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ARTICLE

Blog influence and political activism: An emerging and integrative model

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Abstract Internet has elicited a new decision making process in the area of political marketing thanks to the emergence of new communication tools. This paper focuses on weblogs as pioneer players on Web 2.0 in order to ascertain their actual sphere of influence on individuals' political behaviour. Focusing on the case of weblogs and assuming a wide and integrative theoretical approach, a hybrid model which merges marketing, technology and political science is proposed and tested using a sample of 39 weblogs and 890 blog users in an innovative attempt to shed light on these virtual-physical dynamics. The results are promising and open the door to the comprehension of a new, emerging framework where Internet tools are intended for a major, critical role in the political arena.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Marketing político;
Internet;
blogs;
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Comportamiento político

Influencia blog y activismo político: un modelo emergente e integrador

Resumen Internet ha favorecido un nuevo proceso de toma de decisiones en marketing político gracias al surgimiento de nuevas herramientas de comunicación. El presente artículo se centra en los blogs como agentes pioneros en el contexto de la web 2.0 con el objetivo de determinar su nivel de influencia real sobre el comportamiento político individual. Centrando el análisis en el caso de los blogs de naturaleza política y asumiendo un extenso e innovador marco teórico de partida, se propone un modelo híbrido en el que confluyen marketing, sistemas de información y ciencia política que es validado a partir de los datos de una muestra de 39 blogs y 890 lectores en un intento innovador de conocer más acerca de estas dinámicas reales y virtuales. Los resultados son prometedores y abren la puerta a la comprensión de un nuevo y emergente ámbito de trabajo en el que las herramientas de Internet cobran un papel más relevante dentro de la arena política.

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Introduction

Political activism is a well-known construct (Hoffman, Jones, & Young, 2013; Norris, 2005) whose effects on voting have already been addressed (Franklin, 1996; Vecchione et al., 2015). Nevertheless, research on how political activism is formed and its antecedents have scarcely been studied and, to a lesser extent, in an online setting. Since the term 'weblog' was first coined and defined, blogs have evolved rapidly, the barriers for starting a weblog have increasingly diminished and they have come to cover almost every topic of interest (Levy, Journell, He, & Towns, 2015; Moen-Larsen, 2014; Voicu, 2015). The political sphere is no exception and with a popular issue, a blog can attract attention and exert considerable influence on individuals (Hsu & Lin, 2008). Since 2003, when the first strategically-oriented political blog was created (Howard Dean's 'Blog for America'), politicians and political organizations have massively incorporated the use of blogs and social media in their plans and programmes too (Adams & McCorkindale, 2013; Hong, 2013; Kruikeimeier, 2014; Mergel, 2013; Yi, Oh, & Kim, 2013), whereby academic political marketing research seems to be falling behind.

Although a number of studies on the impact of technologies on political behaviour have been carried out recently (Criado & Rojas-Martín, 2013; Lilleker & Jackson, 2013; Panagiotopoulos, Bigdeli, & Sams, 2014; Park, 2013), the use of a political marketing approach is still scarce (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012). This paper attempts to gain a deeper insight into this line of research by proposing an integrative model including innovative constructs such as political activism and subjective political knowledge where blogs occupy a central position. Hence, the objective here is to assess the influence of blogs on political activism by emphasizing on website factors, such as perceived usefulness, perceived trustfulness and perceived information quality.

Thus, a structural setting of factors in which blog usage and political activism are lastly connected has been proposed to foster a solid relationship between online and offline contexts and to increase the importance of a relationship marketing approach in the political field. Given that non-voting periods are less intense in political activism, focusing on these periods can exhibit straightforward relationships not biased by voting behaviours that might be triggered by immediacy and online and offline candidates' campaigns. Voting behaviour, indeed, has been widely researched (Falkowski & Cwalina, 2012; Sheth, 1976), but little attention has been focused on political behaviour in the ordinary political cycle and even less on interactive technologies applied to political contexts.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, a theoretical framework is developed and the derived hypotheses are proposed. A special emphasis will be given to the theoretical framework section, beyond the specific theoretical support of each hypothesis, aiming to anchor this new communication tool and the type of interactions into established conceptual frameworks. The second part describes the methodology used and then the discussion of the results is presented, which addresses the questions and outlines the managerial implications, limitations and directions for future research.

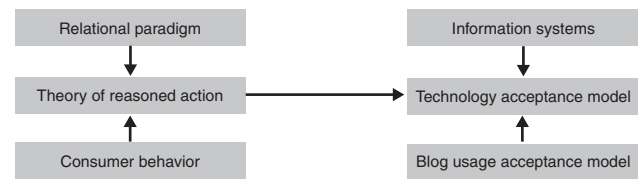


Figure 1

Theoretical framework and empirical model

Theoretical framework

Generally defined as websites where people write about recent events or topics of their own interest, blogs are technically analogous to common websites (Chesney & Su, 2010) and the core of the proposed model and a clear example of interactive communication tools. From a theoretical perspective this research is anchored in the following previous contributions: (i) considering blogs as an interactive nature, given that the quantity of information is the most important determinant of interactivity and that is, exactly, the common feature of all blog dynamics (Rafaeli, 1988; Song & Zinkhan, 2008). (ii) Since blogs allow various individuals –and even organizations– to engage in mediated communications which result in exchanges between them and blog authors and other readers over time, this can be embraced by the relationship marketing theoretical framework (Grönroos, 1994) and lastly fed by Vargo and Lusch's (2004) service-dominant logic. Fig. 1 delineates the conceptual relationships that will be justified below.

Relationship marketing has particularly been strengthened by the impact of new knowledge technologies (Sheth, 2002). However, in the field of political marketing, the application of this relational paradigm is new, as long-term relationships are created between voters and politicians in order to make public policies sustainable in times of crisis or uncertainty (Lees-Marshment, 2014). In turn, key topics of relational paradigms such as collaboration, trust and commitment or value addition seem to have been consistently transferred to the Internet scenario, where users constantly interact and blogs become an information source for a range of fields, such as political issues. This interaction orientation is becoming increasingly important in marketing according to Vargo and Lusch's (2004, 2008) service-dominant logic, in which the customer is always a co-creator of value. In our context, this means that blog users could get involved with the political blog in a wide range of interactive processes which might result in cognitive or behavioural experiences. These encounters between the site and the user are defined within the limits of the conceptual framework for co-creation of value (Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008), whose guidelines are also assumed by this paper.

Since the political market is ideologically biased, many political blogs reinforce social cleavages and, as a result, groups of people become virtually linked and reinforced in virtual communities. This paper will not focus, however, on the aggregate blogosphere as a unit of study, instead, the analytical framework is based on pioneer consumer behaviour models (Engel, Kollat, & Blackwell, 1978; Howard & Sheth, 1969; Nicosia, 1963). Their key and

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