

Chapter 11

Facebook Use in the 2012 USA Presidential Campaign

Obama vs. Romney

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Abstract Politicians and political groups have quickly realized the potential of social networking sites as campaign tools. Although scholars have begun examining the political impact of social networking sites, more research should explore the use of these sites for political purposes. The present study uses content analysis of both the 2012 Presidential candidate's official Facebook pages to understand how politicians use social networking sites to reach out to voters. Currently, President Barack Obama's Facebook page has 35 million users, while Mitt Romney's has 11 million users. Employing concepts from the political campaigns literature, the study examines how each candidate used campaign tools in Facebook. The duration of the study was September 3rd (Labor Day) to November 6th, 2012 (the day of the election). The present study found that both candidates used several similar strategies in reaching out to their fans. Both the candidates' most common purpose for the posts was to promote their candidacy. However, in case of attack and contrast posts, Romney used the strategies more frequently. Overall, Romney led a more aggressive campaign on Facebook, using negative strategies and fear appeal.

Keywords Political campaigns • Facebook • Barack Obama • Mitt Romney • Elections 2012

11.1 Introduction

One of the prominent trends in the online world in recent years is the boom in the use of social networking sites. Facebook now has over 1.6 billion members from around the globe (Facebook 2013). Nearly three-fourths of the electorate is now online, with over 65 % of adults using social media to share and discuss information

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(Madden and Zickuhr 2011). During the 2010 mid-term election cycle, 53 % of adults reported using the Internet for political purposes, while 22 % adults particularly used social media platforms such as Facebook to receive campaigns or find election information (Smith 2011). As Americans have started using these sites for political information and to share their political views online, “politicians and political groups on both ends of the ideological spectrum have begun using them to organize and communicate with their supporters and the public at large” (Smith 2011, p. 3).

Of course, social networking sites were not initially considered as political tools. However, politicians and political groups have quickly realized the potential of these sites. Obama’s utilization of social networking in the 2008 election is often used as an example to demonstrate the success of reaching his audience, particularly the youth (Dalton 2009; Nagourney 2008). Johnson (2012) examined Twitter feeds of 2012 Presidential candidate Mitt Romney to examine the rhetorical situation of the campaign. The author found that Romney used Twitter to build his credibility, attempted to connect to his audience, and explained reasoning for his policies. Romney used “Twitter bites to create a firsthand, immediate experience for the audience that takes out the middleman—the media. . . Romney reminded readers of the situation while also guiding his readers to his specific policy plans and stances on social issues” (Johnson 2012, p. 63).

Although scholars have begun examining the political impact of social networking sites (Williams and Gulati 2013; Zhang et al. 2010; Hong and Nadler 2012; Johnson 2012), more research should explore the use of these sites for political purposes. The present study uses content analysis of both the 2012 Presidential candidates’ official Facebook pages to understand how politicians use social networking sites to reach out to voters. Currently, President Barack Obama’s Facebook page has 35 million users, while Mitt Romney’s has 11 million users. Employing concepts from the political campaigns literature, the study examines how each candidate used campaign tools in Facebook. The duration of the study was September 3rd (Labor Day) to November 6th, 2012 (the day of the election).

11.2 Political Use of Social Networking Sites

Using the theory of diffusion of innovations, Williams and Gulati (2013) examined the use of Facebook and Twitter in the 2006 and 2008 elections to the US House of Representatives. Their findings show that Facebook adoption diffused rapidly. Several variables such as money, level of education, and higher adoption rates by competitors explained both adoption of this new technology and implementation. Compared to 2006, the authors found that by 2008 the majority of both Democratic and Republican candidates had a presence on Facebook. About 72 % had a ‘Politicians’ page, which they regularly updated.

In the 2012 Presidential elections, both President Obama and Presidential candidate Mitt Romney used social networking sites to reach their audience.

Johnson (2012) studied Romney's use of Twitter during the time leading to the elections. Findings show that Romney attempted to build his credibility, expressed his reasoning, and connected emotionally with the audience.

Examining Twitter discussions of the seven republican candidates running for the 2011 Presidential nominations, Mejova et al. (2013) show the political sentiments expressed in the site. They found that the posts were largely negative rhetoric made up of sarcasm and humor. McClelland (2012) studied how politicians used big data from social networking sites to influence voters. In the case of President Obama, the author writes, "the Obama campaign understood how to find distinct patterns in vast amounts of unstructured data. It knew which districts to target and which ones to ignore" (p. 16). The author also explains how these political campaigns learned to raise money by targeting potential donors.

Hence, political use of social networking sites has been well established. Increasingly the mainstream media have recognized the importance of social networking sites for political use. Winslow (2012) examines how major broadcast networks streamed their primetime coverage to multiple platforms during the election season. For example, CNN had a partnership with Facebook, providing Election Night data and analysis of the activity on its widely used social media platform. NBC worked with Crimson Hexagon, and analyzed Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and other social media activity; and ABC used Yahoo and other providers.

Prior research has thus shown that politicians and political parties are using social networking sites for political use. However, few scholars have examined the strategies used in these posts to reach their audience. To understand the kind of appeals politicians use in these sites to reach out to their audience, the present study asks the following questions:

RQ1: What is the primary purpose of the post?

RQ2: What is the primary focus of the post?

RQ3: Does the post contain an emotional appeal?

RQ4: Does the post appeal to the audience to take an action?

RQ5: What is the main issue of the post?

RQ6: Does the post use any images, videos or mainstream media links?

RQ7: Is there a difference between the two candidates in their use of Facebook?

11.3 Methods

A content analysis was conducted to answer the research questions. The unit of analysis was each post in the Facebook pages of President Barack Obama and Presidential candidate Mitt Romney. Coders accessed the posts by logging into Facebook. They coded each post between September 3rd (Labor Day) to November 6th, 2012 (Election Day).

11.3.1 Coding

The primary variables coded were for the purpose of the post, focus of the post, emotional appeal of the post, appeal to the audience to take specific action, issue of the post and the use of video, images, and mainstream media links in the post. The purpose of the post included three categories: to promote a specific candidate, attack a candidate, and contrast the candidates. The focus of the post had two categories: personal characteristics of either candidate, and policy matters. Emotional appeal of the post included six primary emotions such as fear, enthusiasm, anger, pride, humor, and sadness. The next variable examined if the post appealed to the audience to take some specific action. The categories included register to vote, volunteer your time, and donate money.

The issues of the post was categorized into economic policy, social issues, environment issues, social welfare issues, foreign policy issues, and other. Economic Policy included Taxes, Deficit/Budget/Debt, Government Spending, Recession/Economic Stimulus, Minimum Wage, Employment/Jobs, Poverty, Globalization, Housing, and Economy (generic reference). Social Issues included Abortion, Gay Rights, Affirmative Action, Gun Control, Race Relations, and Civil Rights. Environmental issues covered Environment (generic reference), Global Climate Change, and Energy Policy. Within Social Welfare issues, Education, Health Care, Social Security, Women's Health and Welfare were included. Foreign Policy included Military (generic reference), Foreign Policy (generic reference), Veterans, Foreign Aid, Middle East, Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, and Iran. The other category was used to include any issue that was not captured in this list.

11.3.2 Inter-Coder Reliability

Two coders were trained to use the coding instrument. A random sample of 10 % articles was used to calculate inter-coder reliability. Reliability was calculated by using Cohen's Kappa. The resulting score was 0.90 or higher on all measures. Individual scores of all measures are reported in Table 11.1.

11.4 Results

A total of 83 posts were analyzed from both Barack Obama's and Mitt Romney's Facebook pages. The duration of analysis was between September 3rd, 2012 to November 6th, 2012. Barack Obama had a total of 23 posts while Mitt Romney posted 59 times during this time period.

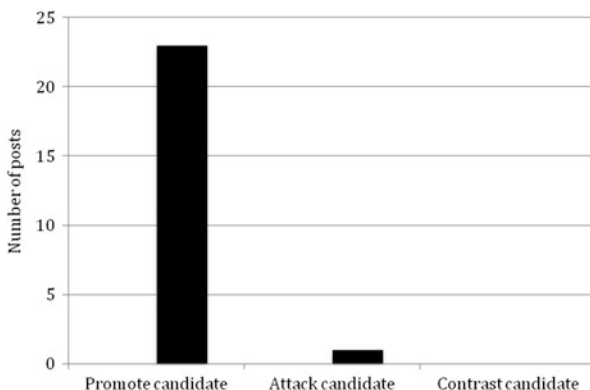
Examining the purpose of the post for Barack Obama's page shows that the incumbent President primarily used the space to promote himself or important

Table 11.1 Reliability results for the variables used in this study

Variable	Reliability score ^a
Purpose	1.00
Focus	0.89
Emotional appeal	0.90
Specific action	0.83
Issue	0.79
Multi-media use	1.00

^aCohen’s Kappa

Fig. 11.1 Purpose of posts: Barack Obama



events (Fig. 11.1). Of the total 24 posts, Obama used 23 posts (97 %) for promoting, only one post (3 %) to attack his opponent, and none to contrast between the two candidates. Romney used 45 posts (76 %) to promote himself, 11 posts (19 %) to attack his opponent and 3 posts (5 %) to contrast the candidates (Fig. 11.2).

The next variable was focus of the post, which had three categories: personal characteristic, policy matters, and other. Eight of Obama’s posts (33 %) focused on policy matters. There was no post of personal characteristic, while 16 posts (66 %) were coded as other (Fig. 11.3). These posts mainly promoted events or urged people to vote. In the case of focus of the post, Romney’s page was very similar to Obama’s. Romney used 17 posts (29 %) for policy matters, while 44 posts were coded as other (Fig. 11.4). These posts were mainly used to promote events, urging fans to vote or promote the mobile application.

The posts were also coded for their emotional appeal. The categories were fear, enthusiasm, anger, pride, humor, sadness, and other. Obama’s posts consisted of 19 (79 %) showing enthusiasm, two posts (8.3 %) showing pride and three posts (12.5 %) showing humor. There were no posts coded in the categories of fear, anger, and sadness. Romney’s posts showed similar enthusiasm with a total of 36 posts (61 %). There were three posts that showed pride (Fig. 11.5). The big difference from Obama’s posts was Romney’s use of fear. Romney used 20 posts (34 %) to discuss the problems that America will face if Obama is reelected. Romney’s page did not have any posts showing anger, humor, and sadness (Fig. 11.6).

Fig. 11.2 Purpose of posts: Mitt Romney

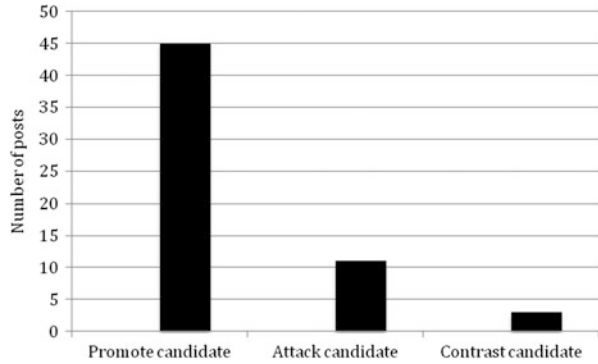


Fig. 11.3 Focus of posts: Barack Obama

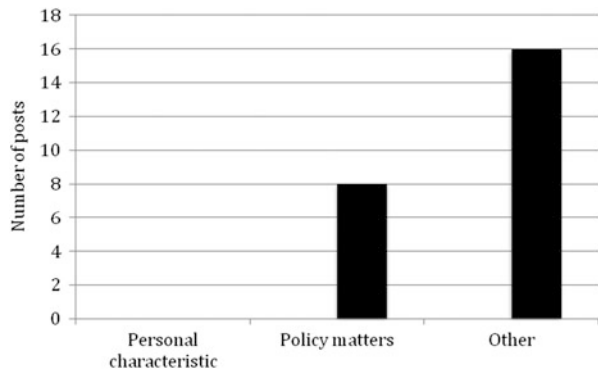
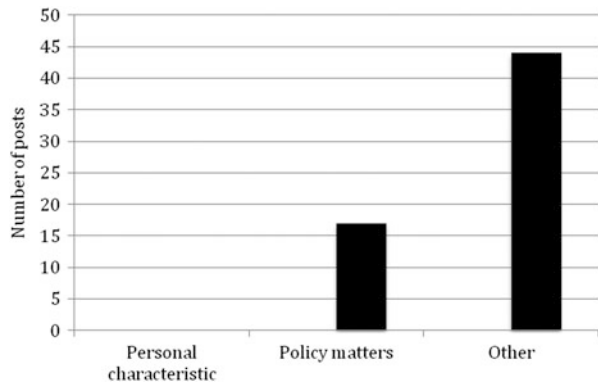


Fig. 11.4 Focus of posts: Mitt Romney



The next variable coded was appeal for specific action. Obama’s campaign employed 7 posts (30.4 %) to urge the audience to vote, 2 posts (8.6 %) to volunteer their time, and 5 posts (21.7 %) to donate money (Fig. 11.7). Similarly, Romney’s campaign used 27 posts (45.7 %) to encourage his fans to vote, 6 posts (10.1 %) to volunteer their time, and 17 posts (28.8 %) to donate money (Fig. 11.8).

Fig. 11.5 Emotional appeal of posts: Barack Obama

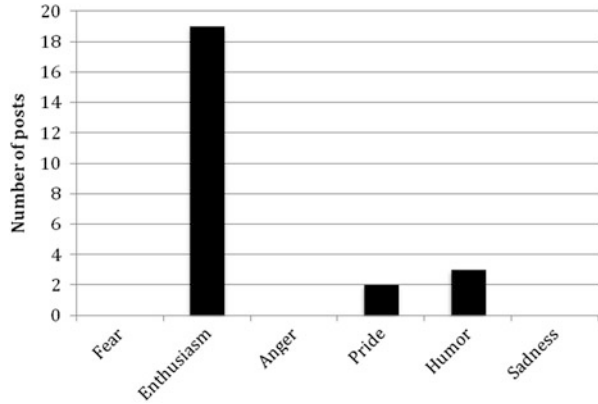


Fig. 11.6 Emotional appeal of posts: Mitt Romney

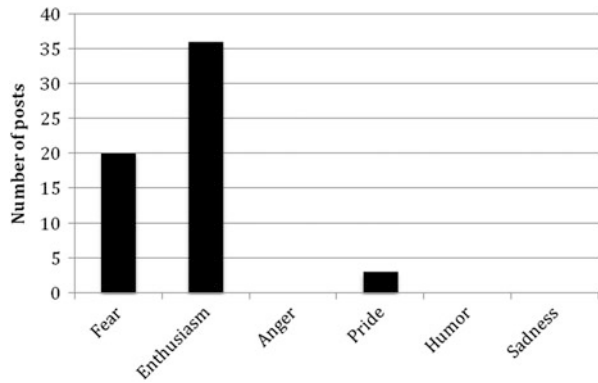
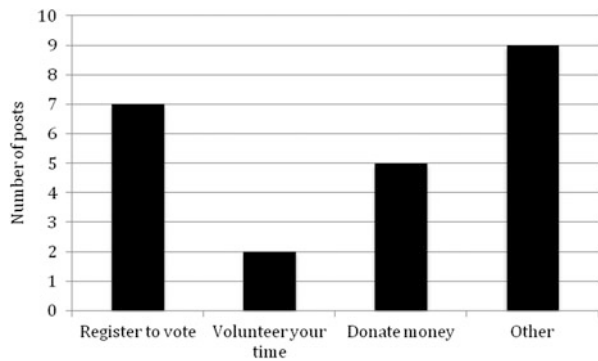
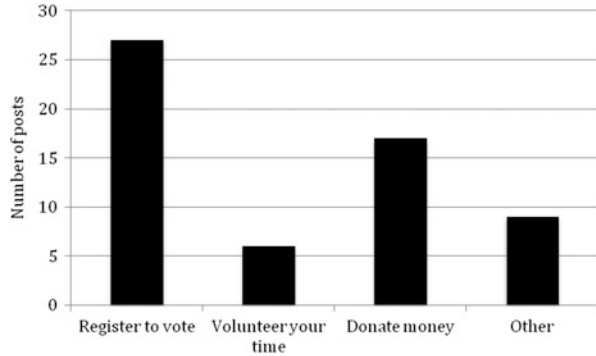


Fig. 11.7 Appeal for specific action: Barack Obama



Another variable coded was the issue of the posts. Four (16.6 %) of Obama’s posts discussed economic policies, one (4 %) post about environmental policies, and one (4 %) about social welfare. There were no posts about foreign policy and social issues (Fig. 11.9). Romney’s posts were dominated by economic policies

Fig. 11.8 Appeal for specific action: Mitt Romney



with 14 (23.7 %) posts, followed by two (3 %) posts about social welfare and one (1.6 %) post about environmental issues. Similar to Obama, his campaign also did not discuss social and foreign policy issues (Fig. 11.10).

The final variable examined the multi-media use by the two candidates. Obama's page consisted of 15 (62.5 %) images, 9 (37 %) videos and 4 (16.6 %) links (Fig. 11.11). Romney (Fig. 11.12) used 52 (88 %) images, followed by 14 (23.7 %) and 7 (11.8 %).

Besides examining the Facebook posts on both the candidate's pages, chi-square tests were conducted to examine the differences between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney's use of Facebook. There were several variables that showed significant differences between the two candidates. Within the purpose of the post, attacking the opponent showed a significant difference (chi-square = 10.54, $p < .01$). The next variable that demonstrated differences was emotional appeal. Enthusiasm (chi-square = 11.23, $p < .01$), fear (chi-square = 15.33, $p < .001$), and humor (chi-square = 12.11, $p < .001$). The other variables did not show any significant differences between the two candidates.

11.5 Discussions

The purpose of this study was to understand how Barack Obama and Mitt Romney used Facebook to reach their audience. Before the implications of the findings are discussed, a few limitations should be mentioned. The study examined only Facebook, comparing other social media use such as Twitter and Youtube would be useful to generalize the findings. The duration of the content analysis was from September 3rd (Labor day) to November 6th (Election Day). Although this is the time for majority of the election campaign action, a longer time period could help understand the strategies used by the campaigns better. Despite some of these shortcomings, the present study helped in understanding the strategies used by the Obama and Romney campaigns on Facebook.

Fig. 11.9 Issue of posts:
Barack Obama

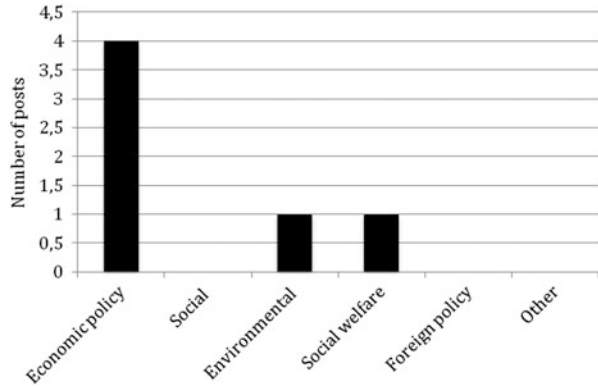


Fig. 11.10 Issue of posts:
Mitt Romney

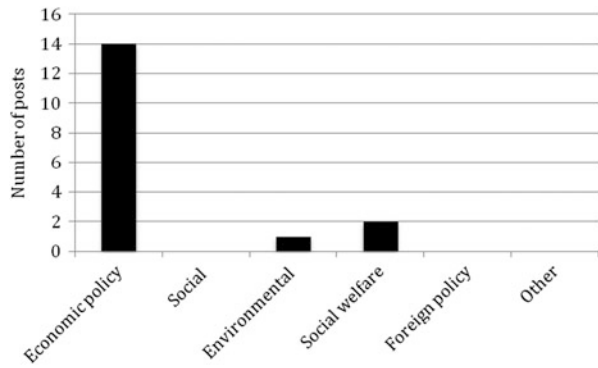
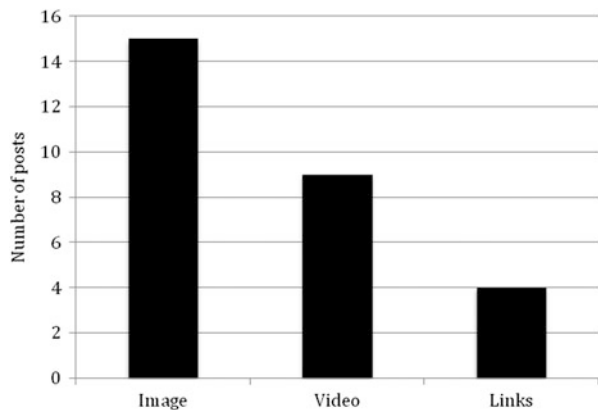
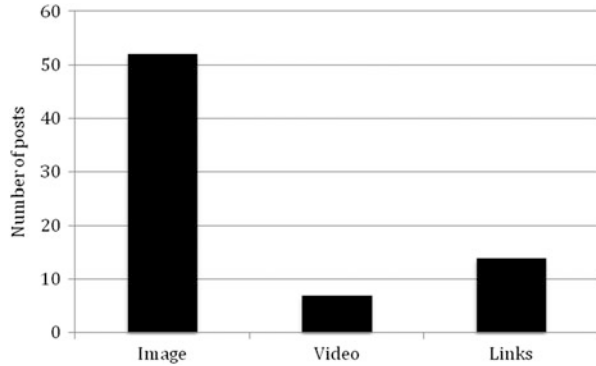


Fig. 11.11 Multi-media
use in posts: Barack Obama



Even though social media were mostly known for connecting with friends and networking, recently there has been a lot of attention paid to the political use of social media. Political campaigns have successfully used social media to reach their audience. However, not much research has been done on understanding the kind of

Fig. 11.12 Multi-media use in posts: Mitt Romney



strategies that are most commonly used by politicians. The 2012 US Presidential elections was a unique opportunity to explore these strategies.

The present study found that both candidates used several similar strategies in reaching out to their fans. Both the candidates' most common purpose for the posts was to promote their candidacy. However, in the case of attack and contrast posts, Romney used the strategies more frequently. During the study period, Obama used only one post to attack Romney. This post was about the 47 % comment made by Romney, where Obama's campaign shared the video of Romney speaking about his opinion about 47 % of the country who will never vote for him. On the other hand, Romney's campaign used several posts to attack Obama. 19 % of Romney's posts attacked Obama and talked about why he is not the right candidate for the country. In 5 % of the posts, Romney's campaign also highlighted the contrasts between the two candidates. Examining just the purpose of the posts demonstrates that the strategy employed by Romney's campaign was more aggressive than Obama's. Obama's was more casual, promoting events, sharing campaign images, and highlighting the importance of voting. Romney's campaign also used the same strategies, but they also attacked Obama's policies, and highlighted why Romney's policies were better than the President's.

The second variable examined the focus of the posts, and generally both candidates used very similar strategies. However, the differences between the two candidates' strategies were explicit in the use of emotional appeal. The majority of Obama's posts (79 %) consisted of posts that showed enthusiasm about the upcoming elections and various events related to his campaign. Obama's campaign also used humor (12.5 %) to reach their audience. While 34 % of Mitt Romney's campaign used fear appeal in their posts. These posts mostly highlighted the problems the country will face if Obama is re-elected. Unlike Obama, Romney's campaign did not use any humor appeal in the posts. In the case of appeal for specific action, issue of the post, and multi-media use, both candidates mostly used the same strategies. Overall, Romney led a more aggressive campaign on Facebook, using negative strategies and fear appeal. Quantitatively too, Romney's campaign posted (59 times) far more often than Obama's (23 times) during the study.

The present study is a preliminary examination of the social media uses of two candidates in 2012 US Presidential elections. Findings demonstrate similarities and important differences in the strategies used by the two campaigns. Future studies should explore social media other than Facebook in election campaign.

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