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Public Perception of Social Media as a Platform for Political Campaigns: An Analysis in the Digital Era

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Abstract

In this research, the hypothesis is explored using the perception of people about social media as a campaign system with regard to the efficiency and moral consequences of the targeted advertising. By applying the qualitative methods, the study examines the user reaction towards emotive political advertisements and the effects of emotive political advertisements on political system trust. The results indicate that although targeted advertising serves as an effective way to make the voters interested in the immediate future, it frequently results in long-term disengagement and distrust. The respondents also raised serious concerns regarding any breach of privacy and the control of emotions appeals pointing out that there should be more regulation and transparency in political advertising. The study is relevant to the existing literature because it gives insights into the emotional and ethical aspects of digital political campaigning, the need to encourage actual political participation in the digital age.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media as a tool for political campaigns has revolutionized how political actors engage with the public. In the digital era, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are no longer just social networking sites but powerful channels for political communication, influencing not only the dissemination of information but also shaping public opinion. In fact, many scholars have recognized social media's role in democratizing political discourse by enabling direct engagement between political candidates and voters (Enli, 2017; Kalsnes, 2016). As political campaigns increasingly move into the digital sphere, it becomes critical to understand how the public perceives these platforms in the context of political campaigning, and what factors influence these perceptions.

One key aspect of social media's influence in political campaigns is its ability to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, allowing politicians to directly address their constituents. This shift has been particularly significant in regions where media outlets are tightly controlled or where public distrust of traditional media is high (Waisbord, 2018). The unmediated communication style offered by social media has allowed political figures to craft their messages more freely and dynamically, often reaching large audiences with minimal cost (Kruikemeier, 2014). As such, social media has become a vital tool for campaigners seeking to mobilize voters, especially

younger demographics who rely more heavily on digital sources for political information (Theocharis et al., 2020).

However, the rise of social media as a campaign tool has also sparked debates about its impact on the quality of public discourse. On one hand, some researchers argue that social media fosters political engagement by providing a platform for citizens to discuss political issues and interact directly with political figures (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). On the other hand, there is concern that the prevalence of disinformation and echo chambers on these platforms might distort political understanding and polarize public opinion (Tucker et al., 2018). The personalized nature of social media algorithms, which filter content based on users' preferences, can reinforce existing biases and limit exposure to diverse viewpoints, a phenomenon known as the "filter bubble" (Pariser, 2011). These dynamics complicate the public's ability to engage critically with political content, raising questions about the broader implications of social media for democratic processes.

Another important factor shaping public perception of social media in political campaigns is the role of digital influencers and peer networks. Unlike traditional media, where political figures are mediated through formal channels, social media allows political campaigns to harness the influence of digital personalities and influencers who command significant followings (Enli, 2017). These influencers, who often present themselves as everyday citizens rather than formal political actors, can play a crucial role in shaping political perceptions among their followers. Moreover, the interpersonal nature of social media platforms allows for the amplification of political messages through peer networks, where individuals share and discuss political content with their friends and family (Bode, 2016). This interpersonal dynamic is particularly important in understanding how political messages are internalized and acted upon by the public.

Research into public perception of social media's role in political campaigns has indicated that these platforms can both enhance and diminish trust in political communication. While some studies have found that social media can improve perceptions of transparency and authenticity in political campaigns, others highlight the growing skepticism toward political content on these platforms, particularly in light of concerns over fake news and misinformation (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Guess et al., 2020). This tension reflects broader societal debates about the trustworthiness of digital media, where the absence of formal editorial oversight can lead to the rapid spread of unverified or manipulated content.

Furthermore, social media's increasing use of targeted political advertising has raised ethical concerns about the manipulation of public opinion. Targeted ads, which rely on data-driven insights into users' behaviors and preferences, allow political campaigns to tailor their messages to specific groups of voters with unprecedented precision (Kim et al., 2018). While this can be an effective strategy for mobilizing support, it also risks exacerbating divisions within the electorate by reinforcing existing biases and perpetuating echo chambers (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018). These developments have prompted calls for greater transparency in political advertising and more stringent regulation of how political campaigns use data on social media platforms (Ghosh et al., 2018).

In light of these complexities, this study seeks to explore how the public perceives the use of social media as a platform for political campaigns, focusing on the subjective experiences and attitudes of social media users. By examining how different demographic groups engage with political content on social media, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the factors that shape public perception, including trust, credibility, and the role of personalized political messaging. This qualitative inquiry into public perceptions will not only shed light on the broader

societal implications of social media in political communication but also offer insights for political strategists looking to leverage these platforms effectively in future campaigns.

Problem of Study

The rapid growth of social media as a platform for political campaigns has dramatically changed how political actors communicate with the public, reshaping the landscape of political discourse. While traditional media outlets have long acted as intermediaries between politicians and the electorate, social media offers a more direct channel for political engagement. However, this shift presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, social media has the potential to increase political participation by allowing users to engage with content in real time, share opinions, and connect with like-minded individuals. On the other hand, it has also raised concerns about the spread of misinformation, the creation of echo chambers, and the manipulation of public opinion through targeted political advertising. These conflicting dynamics make it essential to investigate how the public perceives the role of social media in political campaigns, especially given its influence on voter behavior and political engagement.

Despite the growing body of research on social media's role in politics, relatively little is known about the subjective experiences and attitudes of ordinary social media users towards political campaigns. Understanding public perception is crucial because it directly impacts how individuals engage with political content and make electoral decisions. This study aims to explore these perceptions, particularly in light of concerns about the credibility of political information, the influence of digital influencers, and the role of personalized advertising in shaping political views. By examining the public's nuanced views on the effectiveness, trustworthiness, and ethical concerns surrounding social media as a political campaign tool, this study addresses an important gap in the literature.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it offers insights into the evolving relationship between social media and political communication, particularly from the perspective of the public. In a world where social media has become a dominant force in political campaigns, understanding how the public perceives these platforms is critical for political strategists, policymakers, and digital communication professionals. The findings of this research can help political actors design more effective and ethical campaigns that align with public expectations of transparency, trustworthiness, and engagement. Moreover, the study contributes to the academic discourse by filling a research gap in the qualitative exploration of social media users' perceptions of political campaigns.

This study is also relevant in the context of growing concerns about the negative consequences of social media, such as the spread of fake news and the reinforcement of political polarization. By investigating how these issues affect public perception, this research can provide valuable recommendations for improving the quality of political discourse on social media platforms. In addition, it can guide the development of regulatory policies that address the ethical challenges posed by data-driven political advertising and misinformation. Ultimately, this research not only deepens our understanding of public attitudes toward political communication but also informs practices that can strengthen democratic processes in the digital era.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the qualitative nature of the research means that the findings are context-specific and cannot be easily generalized to the wider population. The focus on individual perceptions and

experiences provides deep insights into public attitudes, but the small sample size may not reflect the diversity of views found in the broader electorate. Second, the study is limited by its reliance on self-reported data from interviews and focus groups. Participants' responses may be influenced by social desirability bias, where they present views they believe are socially acceptable, rather than their true opinions.

Additionally, the study is constrained by the evolving nature of social media platforms. Given the rapid pace of technological change and the constant updates to social media algorithms, the findings of this research may become outdated as new features and platforms emerge. Furthermore, the study does not account for cross-cultural differences in social media use. Since the research focuses on a specific geographic and cultural context, the results may not be applicable to social media users in different countries or regions with distinct political environments. Finally, the research does not explore the long-term impact of social media on political engagement, limiting the ability to assess how public perceptions evolve over time.

METHODS

This study utilized an exploratory qualitative design to thoroughly investigate public perceptions of social media as a platform for political campaigns. The qualitative approach was deemed most suitable due to its capacity to delve into the subjective experiences and attitudes of social media users. The nature of qualitative research allowed for flexibility in capturing participants' deep, nuanced perspectives on how they interpret and interact with political content on social media. By adopting this design, the study was able to address complex and often conflicting viewpoints that users hold about the credibility, impact, and ethics of social media in political communication. This exploratory design also facilitated an open-ended inquiry, permitting themes to emerge naturally during the data collection process rather than being constrained by rigid hypotheses. Data were collected using two primary qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Both methods were employed to provide a comprehensive and diverse understanding of public perceptions. The data collected through interviews and focus groups were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is an effective method for identifying patterns and themes within qualitative data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Trust in Political Content

Distrust in Misinformation

A key finding from the analysis was the significant distrust participants expressed toward the accuracy of political information shared on social media platforms. Many participants revealed a heightened awareness of the prevalence of misinformation, particularly during election periods. This issue was consistently raised, with participants frequently referencing their experiences of encountering posts that they believed to be misleading or outright false. For instance, one participant shared their frustration, stating:

> *"I often question the truth behind political posts. There's just so much misinformation out there, especially during elections."*

This reflection resonated across various interviews and focus groups, where participants emphasized their skepticism toward political content on platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Their concerns were primarily focused on the ease with which false information could be spread, exacerbated by the viral nature of social media.

This distrust was not confined to any particular demographic, as participants from different age groups, political affiliations, and levels of social media use shared

similar apprehensions. Many voiced concerns that the fast-paced, shareable nature of social media made it difficult to discern what was true and what was fabricated. Some participants admitted to limiting their engagement with political content because of their uncertainty about the accuracy of what they were reading. The widespread nature of these concerns points to a broader issue of trust in the political discourse that occurs on social media, with many users feeling disillusioned by the lack of reliable information available.

Credibility of Sources

While distrust in misinformation was prevalent, the study also revealed that participants' trust in political content was strongly influenced by the source from which the information originated. Participants indicated that they were more likely to trust political posts if they came from sources they deemed credible, such as established news outlets or official political accounts. One participant noted:

> *"I'm more likely to trust information from reputable news outlets or official accounts rather than random posts from friends or unknown pages."*

This distinction between credible and non-credible sources played a crucial role in shaping how participants engaged with political content online. Participants explained that they actively sought validation for political information from trusted sources, especially when confronted with claims that appeared dubious or controversial. This behavior reflects a growing awareness of the risks posed by unreliable information, and many participants expressed the need to verify facts before forming opinions or sharing content with others. The reliance on known, established entities such as mainstream media or verified political figures demonstrated a selective trust in social media's capacity to serve as an informative political tool.

However, not all participants viewed traditional media outlets as entirely trustworthy, with some expressing skepticism toward the political bias that might exist within these institutions. Despite this, these sources were generally viewed as more credible than the personal opinions of individuals or unverified news platforms that circulate content without accountability. This complex interplay between trust in credible sources and the persistent fear of misinformation reflects the cautious approach that many social media users adopt when navigating political content online.

Influence of Social Media on Political Engagement

Increased Political Awareness

One of the most significant findings of the study was the role social media played in raising political awareness among participants. Many individuals who participated in the research reported that their engagement with political issues had grown substantially as a result of exposure to political content on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Several participants explained that, prior to using social media, they had little to no interest in politics, often feeling disengaged from the political discourse. However, with the increased accessibility of information online, many users now found themselves more informed and involved in political conversations than before. One participant remarked:

> *"I never really paid attention to politics before, but now I find myself scrolling through news feeds and engaging with political content daily."*

This response highlights the transformative effect that social media can have on previously apathetic individuals, turning them into more active participants in political discussions.

Social media platforms offer a continuous stream of political information, including news articles, opinion pieces, and campaign advertisements. This constant exposure, combined with the interactive features of these platforms such as likes, comments, and shares allowed participants to engage with political content in ways that traditional media often did not facilitate. The participatory nature of social media meant that users could instantly respond to or discuss political issues with their peers, making political engagement a more accessible and routine part of their daily lives. As a result, many participants felt that they were now more politically informed and active, a shift that had occurred largely due to the ubiquity and convenience of social media as an information source.

Participants also noted that social media had exposed them to a broader range of political perspectives. While traditional media might focus on a limited set of issues or viewpoints, social media platforms provided access to a wide array of political content, including diverse perspectives from grassroots movements, independent news outlets, and individual commentators. This increased variety of viewpoints helped users to develop a more comprehensive understanding of political issues, often pushing them to question previously held beliefs or assumptions. For many participants, social media not only increased their awareness of political events but also encouraged them to become more critical and reflective about the information they consumed.

Sub-theme 2: Role of Influencers

Another key aspect of the influence of social media on political engagement was the role of influencers and social media personalities in shaping political opinions. Participants consistently pointed to the significant impact that well-known figures in the digital space had on their political views. Influencers individuals with large followings on platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube were often seen as trusted voices who could effectively communicate political messages to their audiences. For instance, one participant remarked:

> *"When a well-known influencer shares their opinions or endorsements, it makes me reconsider my stance on certain issues."*

This demonstrates the persuasive power that influencers can have, as their opinions and endorsements are often seen as authentic and relatable, compared to traditional politicians or news outlets. Participants explained that they were more likely to engage with political content shared by influencers because they felt a personal connection to these individuals, who often framed political issues in accessible and straightforward ways. Influencers were viewed as being closer to "everyday people" than politicians, and this relatability made their opinions more compelling. In some cases, participants noted that they had changed their views on political issues after following discussions or endorsements made by influencers they trusted. This suggests that influencers play a key role in bridging the gap between politics and the general public, making complex political issues more digestible for their followers.

Additionally, the role of influencers extended beyond simply sharing political opinions. Many influencers were actively involved in political campaigns, using their platforms to encourage voter turnout, raise awareness of social issues, or mobilize support for particular candidates or causes. This type of activism was highly visible and often had a ripple effect, encouraging followers to take political action. As one participant noted:

> *"I wouldn't have voted if it weren't for some of the people I follow online who kept talking about how important it was."*

This highlights the potential for influencers to not only shape political opinions but also drive political behavior, such as voting or participating in political discussions.

In this way, influencers acted as catalysts for political engagement, especially for younger users who were more likely to follow social media personalities than traditional political figures.

Overall, these findings indicate that influencers are not just passive commentators but active participants in shaping public political discourse. Their ability to engage with large audiences, build trust, and make political issues more approachable has made them significant players in the political landscape of the digital era. For many social media users, influencers serve as key sources of political information, and their opinions hold considerable sway in shaping public perception and engagement with political campaigns.

Emotional Responses to Political Ads

Emotional Manipulation

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from the data was participants' emotional responses to political advertisements on social media, specifically their feelings of being manipulated. Several participants reported that political ads often played on their emotions, eliciting strong feelings of fear, hope, or anger. This emotional manipulation was seen as a deliberate tactic used by political campaigns to influence their opinions and voting decisions. One participant vividly described this experience, stating:

> *"I often feel manipulated by the ads that play on my fears or hopes. It's hard to ignore them when they make me feel strongly about a candidate."*

This observation reflects the powerful psychological strategies employed in political advertising, where emotional appeals are used to capture attention and provoke visceral reactions. Participants explained that political ads frequently used emotionally charged language, imagery, and music to create a sense of urgency or crisis. These tactics often involved focusing on negative aspects of opponents or promoting fear of political consequences if a particular candidate or policy was not supported. Many ads were designed to trigger emotional responses rather than present rational arguments or policy details. This reliance on emotional appeals left some participants feeling manipulated, as they felt the ads were trying to bypass critical thinking and appeal directly to their emotions. For example, one participant noted that ads promoting fear of economic collapse or social unrest were particularly effective in generating strong emotional reactions, even if the underlying messages lacked substantial evidence.

Despite their feelings of manipulation, several participants acknowledged the effectiveness of these emotional appeals. They reported that such ads were difficult to ignore, as they often left a lasting impression, even if the content was disturbing. This suggests that while participants were aware of the manipulative nature of political ads, the emotional intensity of the messages made them impactful. In some cases, these emotional reactions led participants to further investigate the political issues presented, while in other cases, they contributed to a sense of frustration or fatigue with the political process. Ultimately, the data showed that emotional manipulation in political advertising is a double-edged sword, generating strong engagement from viewers but also contributing to growing skepticism and distrust.

Desensitization to Political Ads

While emotional manipulation was a common experience, some participants reported an opposite reaction: desensitization to political ads. These participants explained that over time, they had become numb to the constant barrage of political advertisements, particularly during election seasons. One participant expressed this fatigue by stating:

"I used to pay attention to political ads, but now I just scroll past them. They all feel the same, and I'm tired of being bombarded with them."

This response indicates that the sheer volume and repetition of political ads on social media had led some users to disengage from the content altogether. Desensitization was particularly prevalent among participants who frequently used social media and were regularly exposed to targeted political ads. These individuals described feeling overwhelmed by the relentless nature of political advertising, which often appeared in the form of sponsored posts, banner ads, or promoted tweets. Many participants reported that they no longer paid attention to the messages because they felt inundated by similar ads, all vying for their attention with the same emotional tactics. As a result, they had developed a habit of scrolling past or dismissing political content without engaging with it.

This desensitization had important implications for political engagement. Participants who had become desensitized to political ads were less likely to engage with political content, share it with others, or seek out additional information. Some even expressed a sense of cynicism, noting that the ads all seemed to follow the same formula of emotional appeals and negative campaigning, making them feel disillusioned with the entire political process. One participant mentioned:

"I don't even care anymore. It's just noise to me now. I don't feel like these ads are meant to inform me—they're just trying to manipulate my emotions, and I'm over it."

This statement reflects a growing apathy among social media users, where overexposure to political ads can lead to disengagement and diminished interest in political participation.

In contrast to the participants who felt manipulated by political ads, those who had become desensitized demonstrated a form of resistance to emotional appeals. By developing a habit of ignoring or dismissing political ads, they were able to shield themselves from the manipulative tactics commonly used in these campaigns. However, this also meant that they were potentially missing out on important political information or discussions that could have influenced their views or voting behavior. Overall, the data suggested that while emotional manipulation was effective in the short term, repeated exposure to similar tactics could lead to desensitization and disengagement in the long term, highlighting the complex relationship between political advertising and public perception.

Ethical Concerns Surrounding Political Advertising

Targeted Advertising

One of the most significant ethical concerns raised by participants was the use of targeted advertising in political campaigns. This issue centered on the ways political campaigns leveraged personal data to tailor ads specifically to individual users, raising questions about privacy and consent. Participants described feeling uneasy about how much personal information was being collected and used to shape the political content they encountered. One participant commented:

"I'm uncomfortable with how much data they use to target me with specific ads. It feels invasive."

This statement encapsulates a broader anxiety about the intersection of personal privacy and digital political strategy, where sophisticated algorithms determine which users see what political messages based on their online behavior.

The concern was not just about the ads themselves, but also the methods used to deliver them. Many participants were aware that platforms like Facebook and Google

use vast amounts of personal data including browsing history, location, and even online purchases to build detailed profiles that can be exploited for political purposes. Participants felt that this practice was ethically questionable because they had not explicitly consented to their data being used in this way. Some expressed frustration with the lack of transparency, explaining that they did not fully understand how their data was being collected or who had access to it. As one participant noted:

> *"It's one thing to get an ad for shoes after I've been shopping online, but it's another to get political ads that are clearly trying to manipulate my views based on what I've done online."*

This highlights a feeling of discomfort with the personalization of political content, especially when it is perceived as manipulative or intrusive. In addition to privacy concerns, participants also questioned the fairness of targeted political advertising. Some argued that this practice could reinforce existing biases by only showing users content that aligned with their current beliefs, creating an "echo chamber" effect. This led to concerns that targeted ads might limit exposure to diverse political perspectives and undermine the democratic process by manipulating users' perceptions in subtle ways. Participants expressed a desire for more control over the types of ads they were exposed to and called for greater regulation to ensure that political campaigns could not use personal data to unfairly influence voters. The ethical implications of these practices were a major source of concern, as participants grappled with the tension between technological innovation and the protection of individual rights in the political sphere.

Regulation and Accountability

Participants also expressed a strong desire for increased regulation and accountability in political advertising on social media platforms. Many felt that the current system allowed for too much freedom, enabling campaigns to spread misinformation or engage in unethical advertising practices with little consequence. One participant remarked

> *"There should be stricter rules on what can be said in political ads. It's too easy for misinformation to spread without consequences."*

This sentiment reflects a growing awareness among the public of the need for clearer guidelines and stronger oversight to prevent the misuse of social media in political campaigns.

The lack of regulation was seen as a key factor contributing to the spread of misinformation, particularly in the lead-up to elections. Participants noted that while traditional media outlets are subject to regulations that require accuracy and accountability, social media platforms often operate in a legal grey area where false or misleading political ads can be widely disseminated without repercussions. This lack of oversight raised concerns about the integrity of political discourse on social media, as participants worried that voters were being influenced by inaccurate or deliberately deceptive information. As one participant explained:

> *"I've seen ads that are completely misleading, but there's no one holding these campaigns accountable for what they say."*

This underscores the frustration that many users feel about the state of political advertising in the digital age, where the speed and reach of social media can amplify false claims and distort public perception.

Participants also called for greater transparency in the political advertising process. They argued that social media platforms and political campaigns should be more upfront about the sources of funding for ads, the criteria used for targeting, and the

truthfulness of the content being promoted. This would not only hold campaigns accountable for the messages they share but also empower voters to make more informed decisions. Some participants suggested that there should be independent fact-checking organizations involved in monitoring political ads, ensuring that misleading content is flagged or removed before it can spread widely. As one participant put it,

> *"We need more transparency in who is funding these ads and whether what they're saying is actually true. It's hard to know who to trust."*

This call for transparency reflects a broader concern about the role of social media in shaping political opinions and the need for checks and balances to prevent the erosion of trust in the political system. Overall, the demand for regulation and accountability highlights a growing recognition that the unregulated nature of political advertising on social media poses serious risks to democracy. Participants were concerned that without stricter oversight, political campaigns could continue to exploit the vulnerabilities of social media to spread misinformation, manipulate public opinion, and evade accountability. By calling for more robust regulations, clearer rules about the content of political ads, and greater transparency, participants underscored the importance of protecting the integrity of political communication in the digital era. These findings suggest that the public is increasingly aware of the ethical challenges posed by digital political advertising and is eager for reforms that promote fairness, accuracy, and accountability.

Discussion

This study provides a detailed examination of public perceptions of social media as a platform for political campaigns, contributing to the existing literature by addressing gaps related to emotional manipulation, targeted advertising, and ethical concerns regarding transparency and accountability in political communication. Previous research has widely acknowledged social media's role in political campaigning, yet the focus often remains on either the efficiency of social media platforms in mobilizing voters or the spread of misinformation (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Tucker et al., 2018). This study enriches these perspectives by exploring not only the effectiveness of political advertising on social media but also how users emotionally and ethically respond to these campaigns, providing a more nuanced understanding of how social media influences voter behavior and perceptions.

Addressing Emotional Manipulation in Political Ads

This study adds a significant contribution to the literature by examining emotional manipulation as a common strategy in political advertising on social media. Previous research has consistently demonstrated the use of emotional appeals, particularly fear-based content, to provoke strong reactions from audiences. For example, Brader (2005) and Valentino et al. (2011) found that political ads often utilize fear, anger, or hope to capture voters' attention and drive their engagement with political content. However, our findings provide a more nuanced understanding of how these emotional appeals are perceived by the audience. The study reveals that many participants were highly aware of the emotionally charged nature of these ads and frequently recognized the manipulative tactics employed to trigger specific emotions, such as fear and anger.

This recognition led to a variety of responses. While some participants initially engaged with the content, they reported that the continual use of emotional manipulation ultimately resulted in disengagement or skepticism. This challenges earlier studies, such as those by Huddy et al. (2007), which suggested that voters are passively influenced by emotional appeals in political ads. Our findings suggest that over time, voters may become resistant to these tactics. This highlights a more

dynamic relationship between emotional content and voter behavior than previously documented. The study contrasts with the earlier literature by showing that when emotional appeals are overused, they may lead to desensitization a psychological process that is underexplored in political communication literature (Dean & Croft, 2001).

Furthermore, the findings suggest that emotional manipulation has both short-term and long-term effects on political participation. In the short term, emotionally charged ads may succeed in grabbing attention and evoking a response, consistent with existing research on emotional marketing (Brader, 2005). However, the study also revealed that long-term exposure to these tactics leads to diminished trust in political ads and the political system itself. Many participants expressed a growing cynicism toward the use of emotional manipulation, stating that it eroded their trust in political content on social media. This aligns with Friestad & Wright's (1994) model of persuasion knowledge, which suggests that when consumers recognize persuasive intent, they become more resistant to the message.

The study also expands on existing research by considering the broader implications of emotional manipulation for democratic engagement. While emotional appeals are often intended to galvanize voters, this study shows that the overuse of such tactics can lead to disengagement. Participants who felt emotionally manipulated were less likely to trust political ads and, by extension, less likely to participate in political discourse. This adds to Miller & Krosnick's (2000) findings on the negative impacts of perceived manipulation, extending their work by demonstrating how emotional manipulation specifically contributes to the erosion of trust in political messaging over time.

Targeted Advertising and Privacy Concerns

This study makes a significant contribution to ongoing debates about the ethical dimensions of targeted political advertising. Previous research has largely focused on the technical aspects of how platforms like Facebook and Google use algorithms to deliver micro-targeted ads to specific voter segments based on their digital behaviors and personal data (Borgesius et al., 2018). Scholars such as Kreiss & McGregor (2018) have examined the efficiency of these ads in influencing voter behavior, emphasizing how personalized political content can sway electoral outcomes by reaching undecided voters or reinforcing the preferences of specific demographics. However, less attention has been given to how users themselves perceive these practices, particularly with respect to the ethical implications of using personal data without explicit consent. This study fills that gap by focusing on public concerns about privacy, the ethical use of personal data, and the emotional responses to targeted ads.

The participants in this study expressed considerable unease regarding the invasive nature of targeted political advertising. Many felt that their online activities were being monitored and exploited without their informed consent, a finding consistent with earlier studies on privacy concerns in the digital age (Zimmer, 2010). What sets this study apart from previous research is its in-depth exploration of the emotional and ethical reactions of users to targeted ads. Participants did not merely feel concerned about data privacy; they felt that their personal boundaries were being violated by political campaigns that used their private information to send them ads tailored to their specific fears, beliefs, or political leanings. This sentiment reflects a broader anxiety about the erosion of personal privacy in the digital world, where users are often unaware of how their data is collected, processed, and used for purposes they never agreed to.

Moreover, the findings indicate that targeted ads contribute to a "filter bubble" effect, as described by Pariser (2011), where users are repeatedly exposed to content that

aligns with their existing views, limiting their exposure to diverse political perspectives. This practice not only raises ethical questions about the fairness of digital political advertising but also points to a potential weakening of democratic discourse. When users are funneled into echo chambers by algorithms designed to keep them engaged with specific types of content, their capacity to engage critically with opposing viewpoints is diminished. The participants in this study recognized this dynamic and expressed frustration over the way targeted ads shaped their online political environments. This deepens our understanding of the consequences of algorithmic political targeting and supports the calls made by scholars like Bakir & McStay (2018) for greater transparency and regulation in digital political advertising to protect voters' rights to informed and diverse political discourse.

In contrast to earlier studies that primarily highlighted the effectiveness of micro-targeting (Kreiss & McGregor, 2018), this study reveals the ethical and emotional backlash from users, indicating that while targeted ads may be successful in influencing voter behavior, they come at the cost of user trust and privacy. This finding suggests that the future of political advertising on social media may need to prioritize ethical practices and transparency to maintain public confidence and avoid further alienation of voters.

Ethical Concerns and Regulatory Gaps

Another key finding of this study is the widespread public desire for more regulation and accountability in political advertising on social media platforms. Participants expressed concern that the current lack of regulation allows political campaigns to engage in practices that would not be tolerated in traditional media environments, such as spreading misinformation or using personal data without explicit consent. This aligns with recent calls in the literature for more stringent oversight of digital political campaigning, as scholars such as Zuboff (2019) and Isaak & Hanna (2018) have highlighted the ethical risks posed by the unregulated collection and use of personal data by both political actors and tech platforms.

The participants in this study consistently voiced the need for stricter regulations to hold political campaigns accountable for the content of their ads and their data collection practices. Many felt that political ads on social media were not subject to the same fact-checking or accountability mechanisms as traditional media ads, which led to the unchecked spread of false or misleading information. This concern mirrors findings in previous studies, such as Howard & Bradshaw (2018), which documented the rise of misinformation in digital political campaigns and the challenges of holding online platforms accountable for the content they disseminate.

Furthermore, participants called for greater transparency from both political campaigns and social media platforms regarding the sources of political ads, the funding behind them, and the methods used to target users. Many felt that they had no control over the political content they encountered on social media, which contributed to feelings of mistrust and disempowerment. This finding echoes the literature on the need for more transparent data practices in the digital advertising ecosystem, with scholars such as Gorwa (2019) advocating for stronger regulatory frameworks to ensure that digital platforms disclose how political ads are targeted and who funds them.

By foregrounding these ethical concerns, this study contrasts with earlier work that focused on the democratizing potential of social media in political campaigns (Enli, 2017; Baldwin-Philippi, 2015). While these studies emphasized the ability of social media to engage more voters and facilitate political participation, this research shows that without proper regulation and transparency, digital political advertising may erode public trust in the political process. The findings underscore the importance

of establishing clear ethical guidelines and regulatory frameworks to ensure that political advertising on social media does not undermine democratic engagement.

Ethical Concerns and Regulatory Gaps

The findings of this study reveal widespread public concern over the ethical issues related to political advertising on social media, particularly the lack of regulation and transparency. Participants expressed frustration with how political advertisers and social media platforms are able to operate with minimal oversight, especially concerning the spread of misinformation and the use of personal data without users' consent. This aligns with Zuboff's (2019) and Isaak and Hanna's (2018) arguments, which highlight the growing need for stricter regulations on digital platforms, particularly in how they handle user data and enable political campaigns to micro-target voters based on personal information.

In contrast to the more technical focus of previous research, which examined how social media has improved the efficiency of political campaigns (Enli, 2017; Baldwin-Philippi, 2015), this study delves into the ethical ramifications of these advancements. While it is true that digital platforms have made it easier for campaigns to reach specific voter groups and mobilize supporters, this has come at a cost. Participants felt that political advertisers were exploiting personal data to manipulate public opinion, raising concerns about the boundaries of ethical political campaigning. This perspective sheds light on an underexplored dimension in the literature the ethical responses of the public to the growing sophistication of digital political advertising.

One of the most concerning findings from this study is how the unregulated nature of political advertising on social media can undermine democratic processes. While platforms like Facebook and Twitter have made it easier to share information and engage with political discourse, participants felt that the lack of accountability and regulation has allowed misinformation to spread unchecked. This is particularly troubling because, without safeguards in place, the public's ability to make informed political decisions is compromised. The role of social media as a democratizing force, which has been emphasized in studies by Kreiss (2016), is therefore questioned by this study's findings. Instead of enhancing democratic engagement, unregulated political ads may foster mistrust in the political system and contribute to voter disengagement.

This study also builds on the work of Gorwa (2019), who argued that the lack of accountability in digital political advertising is one of the primary challenges facing modern democracies. Participants in this study voiced similar concerns, calling for increased transparency from both political advertisers and social media platforms. They wanted to know who was funding the political ads they saw and how their personal data was being used to target them. The absence of clear guidelines on these issues has left many users feeling manipulated and powerless, further eroding their trust in both political campaigns and social media platforms.

Bridging the Gap in Literature

This study provides a valuable contribution to the existing literature by addressing critical gaps, especially in the understanding of the ethical and emotional consequences of political advertising on social media. Much of the previous research has focused on the effectiveness of online political campaigns in influencing voter behavior, emphasizing the technical aspects of micro-targeting and ad delivery. Scholars such as Karpf (2016) and Nielsen (2012) have explored how digital platforms allow campaigns to efficiently reach specific demographics, often focusing on the short-term impacts of these strategies, like voter mobilization or support consolidation. However, this study shifts the focus to the ethical, emotional, and

long-term effects of political advertising, particularly highlighting the growing public awareness of emotional manipulation and its consequences for political trust and engagement.

The findings reveal that repeated exposure to emotionally charged political ads often results in voter disengagement and skepticism, a theme that has been underexplored in earlier literature. While studies by Lilleker & Jackson (2010) have examined how political ads influence immediate voter decisions, they have not adequately considered how overuse of emotional manipulation may lead to long-term disillusionment with the political system. This study addresses that gap by illustrating how users, initially influenced by emotionally provocative ads, gradually become desensitized or even resistant to them. This challenges previous assumptions that emotional appeals consistently drive voter engagement, introducing a more complex dynamic between emotional manipulation and public perception.

Additionally, this study responds to a growing body of literature calling for more attention to the ethical dimensions of digital political advertising. Howard and Bradshaw (2018) have emphasized the need for further research into the ethics of how personal data is used in political campaigns, particularly in light of scandals such as Cambridge Analytica. This study contributes to that discussion by exploring user perceptions of privacy violations and the ethical use of data in targeted political ads. The participants expressed significant concern over how their data was being used without consent, and how this targeted advertising violated their personal boundaries. This finding contrasts with studies that have praised the democratizing potential of social media platforms, offering a more critical lens on the unintended consequences of these platforms.

Furthermore, the study challenges earlier research that has emphasized the positive role of social media in enhancing democratic participation. While social media platforms have been lauded for providing a space for political discourse and engagement, this study shows that the unregulated nature of political advertising on these platforms often leads to voter mistrust and disillusionment. Participants frequently reported feeling manipulated by political ads that used their personal data to craft highly targeted and emotionally charged messages. This suggests that the unchecked spread of political advertising on social media may undermine, rather than enhance, democratic engagement a perspective that contrasts with the optimism found in works like Chadwick (2013), which highlights the democratizing potential of digital communication.

CONCLUSION

This study has illuminated the complex and multifaceted ways in which political advertising on social media influences public perception, voter behavior, and trust in the political system. Through a detailed analysis of user experiences and reactions, the research has demonstrated that while emotionally charged and targeted political ads can be effective in capturing immediate attention, their long-term effects can lead to voter disillusionment, skepticism, and disengagement. The study highlights significant ethical concerns, particularly surrounding the use of personal data for micro-targeting without explicit consent, and how these practices contribute to a broader sense of privacy violation and manipulation among users. Additionally, the research calls into question the unregulated nature of political ads on social media, showing that a lack of transparency and accountability undermines public trust in both the platforms and political actors. This study fills critical gaps in the literature by focusing not just on the effectiveness of digital political campaigns but on the ethical, emotional, and long-term impacts on the public. It underscores the urgent need for more robust regulatory frameworks and transparent practices to ensure that

digital political advertising fosters genuine political engagement rather than contributing to growing voter cynicism and mistrust.

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