

## **Donald Digital Marketing: An Exploratory Study of Digital Political Marketing in Trump Presidential Campaign**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Digital marketing harnesses the interactions of individuals through the Internet. Its growing popularity among politicians has potentially important implications for a wide range of digital political marketing activities, such as social media building, constituents' engagement, website development, and digital advertising. This paper explores Trump presidential campaign in 2016 for understanding the digital political marketing implementations and challenges. Four different social media platforms and a website were explored, discussed and compared. The results of the exploratory study were presented based on the digital media used within the 20 months Trump presidential campaign to offer an overview of the relevant evidence in the digital political marketing mechanism. It discusses how this previous work is being extended and combined with insights from detailed data on Trump digital media usage in order to determine which digital marketing strategies are being used in the Trump presidential campaign and how these strategies relate to constituent engagement. Finally, it identifies opportunities that this new area presents for digital political marketing research.

*Keywords:* Digital marketing, digital political marketing, political campaign, social media

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### **INTRODUCTION**

During Trump presidential campaign in 2016, he said to his trusted aid, who was none other than his son-in-law, "I don't want people getting rich off the campaign, and I want to make sure we are watching every dollar just like we would do in business" (Bertoni, 2016). Being a prominent business mogul, Trump has

implemented and mastered most of the marketing strategies known to experts. His political marketing strategies utilized the newest media including digital media.

The development of digital political marketing has been noted since businesses utilized digital marketing and it turns the business strategies into profit. Political sector watched, learnt and practised the strategies into gaining voter supports. Howard Dean was recorded as an early politician employing digital campaign when he competed in the 2004 US presidential election. Roh Moo Hyun won the Korean presidential election and named the “First Internet President” in 2003 (Kim, 2003). The deployment of digital tools has been a political phenomenon since then until the current US presidential election in 2016.

One of the important aspects which marketers should consider when they plan their digital strategies is consumer involvement (Hashim & Ariffin, 2016). Businesses with high consumer involvement will gain positive results in reaching their business goal. People’s presence in the digital world matters since they live and even feel enriched by the platforms in the virtual realms (Thang et al., 2016). These netizens are potential consumers and constituents for business and politicians. The political sector also shares the same condition when the engagement with the constituents is high. It is more likely that their popularity is high. This is one of the reasons why digital marketing has been a trend in the political area in which high level of popularity is essential.

The objective of this study is to explore which digital marketing strategies were used in the Trump presidential campaign and how these strategies relate to constituent engagement. Since all the custom and common strategies of traditional marketing have been challenged by digital marketing, practitioners need to explore a diverse range of digital marketing strategies in maintaining engagement with the target audiences. The digital political marketing has been one of the marketing trends which results in the implementation of marketing strategy in different fields of practice.

### **Literature Review**

Kotler and Levy’s (1969) study as an academic foundation of marketing strategy produced a call to action for future scholars. Their work was heeded and adopted in the digital era by numerous researchers. For example, Parson et al. (1998) underlined the upcoming digital marketing that would have to be developed to win the non-traditional marketing competition. At the time website started to develop as an interactive environment, they called the emerging challenges dealing with new market audiences “digital marketing“. This type of marketing refers to the integrated perspective to manage all types of interactive media for marketing purposes. One of the imperative applications of the elements which marketers rarely apply is engaging users’ interest and participation. The study offered key strategies to manage the “Engage” element by developing creative and valuable contents to achieve interaction and transaction.

The early scholarly works mentioned are also followed by research resulted in studies of consequences within another field. Maarek (2014) used the term of digital political marketing to explain the tools to win political competitions. Even though the method is very helpful in the political campaign, Maarek warned about the inclination of uncontrollable rumour mills production within the digital media. It was claimed that Trumps has successfully utilized targeted communication based on market-oriented metrics to win the 2016 election (Gillies, 2018) even though it was only targeting small fractions of voters. Maarek findings were also noticed by Lilleker (2006) who looked at political marketing as the use of marketing techniques by the political sector in the area of policy development, campaigning, and internal relation.

A variety of specific techniques and strategies have been suggested to address the challenges of overcoming the negative impacts of digital marketing on politics in the campaigning. For example, Knoll et al. (2018) examined social media use as a way to increase political participation. The authors presented a complex form of social media usage as processes that were conditionally interrelated. This approach may not be essential for increasing political participation, but it can be used to develop a complete picture.

The digital media utilization that leads to campaigning and promotion for Trump presidential race has been of great interest to scholars, particularly in the context of

social media performance (Lee & Lim, 2016; Enli, 2017; West, 2017; Wang et al., 2016; Winston, 2016). Since the curiosity to Trump's social media is huge, the public often needs to act on partial information about the particular campaign. Particularly important in the marketing process within new media, given the often used and the reliability of data within the digital world that surround new media, are potential important campaign source for improvement (Hwang, 2016).

Researchers have identified several key digital marketing strategies that lead to a successful marketing campaign in more interactive settings, including the quality of the preparation demonstrated by aspiring digital marketers (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2016; Smith, 2011). The presumption is that these strategies reveal the underlying nature of actions and ensure that higher-quality marketing is more likely to achieve success.

The work of Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2016) is worth to refer when one needs to study the digital marketing strategy. The work carefully elaborated the groundwork on strategy, implementation and practice. They highly encouraged that the strategy had to be integrated and structured following the goals and objectives. The strategy was implemented to communicate with the unique digital target audiences at different digital touchpoints (web services, email, social media and mobile phone). The social media application, in particular, is one of the important tactics in digital marketing.

The digital village will only continue to increase in size and diversity. Unfortunately, research into which strategies are used by a particular political actor (in this case Trump's campaign team) has so far been both general and sparse. This is shown by the literature reviewed in this section especially in relation to the core of digital marketing which reflects immaturity. Particularly needed is a way to categorize the strategies used by a particular actor in the digital world and to explore the relation to constituent engagement. In addition, this research is purposely designed to fill in the gaps in describing the relationships between political digital marketing strategies and constituents engagement.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

As an exploratory empirical study, this paper aims to develop initial evidence about the nature of digital marketing in Trump presidential campaign and its correlation with constituent engagement. This method is appropriate for an evolving topic in the evolving field of digital marketing (Brennan & Croft, 2012; Chi, 2011; Royle & Laing, 2014), as the initial data can be used as a foundation for the next theory development (Eisenhardt, 1989). Thus, rather than formal hypothesis testing, the remainder of the paper will examine key issues around Trump presidential campaign from the perspective of digital political marketing, particularly its links to existing theory on digital marketing strategy and the relation to constituent engagement. To further explore the data, integrated Internet media analysis

and content analysis were performed to the practice of Trump presidential digital campaign.

As the goal of this paper is to provide an additional perspective on digital political marketing, data extracted from Trump's main digital platforms where he conducted his digital marketing activities were used. His website and social media accounts are the largest and dominant operating apparatus. His main website at [www.donaldjtrump.com](http://www.donaldjtrump.com) uses an integrated media model, but it is also the hub for the social media platforms with many of the features written into all of his social media (Shafer, 2017). Thus, website and social media were examined differently in this study because mobile application access to the social media brings digital marketing tactics with a different perspective and is likely to serve as a broadly useful model for examining the digital political marketing efforts.

The official campaign website and social media would be studied from 2015 right after he formed an exploratory committee in preparation for a possible run for president on the Republican Party ticket. Data gathered were limited to the time Trump was elected in November 2016. [Web.archive.org](http://web.archive.org) was used in this study to collect the data on the website within the timeframe<sup>1</sup>. The old data available on the website at the time of the writing of this paper also enriched the data collection. Most of the data from the digital media were not available on the platform

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<sup>1</sup> For an archival impression of all the data presented in this study captured in 2018 see <http://web.archive.org> with a specific official media URL, unless otherwise stated.

except Instagram. The method employed for collecting data from Web.archive.org also serves as a validation stage because the owner of the platform could erase the old contents anytime within the time period. There were website content and social media available within the 20 month period to be observed. The goal of the data collection was to see which postings fall in the category of digital political marketing discussed in the literature.

Although Trump used more social media platforms, this study limits the data gathering sources to four official social media accounts. Purposive sampling technique was used to answer the research questions. Datasets were selected from a certain period of time which lies between the election date and the start of the campaign period. The sampling technique as a non-probability sampling is suitable for this study to investigate the presidential campaign period (Tongco, 2007).

The four media are regarded as having the highest role in Trump presidential campaign. The social media management of the campaign focused on four platforms: Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. The twitter account at @realDonaldTrump was created in March 2009. The contents and strategy available in this account from 2015 to 2016 were observed to identify integrated digital political marketing in action. Twitonomy, Allmytweets, TweetStats and Brand 24 are third-party programs used in this study to observe data from Twitter. We also used Twitter Advance Search Engine to categorize tweets within a specific time

range. The reason for the use of the tools is because Twitter only allows nine hundred plus tweets to preview in one account. Considering the official announcement of Trump presidential candidacy on June the 16<sup>th</sup> and the election day on November the 8<sup>th</sup>, we gathered over 9,300 tweets from May 2015 (because campaign-oriented tweets had started a month prior to the campaign launching) to November 2016.

Trump official Facebook for his presidential campaign is @DonaldTrump. It was created since 2009 and it was an important part of his presidential campaign since 2015. Around 1,800 Facebook posts within 20 months of the campaign period were identified and analyzed. The official YouTube account at Donald J. Trump for President was created on March 16, 2015 (Donald J. Trump for President, n. d.). Most of the videos uploaded during the presidential campaign had been deleted from the channel because it was extracted from the actual channel in 2018 which was over two years of the campaign period. Source from web.archive.org was used to locate deleted videos on the channel in order to study the channel. The proportionally missing content from the digital platform, at least in part, an authority of the owner of the platform is an issue of data extraction from the digital site. The issue should not affect our analysis of the integrated digital political marketing and the significance of the variables. 68 videos were identified and analysed within the period of the electoral campaign.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

To obtain an understanding of digital political marketing of Trump presidential candidacy, both an empirical description of Trump digital political marketing and an analysis of the factors associated with his digital media management were offered. The areas of social media and webpage utilization were then delved deeper because they are the most important tools in Trump digital political marketing.

Drawing content analysis data from Social Networking Sites (YouTube channel = 68 videos, Twitter account = 9,300 tweets, Instagram account = 912 posts, and Facebook = 1,800 posts) and 200 posts in the official website, the integrated communication was shown as a strategy. From the digital marketing strategies that Trump used, all digital media that he used were important in conveying the message of "Make America Great Again" (MAGA). It started from his website in May 2015 putting the slogan MAGA as the headline of the website which was consistent with all social media.

The number of Instagram posts from May 2015 when the presidential campaign started to the time Trump was elected in November 2016 is 912 posts. This amount of content was the lowest in quantity compared to another social media platform. These posts contained a mix of images, videos, and screenshots of texts. The images showed a humanist side of Trump (Post on Ivana holding his grandchild), his political stance (Post on Obamacare), his support for group/community/locale (Post

on veteran) and his competitiveness (Post on attack video on Hillary). The Instagram posts were part of the whole tools in the integrated digital marketing strategy. Within Instagram, there was a relatively immediate audiences' feedback (Chaffey & Smith, 2013; Tiago & Verssimo, 2014; Wind & Mahajan, 2002) in most of the posts during the campaign period. Cross-posting was found on Instagram the form of screenshots of tweets and uploaded videos from the official YouTube channel.

The official Twitter account had the highest interaction level and usage among all the social media accounts. Screenshots of tweets could be found on the official website, Facebook timeline and Instagram post showing us that Twitter was important for an integral part of the message deliverance. Findings from the texts, videos and image tweets showed that Trump interacted in the form of commenting on current news, issues and word of mouth (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). He also showed his humanist side by retweeting the support tweets from his family members. His communication tone was bold and straight forward with the occasional use of cynic words, all-caps words (Kouloumpis et al., 2011), bold and bigger text fonts and sarcastic images. The number of followers of this account had reached three-plus million in 2015 and by the election day of November 9, 2016, his followers were thirteen plus million (Trump, 2016).

The YouTube channel had the lowest interaction level compared to other social media account during the campaign

period even though there were many videos produced and shared across other platforms. It started with twelve plus thousand subscribers in 2015 and reached ninety-nine plus thousand on November 9, 2016 (the election day). Most of the contents at the beginning of the campaign period were campaign advertorials. On the election days, many videos on the debates and TV interviews were uploaded to the channel. MAGA was consistent with another platform as the sub-headline of this channel.

The Facebook account, @DonaldTrump, was created in 2009. It was affiliated with The Trump Organization. It was converted from a personal account to a Facebook Page in 2015. The contents varied from posting originally for Facebook to cross-postings from YouTube and Twitter accounts.

The literature has shown how digital marketing has to be managed. Digital marketing has to be planned in advance and the strategy has to be integrated. Trump presidential campaign showed integrated digital political marketing. His website and social media carried the same message at the presidential campaign since the beginning of 2015. MAGA as the slogan was always deliberately chosen as the headline or sub-headline on the cover page of the digital media.

Trump digital political marketing in the presidential election in 2015-2016 utilized social media and website as the digital marketing tools. Based on our findings, Trump mostly used his Twitter to directly comment, respond and answer to people. The website, Instagram, Facebook, and

YouTube are the types of media mostly managed by his management team. All social media accounts are linked to the official website. Since the domain of the website was created in 1997 and launched in connection with the Trump Organization, it was then acquired to be the official website of Donald Trump presidential campaign. It was launched as a presidential campaign website in 2015 with his integrated digital marketing including slogan and links to the official social media. The website is still active until recently it serves as a current mirror for the official presidential website. One of the interactivity features that the website offers is the "Donate" facility where supporters can complete a donation process as easy as shopping online. The website also underlined the importance of his social media by mentioning the number of followers of social media in the About section of the website. The website was primarily built to create an environment where audiences can interact with the Trump campaign cause. Donate, Get involved, Support form, and Comment features are some of the tools available on the website (Show your support for Donald Trump, 2015).

By comparison, social media accounts successfully nurtured the environment where constituents interact with Trump and with each other. The digital political marketing of Trump presidential campaign has utilized integrated marketing involving digital media management as a tool for interactivity. This study reveals the high interaction between constituents in comment

sections of Facebook posts, Instagram posts and retweets and comments between Twitter followers on particular tweets (Ott, 2017).

Evidently, the more interactions in the comments area, retweets, donation, and likes, the more constituents are engaged, reached and nurtured. The strategy of digital political marketing also employed digital advertising especially Facebook ads. The nature of the political competition in America is not only to compete on some amount of political-aware people who already read Trump social media feeds but also to get the apathy people in the rural areas of the USA. The digital advertising targets the small population of people converts them into Trump supporters (social media followers) and keeps reminding them to show up to vote on the election day.

## CONCLUSIONS

As has been noted, Trump presidential campaign in 2016 utilized digital political marketing. The strategy involves an integrated method employing digital media platforms including websites and social media. The current development of technology and the nature of the audience encourage marketers and politicians to use digital marketing. The real question is how to use digital marketing.

Trump presidential campaign shows us what has been done and which strategy worked for American audiences. The benefit for academic research is an open area of research within digital political marketing, for example;

1. Open an investigation on the design and limitation of digital political marketing strategy. Understand what strategy works and what digital tools should be chosen. Develop a model and prototype of the integrated digital marketing system.
2. Develop effective solutions and tactics on challenges which emerge from the elements of digital marketing. The digital political marketing elements might be slightly modified from the previous findings and theories.
3. Organize a theory-driven experiment that explains the relationship between social media communication and audiences' interaction.
4. Compare the efficiency of digital political marketing across geographical regions. The foundation of the theory might have developed new perspectives by looking at a similar set of the population in different locations.
5. Understand how the personal brand in digital political marketing plays a role in the planning of an integrated strategy.

The power of digital political marketing has its roots in the strategic side of marketing strategy brought about by the increased digital natives as political audiences. Politicians need to create interactivity among the internal organizations, their constituents, their partners, and their competitors. While



digital marketing studies how businesses converting and engaging online audiences, political and marketing theory are the natural foundation for the study and exploration of digital political marketing.

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