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INVESTIGATING THE ANTECEDENTS THAT CREATE INFLUENTIAL WORD OF MOUTH (WOM) WHICH IMPACTS CITIZENS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLITICAL ISSUES IN EGYPT

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ABSTRACT

Social influence plays a vital role in impacting peoples way of thinking. The aim of this paper was to identify various antecedents that create influential WOM, which impacts citizens' attitude towards various political matters. This study contains a cross-sectional design and an exploratory purpose. The variables were identified through the use of qualitative research approaches. Nineteen interviews and five observed locations (reflections arose multiple times) were conducted until the saturation level. The empirical findings illustrated that socialization did play an important role in the formation of people's political opinions. Social influence impacted Egyptians' attitude towards various political matters (governmental, civil, constitutional, partisan, and electoral). In addition, the study recognized and portrayed the prominent triggers of WOM (the sender, the message, interpersonal traits, and the situation). These discoveries clarified that people in the Egyptian community sought advice and news from different social ties. Various people's verbal messages created powerful impact due to their wide range of personal characteristics and how they delivered the information. Further, their WOM were significant during certain situations when desiring the message. This study contributed on the theoretical level by: adding to the field of interpersonal social influence and political socialization in the Middle East context; and establishing a proposed conceptual framework concerning influential WOM antecedents on attitude formation towards political matters.

KEYWORDS: Attitude, Political Socialization, Word of Mouth (WOM)

INTRODUCTION

Social influence plays a key role in humanity. An average person in a community has important individual in their lives in which their opinions are valuable and are worth considering. These significant people play a role in adjusting the attitudes, intentions, and behaviors of others. Through interactions, a pool of information is formed. A collision of knowledge, news, ideas, opinions, and beliefs arises, which alters a person's perspectives (Venkatesh *et al.,* 2003; Elliot and Phillips, 2004).

People habitually talk to each other and imitate each other as a learning paradigm. The word of mouth (WOM) interaction is central to the information exchange process, transmitting news and facts. Individuals often rely on opinions of others when making choices concerning products, services, activities, philosophies, and ideas (Carol, 2006). Correspondingly, interpersonal sources are applicable and beneficial when it comes to political issues (Fay, 2006).

As social interactions occur (whether on the phone or face-to-face), it creates opportunities for people to gather information about politics in order to form judgments and to develop intents to act a certain way or support a specified cause (McClurg, 2003).

In the Egyptian context, political socializations are common among the citizens' daily conversations. Since January 2011, the nation showed growing interest in politics as the country underwent several major current governmental and constitutional changes (Bassiony, 2011). Socialization played an important role in inspiring and shaping individuals' political perspectives. Collective interactions remains a strong indication that social influence is alive and well among the Egyptian region (Negm *et al.,* 2012). Thus, this study focused on identifying and portraying the prominent triggers that construct dominant WOM that affect the views of Egyptians. The objective of this research will be to investigate the antecedents that create influential WOM, which impacts citizens' attitudes towards Politics in Egypt.

LITERATURE REVIEW

People's opinions are based on beliefs, which are obtained through socialization. Socialization is a process in which people become aware of their environment, culture, and principles. It helps individuals learn, assimilate, and adopt the customs, norms, and backgrounds of a society (Trusov *et al.,* 2009). In addition, it aids in the development of the acceptable values in the community (Negm *et al.,* 2012). Social interactions coordinate people's conduct to fit into the nation and provide necessary foundation of behavioral patterns and viewpoints that are suitable for integration into the society (Settle *et al.,* 2011).

Conversations about governmental, civil, constitutional, and electoral issues are relevant to the understanding of political practices (Negm *et al.,* 2012). It is fundamental for: *"solving conflicts, deciding public policies, or protecting ones own interests"* (Kim, *et al.,* 1999, p.362). Political discussions are rational conversations where deliberative exchange of arguments and suggestions occur among partakers. As people converse, they encounter different political views and knowledge. Thus, diverse political talks and expressions (voicing opinions on controversial matters) allow some issues to arise for reflection (Scheufele, 2000).

Any forms of political socialization are essentially goal oriented. The objectives are centered on politics. These goals can include: swapping information, voicing one's own perspectives, and assessing what others think about the specified topic. The importance of these political conversations was confirmed in a number of prior studies (McClurg, 2003). Scheufele (2000) provided evidence that interpersonal political socialization is a key reliant condition for connections between communications and political knowledge. In other words, people whom converse about politics are likely to learn and gain a greater understanding of the governmental and civil facts and processes. Political discussions are necessary conditions for people to make sense of the political information that they deal with on a daily basis (Fay, 2006). WOM are a great source of data collection than traditional broadcasting tools, since media, especially newspapers, fail to provide mobilizing information (Settle *et al.,* 2011).

A number of major trends in society are driving the success of WOM communication when it comes to political matters. The increase interest in political socialization concerning interpersonal bases are due to the distrust of traditional advertising and marketing; decreasing confidence in politics and politicians; the excessive cost of television advertising for many campaigns and political concerns; the rise of single issue voters who require micro targeting; and growing distrust of campaign media close to Election Day (Fay, 2006). All these factors regarding the rise of political socialization have led to

the growth in its importance (Negm *et al.,* 2012). Advice and personal recommendations from various people often guide people during decisions-making and encourage political participations (Settle *et al.,* 2011).

Regardless of whether a message is received face-to-face, through telephones/ mobiles, and other electronic memos, the same word expressed by various people and methods can have different effects. There are several elements that can enhance the WOM power on impacting people's attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. WOM influence can be vibrant with the help of various dynamics found with the sender of the message; the message content and delivery; interaction among personal and non-personal contacts; and during different situations when seeking WOM (Bansal and Voyer, 2000; Sweeney *et al*., 2008). This study plans on studying and exploring the relevance of these factors in Egypt's current political circumstance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The determination of this study was empirical probing and fact-finding in nature. This research had an exploratory purpose and a cross sectional design in its data collection (gathered data just once over months to answer the research questions). This approach allowed for better comprehension of the nature of the problem; helped develop a conceptual framework; inspected relevant factors to the context; and examined the relationships among different variables concerning the establishment of influential WOM and attitude formation towards political matters. Semi-structured interviews and complete observation were used to allow meaningful preliminary insight to emerge and validate the theoretical structure (gaining rich and complex understanding of the studied phenomenon). The sampling method was nonprobability (according to convenience). Nineteen interviews and five observational sites were conducted until saturation level of data was met. Observations were conducted distantly (listened, watched, and took notes without interaction with the sample population) in the natural setting during different days, locations, and hours. The interviews, on the other hand, were conducted with permission from the respondents. The target sample were youth and young adults of different demographic backgrounds (age, gender, marital status, career and income) in order to ensure a large enough variety in the studied population. The motive for choosing this segment was due to their role in the 2011 Revolution. This revolt was known to be the "Youth Revolution" due to their initiation in the rebellious actions and their various political socialization practices (Bassiony, 2011).

DATA FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

During autumn of 2012, the researcher visited numerous sites (college campuses, malls, sports club, etc.) to learn about youths' influential interpersonal social ties; their outlooks towards socialization and WOM; and their attitude towards political matters. The interviewees were of the ages found in the Egyptian "youth bulge". Accordingly, 31.6% of the respondents were between the ages of 15 to 19; 36.8% were between ages of 20 to 24; and 31.6% were between the ages of 25 to 29. The respondents who were interviewed were 52.6% females and 47.4% males. When it came to the marital status, 42.1% were single, 21% were engaged, and 36.8% were married. The majority of the respondents were either students or college gradate beginning their career path. Those employed were 63%; 5.2% were in high school; and the remaining 32% were still in college. The respondents who were still in college were enrolled in different academic fields. Students majoring in media management were 16.7%; those enrolled in the faculty of economics were 16.7%; 33.3% studied marketing and international business; and the remaining 33.3% majored in accounting and finance. With the use of semi-structured interviews and observations, a portrayal of the major antecedents on what created effective

WOM was identified in the Egyptian context. Explanations were given to confer the description and significance of the variables under each category concerning WOM (the sender, the message, the interpersonal traits, and the situation). In addition, the current research illustrated the attitudes of the Egyptian citizens' in the political context.

The qualitative study began unraveling the respondents' socialization patterns and focuses. The participants indicated that they enjoyed socializing, especially with different people in various social ties. Their reflections conveyed that habitual talks were a constructive pursuit (learning paradigm). The participants had significant people (family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors) in their lives that gave them knowledge and affected their thinking process. Interactions with citizens provided countless indispensable and desired information since people expressed a great deal during informal contacts. People became aware of various matters in their environment, such as products, services, activities, philosophies, ideas, and performances. Hence, it impacted individuals' opinions, attitudes, decisions, and behaviors. These conclusions were similar to the findings of prior studies.

A number of preceding studies stressed the importance of social structure and its role in the spread of ideas and influence (Rogers, 2003; Forsyth, 2013). These past works specified that socialization was a life-long process. People in a society usually learned and received indications on how to behave through direct contact with family members, relatives, friends, co-workers, religious communities, political parties, sports teams, and casual acquaintances. Hence, reference groups were the foundation for developing a person's way of thinking (perceptions and thoughts). They had strong power in influencing and determining a person's self-identity, attitudes, and social ties (Rogers, 2003; Thompson and Hickey, 2005; Haralambos and Holborn, 2008; Forsyth, 2013). Further, prior scholars revealed that verbal interactions aided and coordinated people's adequate conduct; provided necessary foundations of behavioral patterns (Settle *et al.*, 2011).

The participants signified during the investigation that they trusted WOM. They believed that verbal communications were: *"convenient, dependable, and beneficial"*. The participants' valued opinions expressed directly to them. Prior studies confirmed this testimony. Rogers (2003) indicated most individuals evaluated a product, service, idea, or philosophy not on the basis of scientific research by experts, but through subjective evaluation of close peers. Correspondingly, prior findings empirically showed that WOM was more persuasive than traditional media. Compared to traditional marketing tools, WOM was perceived as exceedingly reliable and relevant; more likely to generate compassion and clear understanding; speed up decision-making; and drastically reduce consumer resistance (Harrison-Walker, 2001; Trusov *et al.*, 2009). Sweeney *et al.* (2008) recognized that WOM trustworthiness was developed because the people involved in the communication were noncommercial. With this in mind, people trusted recommendations from other individuals (Carol, 2006). Advice and personal recommendations guided individuals in their decision-making process and choice evaluations (Fay, 2006). The participants acknowledged that asked opinions and advice had a more positive impact than unasked opinions and advice. This was aliened with prior discoveries. Arndt (1967) found that WOM seekers were selectively exposed to cogent WOM and were prone to such messages. WOM was influential when the receivers initiated dialog by asking senders for information. According to Bansal and Voyer (2000), WOM was "domain-specific"; the people were not aware of the relevant subject area until they became attentive to the WOM communication. Sweeney *et al.* (2008) declared that WOM were powerful on people's behavioral decisions when they actively requested the information.

In this study, WOM was well received for various reasons. The participants implied that WOM was sought when people were overwhelmed with excess viewpoints and information, with marketing clutters, and limited decision-making

time. They further indicated that WOM was needed during complex situations in which the subject's benefits were ambiguous, intangible, or not immediately observable. Nevertheless, some participants suggested that WOM was needed when individuals tried something for the first time (product, service, and idea) or when the subject was associated with a probability of hazard and threat. Hence, the receivers reeled on the opinion of others as a guide for whether to show interest in the matter, evaluate a subject, or behave a certain way. WOM compressed the process time quickly and effectively. Verbal communication was prominent because individuals usually consulted a trusted source. These testimonies were aligned with several early academic findings. For example, Silverman (2001) connoted that WOM was powerful due to its experience-delivery mechanism that did not take time. Fang *et al*., (2011) declared that WOM helped people with research and opinion seeking so as to reduce risk. Finally, Sweeney *et al*. (2008) declared that high complexity matters were vulnerable to personal influences. The investigation identified efficient ways in delivering prevailing verbal messages. The participants indicated that influential communication depended on the message content and the delivery technique. They declared that communications should be stated in a simple manner (clear beginning, middle and end), converted relevant information to the listeners (content was inspiring and visual due to details and visual aids), and maintained their interest (conveyed passion and emotion). Furthermore, the participants indicated that tone of voice and body languages were critical in creating influential messages, regardless of the natural speaking style. These dynamics were mentioned before in earlier studies.

Previous literatures and studies identified that the delivery of the message (what and how the message was said) played a vital role in the creation of persuasive WOM. Researchers showed that powerful descriptions and the usage of convincing voice tones during a conversation grasped listeners' attentions, altered their opinions, created a strong root in their memories, and impacted their ability to recall WOM (Bansal and Voyer 2000; Sweeney *et al*., 2008). Furthermore, showing listeners various visual stimuli during verbal contact delivered a greater impact and influence on people (Gabbott and Hogg, 2000). After the elaboration of various insights regarding what constitutes influential WOM, the participants revealed that: *"politics was currently the hot discussion topic"*. They implied that Egyptians began to socialize about various governmental and civil issues. Political interests were driven by the current events that occurred in the country. The public expressed their thoughts regarding the regime changeover, democratic establishments, constitutional developments, electoral improvements, and domestic progresses. These topics blended into people's routine dialogs, held amongst various interpersonal networks. Egyptians encountered all kinds of political talks and arguments that were voluntarily carried without any specific purpose or predetermined agendas. Through this process, people learned political facts and values. These findings also surfaced in earlier studies.

Previous studies showed that the existence and nourishment of a democratic society depended on the participation of people whose democratic values and beliefs produced wise political judgments, which were induced through social interactions and sets of life experiences (Putnam, 2000; Munroe, 2002; Settle *et al*., 2011). According to Fay (2006), political discussions were necessary conditions for comprehension of the political news. Moreover, scholars clarified political dialogs as rational conversations where deliberative exchange of political opinions and suggestions occurred. Conversations about governmental, civil, constitutional, and electoral issues allowed for the acquirement of knowledge, values, attitudes and dispositions that governed the actions of a democratic citizen, which impacted peoples outlooks (Scheufele, 2000; McClurg, 2003; Settle *et al*., 2011). Interactions among people had a strong influence on the individual tendency to share interest in politics. It created opportunities for individuals to gather reports about politics, thereby supporting the political awareness, attentiveness, and curiosity of many people (McClurg, 2003; Settle *et al*., 2011).

The participants illustrated that their political discussions occurred with different people in numerous social networks; arose among family, friends, peers, neighbors, and other far acquaintances. The participants indicated no difference in the amount of disclosure found among the strong or weak ties. Furthermore, the acquaintances that they interacted with were thought to be powerful agents of political influence because they were trusted, frequently encountered, and perceived as knowledgeable informants. The investigation revealed that social ties were important resources for civic and political information and democratic outlooks. Socialization with numerous agents welcomed individuals into the political culture and provided an orientation towards a wide range of political issues. These findings were comparable and equivalent to the conclusions and results from previous empirical discoveries.

Earlier scholars claimed that social influences concerning political matters were enhanced among various associates. Numerous ties aided in peoples' developmental process through providing political cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors. Both strong and weak ties influenced political socializations in different matters (Putnam, 2000; Settle *et al.*, 2011). Strong ties expanded perspectives, detected common problems, and encouraged collective actions. Their political talks made people more tolerant and encouraged political participation. Weak ties, on the other hand, were beneficial for the diffusion of distinctive information and political mobilization. Casual associates with dissimilar social backgrounds brought people into contact with ideas and news that they did not encounter before (Scheufele, 2000; Mutz and Mondak, 2006). Rubenson (2005) illustrated that people who were in contact with different types of networks were more likely to vote, sign petitions, protest, attend political meetings, boycott, and help in political campaigns.

Based on the qualitative findings and discussions, a proposed conceptual framework was developed regarding the antecedents that created influential WOM, which impact people's attitude in the political context. Figure 1 illustrated the proposed model.
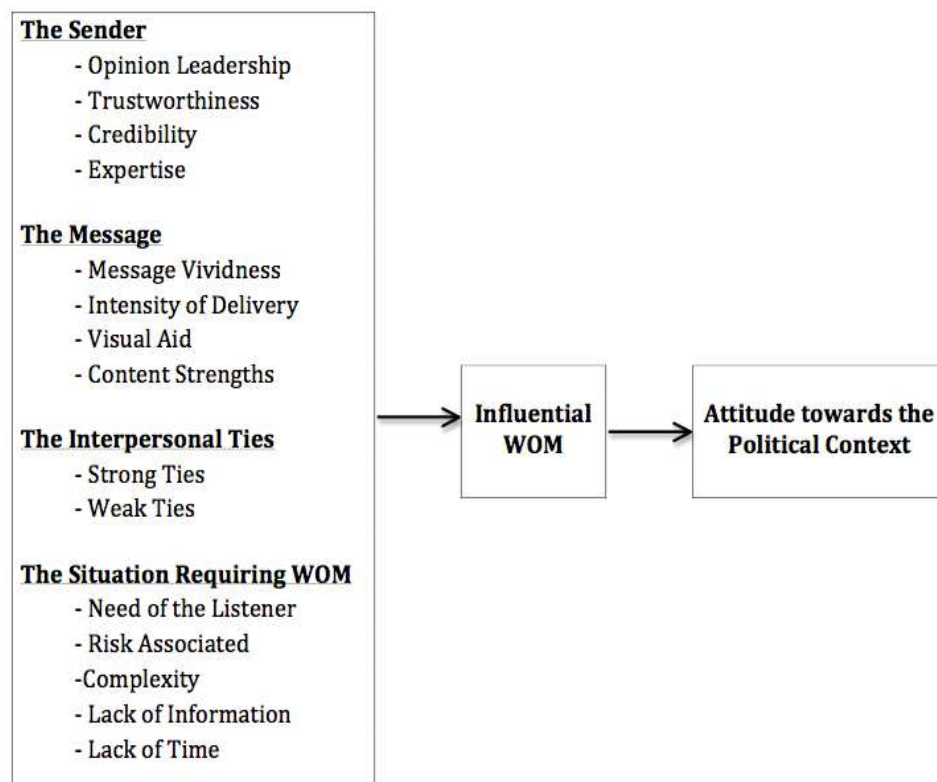
The Sender
- Opinion Leadership
- Trustworthiness
- Credibility
- Expertise

The Message
- Message Vividness
- Intensity of Delivery
- Visual Aid
- Content Strengths

The Interpersonal Ties
- Strong Ties
- Weak Ties

The Situation Requiring WOM
- Need of the Listener
- Risk Associated
- Complexity
- Lack of Information
- Lack of Time

→ **Influential WOM** → **Attitude towards the Political Context**

Figure 1: The Proposed Conceptual Framework

CONCLUSIONS

Various researches have been conducted in the American and European context on the creation of influential WOM in the political context. Few work have been done in reference to any Middle Eastern/Arab country (Assaad, 2007). Doing fieldwork to study the youth and young adults' perspectives on what creates influential WOM in the political context aided in offering a valid and working outline for a theoretical framework for Middle Eastern countries. The qualitative research was beneficial in providing valuable and rich insight into the subject matter. It provided a more reality-based standpoint of the respondents. With the use of the interviews and the observations' findings, a proposed conceptual framework was developed for future researches to use and build upon.

The study provides some useful insights for practitioners in the field of civic and political events and activities. Results showed that interpersonal social influence plays a vital role in affecting citizens' attitude, concerning both politics and public affairs. Community associations, such as clubs and religious bodies; associations with work organizations and unions; and informal happenings such as sports leagues, picnics, and parties should allow their supporters and staff to hold numerous traits to encourages political knowledge formation. When people in various interpersonal social networks communicate to others about political, governmental, and civil matters, they should provide the listeners with necessary information to effectively evaluate political topics. They allow the clearing up of ideas in the minds of the listeners and overcome objections that some people might have. Therefore, they are viewed as reliable and credible. In addition, the participants should sway listeners to participate in civic matters with the messages that they project. Characteristics of the message help impact people's attitudes formation and intention development. The message vividness and the way the message gets delivered are crucial dynamics when wanting to sway peoples' opinions.

This study had several limitations. The first was the small size of the sample and the fact that participants were in a single area (Cairo and Alexandria, not Egypt as a whole). The present study needs to be supported by quantitative research that assesses the range of suggested antecedents as well as the overall model that was suggested. Finally, this study only focused on the receivers' viewpoints not the influencer.

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