.0 %	36.4 %	3.3 %	2.1 %

Table 4.1: **Nature of Content on Twitter and Facebook**

According to the results shown in *Table 1,* it is very much clear that majority of MNAs i.e. 32.4 % are busy in attacking their opponents whereas 26 % of the total tweets are about their self-promotion. Third place goes to party promotion and the tweets containing both self-promotion and opponent attack are only 5.4 %.

PR Tactic				
Self- Promotion	Party Promotion	Opponent Attack	Self-Promotion + Attack	Any other
Tweets (N=1930) 26.0 %	17.5 %	32.4 %	5.4 %	18.7 %

Table 4.2: **Tactic Used by MNAs**

The results shown in Table 4.2. also strengthen the observation that MNAs are using Twitter to build negative images of others and using it as a propaganda tool. Though it may be beneficial for them but it may not have positive effect on the society in the longer run. The politicians are the opinion leaders and their audience see them as their role models and if they are using Twitter for destruction rather than construction then it also encourage their voters and supporters to post the same type of content.

The results shown in Table 4.3. analyse the language style used in the tweets by the MNAs. According to the findings of the language in the tweets, the highest share i.e. 37.5 % is of the critical language whereas 31.1 % the content has self-appreciative language. The lowest share is of the tweets containing threatening language and the use of abusive language is also low which contradicts the prediction that MNAs would be using very abusive language for their opponents.. It means they are critical of their opponent but use of language which is not socially acceptable is quite low. It is worth mentioning here that though this percentage is low but it does make difference, because whenever they use it, it has no filter.

Language					
Insulting for Others	Self-Appreciation	Appreciation for Others	Critical	Threatening	Other
Tweets N=1930 3.4	31.1	5.1 %	37.5 %	0.9 %	22 %

Table 4.3: **Language used in Tweets**

Therefore, according to the results, the MNAs are using more critical language for others and the percentage of the tweets attacking their opponents are also highest. The members put their political messages to criticize their adversary only to fulfill their political interest; they try to use social media for their positive self-promotion and negative publicity for others, expecting more social acceptance and following for themselves. These findings if seen together, perfectly reflect the mindset of the MNAs. Their strategy is so obvious that they are using Twitter to defame

others, creating negative images of opponents; and for that purpose using critical language.

They are more interested in defaming others. It can also be said that to some extent they are using it very strategically to achieve their own goals and objectives irrespective of its effects on the audience and society. It may be a fragment of political agenda but when they affront others and use insulting language, it also harms the moralities of the society. While analyzing the Tweets, it is also observed that the selected MNAs are depicting themselves as true creator of nation and savior. This attests that the political leaders can go to any degree just to prove themselves correct and the other person incorrect. They share taunting posts and make fun of the opponent. Another interesting factor revealed is that the tweets reflect the ability of political actors to use the same contents in diverse manners to achieve their objectives like any public relations expert. It is also observed that in all of the Tweets, MNAs post content and announcements from their own viewpoint and show one side of picture, the side that supports them. This is an exceptional instance of how the political actors are now acting like public relations professional for themselves. The MNAs are found critical of other leaders and do not hesitate to involve in the personal life issues of their opponents.

5.0. Conclusion

With the help of findings and discussion, it can be concluded that MNAs are posting more shares and linked to other content and producing less content themselves, though its easy to use already produced content but to get maximum benefit they should discuss their point of view more so they can help in forming public opinion. This would also give them an excellent opportunity to lead the discussion about any issue in their desired direction and the basic purpose of strategic communication would be fulfilled. It is also very clear that MNAs are consuming
Twitter more for attacking their opponents and also using more critical language on Twitter for their opponents. This can be safely inferred from the findings that they are using Twitter strategically for their political communication as they are using critical language to create negative image of their opponents. They are trying hard to achieve their goals and it also strengthen the opinion that the politicians absolutely believe that Social Media is the best platform to propagate their own political ideology and it can be their perfect mouth organ. The politicians can aid in strengthening democracy by becoming true opinion leaders, promoting harmony and sharing their accomplishments/achievements in their tweets rather than defaming or attacking others.

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