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**Drivers and Outcomes of Political Candidate Image Creation:
The Role of Social Media Marketing**

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Drivers and Outcomes of Political Candidate Image Creation: The Role of Social Media Marketing

Abstract

The study examines the role of social media marketing (SMM) activities and the influence of perceived candidate image in building voter–candidate relationship equity within the context of United Kingdom (UK) politics. Drawing from branding literature and social identity theory the article further investigates the role of candidate image as a mediator between SMM and voter–candidate relationship equity, whilst also testing the moderating effect of political ideologies. Survey results from 235 young UK voters indicate that while all SMM activities appears to positively influence the perceived candidate image, not all SMM variables directly relate to relationship equity. The relationship rather appears to be an indirect one, mediated through the political candidate’s image. Surprisingly, political ideology also does not appear to moderate the candidate image–relationship equity relationship. The study findings highlight the growing importance of SMM activities and candidate image in political contexts, providing insights for political campaigners.

Keywords: political marketing; social media marketing; United Kingdom; candidate image; relationship equity

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1 Introduction

The use of marketing in politics is growing increasingly influential and nowadays include a multitude of approaches (Kaid, 2012; Newman and Sheth, 1985; Hobbs, 2017). Recent literature displays abundant comparisons between political and commercial marketing practice, particularly in terms of strategies adopted by the candidates for local and presidential campaigns, voting and buying behaviors, and brand and customer/voter equity (Winchester et al., 2014; Kaid, 2012). Consequently, as economic and societal conditions evolve, so does the integration of social media in political marketing.

The most recent elections, including the United States (US) Presidential election and United Kingdom (UK) general election saw social media as the rising star of election campaigning. This development has subsequently brought much attention to the use of social media in political marketing (Hobbs, 2017; Ruddick, 2017). Many campaign analysts alongside social media experts emphasize the increasing importance of social media in political marketing, and discuss who made better use of social media platforms throughout the campaign periods (Hobbs, 2017). In the UK, The Labor party and, the marketing efforts of its leader, Jeremy Corbyn, on social media were praised on numerous occasions, and Labor's relative success was attributed to their worthwhile outreach to youth on social media in comparison to their conservative Tory counterparts (Hobbs, 2017). Some campaign analysts and journalists have praised the way Corbyn and the party interacted with the UK voters, and their portrayal in related social media accounts helped contribute to the subjectively affable image perceived by the potential voters (BBC Election 2017, 2017).

The discussions revolving around the UK Election, the latest US presidential elections, and other examples including the Brexit vote and the likes of Beppe Grillo in Italy, show that the role of social media and candidate image in politics is becoming ever more prominent. Yet, although the rising significance and the increasingly potent role of social

media marketing (SMM) are discussed in the general marketing literature (e.g., Saridakis et al., 2016), it still remains relatively unexplored within the political marketing domain (Godey et al., 2016; Kaid, 2012). Indeed, social media is regarded a double-edge sword as it has made it both simpler and more challenging for brands to form credible relationships with their consumers (Muntinga et al., 2011). On the one hand, it has made things easier because social media is considered a more intimate and interactive environment for consumers, but, on the other hand, this simplicity has also brought about challenges of figuring out what works best for which audience (Godey et al., 2016).

Candidate image (CI) is deemed an influential factor in political campaigns and voter behavior (Newman and Sheth, 1985; Hoegg and Lewis, 2011). Notwithstanding a few exceptions investigating the role of perceived human brand image, including that of politicians, and its role in consumer attitude and brand equity (e.g., Moulard et al., 2015; Newman and Sheth, 1985), there is a dearth in extant literature focusing on the role of perceived candidate image in political marketing in the social media era. Based on this gap in the literature, our study explores the role of SMM activities and CI in determining voter-candidate relationship equity.

By doing so the current study contributes to extant literature by being among the first to present and empirically test an integrated conceptual model of politics-related SMM activities influencing political CI and its consequences in the form of voter-candidate relationship equity. Further, given the increasing political divide witnessed in recent elections, this study considers current political debates and takes a timely UK perspective. The UK market is currently battling a number of hot political issues, including negotiating an exit from the European Union (Brexit), making it a highly suitable context for a study such as this. Finally, given the potential effect of political ideologies discussed in the introduction, the study also investigates the conditional effect that different ideologies might exert on the key

study relationships, by also investigating the moderating effect of conservative versus liberal voters.

2 Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Newman and Sheth (1985, p. 180) describe candidate image as “observable personality traits” that are associated with the candidate. Whilst the literature does not provide an exact description of the components that constitute CI, studies on human brands can be taken as a reference point as many include politicians and electoral candidates (Saboo et al., 2016).

Just as a brand can be easily associated with human-like characteristics and thus given a ‘personality’, a human can be seen as a brand and carry brand-like characteristics as well (Moulard et al., 2015). Extant research on humans as brands indicate that public personas are indeed more than mere endorsers to commercial brands but rather possess their brands, built upon their perceived characteristics, lifestyles, and career activities (Thompson et al., 2006; Moulard et al., 2015). Human brands are commonly referred to as any “persona that is subject to marketing communication efforts” (Saboo et al., 2016, p. 525). Drawing on social identity theory, Saboo et al. (2016) suggest that the widespread and growing presence of social media have strengthened the creation of human brands. Due to the increased level of interaction on social media platforms, consumer attachments and relationship building among users and brands are peaking (Moulard et al., 2015). Although literature has discussed celebrity brands and their influential images in the entertainment industry, little has been done on the images of political candidates.

Figure 1 depicts this study’s conceptual model, it draws from branding and social identity theory to integrate a robust set of antecedents to political CI and relationship equity in politics. The following sections discuss and clarify the hypothesized relationships in detail.

- Figure 1 here -

2.1 Candidate Image

Marketing and advertising strategies have always been employed in political campaigns, particularly the USA and UK (Kaid, 2012). One notable reason for such efforts in political marketing is to build, emphasize, “visualize and dramatize” the political candidates, and to help create a positive perceived CI in the eyes of the voters (Kaid, 2012, p. 30).

With the rising power of the internet and social media, advertising tools and platforms used in political marketing have been greatly altered (Hobbs, 2017). Many political parties that understand the necessity of reaching out to younger audiences, have diverted their focus towards establishing more authentic and engaging social media marketing strategies (Hobbs, 2017; Winchester et al., 2014). Though the importance of social media in political marketing has not been discussed widely in the literature, its soaring use and eminent role in recent elections, from the US to the UK to Italy, has generated a surge in popularity in the marketing literature as well (Safiullah et al., 2017; Conick, 2016). Most marketers claim, however, that social media marketing is indeed applied in an effort to establish a more authentic CI in the public opinion (Hobbs, 2017).

Lau et al. (2007) state that any negative imagery used and portrayed by the candidates and the parties throughout a political campaign cause different effects on voters’ decisions on how to vote and their commitment to the party or the candidate they are willing to vote for. Winchester et al. (2014) discuss the potential positive impact of perceived politician or candidate image on voter decision making and the voter’s relationship with the party or the candidate. However, they do not assess candidate image in their study and further propose in their future research recommendations that the impact of candidate image in political marketing should be discussed further. As many political issues can be seen as quite complex by the uninitiated, many voters are likely to form opinions in the basis of CI without direct

reference to broader campaign issues. In accordance with this, much politics research has found numerous positive outcomes associated with strong candidate images, including candidate preferences, electoral behavior, and voter's subjective appraisal of certain candidates (Newman and Sheth, 1985). Following this line of arguments, we propose:

H1: Candidate image positively relates to relationship equity.

2.2 Social Media Marketing Efforts

Although social media's impact on purchase behavior, brand, and customer equity has been discussed in the literature to some extent, its application in political marketing is yet to be examined at length (Godey et al., 2016; Winchester et al., 2014; Kaid, 2012; Asmussen et al., 2013; Chang et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2016). The role of social media and its employment by brands is becoming more eminent primarily because these platforms allow marketers to operate in a more interactive manner by allowing them to observe consumer reactions, and monitor these reactions and conversations taking place on their platforms (Schweidel and Moe, 2014; Saridakis et al., 2016). Such privileges, in return, enable brands to gain a better understanding of their consumers (Felix et al., 2017). Social media has therefore become an increasingly popular marketing tool across a variety of fields including political campaigning (Hobbs, 2017).

Kim and Ko (2012) define the dimensions of social media marketing as interaction, entertainment, trendiness, customization, and word-of-mouth (WOM). Chang et al. (2015) contribute to these dimensions via the constructs making up the persuasive message content on social media and user attitude. The latter include argument quality and usefulness based on Bhattacharjee and Sanford's (2006) reasoning. Though Kim and Ko's (2012) social media marketing dimensions have previously been applied in the luxury industry context, their political marketing applicability is less clear (Godey et al., 2016). Hence, in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of SMM activities within the political marketing context,

certain modifications are in order. Thus, based on a comprehensive literature review on political and electoral marketing alongside popular news and commentaries on the area, the following variables are proposed to account for SMM activities in political marketing: content; argument quality and usefulness; interaction; message credibility; and WOM.

2.2.1 Content

Content of the information shared on social media is especially important in the case of human brands involved in politics and public service. The content of the posts shared on such accounts can comprise a number of dimensions including entertainment, argument quality, and insightfulness (Kim and Ko, 2012; Chang et al., 2015). According to Bhattacharjee and Sanford (2006), a message's argument on social media is concerned with how believable, potent, and convincing the message is, whereas perceived usefulness of a message is concerned with its effectiveness, productivity, and performance gains as perceived by the target audience. Chang et al. (2015) links the two elements by suggesting that when the argument quality of messages posted on social media are low, the perceived usefulness of these posts will follow suit.

Although the content quality and effectiveness of social media accounts and posts are vital, entertainment is amongst the top factors that make social media more in demand (Godey et al., 2016). Social media is often regarded as a pastime activity and a means of enjoyment (Muntinga et al., 2011; Godey et al., 2016). Given the fact that political marketing is often associated with comparative and humorous messages, entertainment is be regarded essential as well (Hoegg and Lewis, 2011; Clementson et al., 2016; Kaid, 2012). The entertainment aspect of the content includes how fun and interesting the content of the posts are (Godey et al., 2016).

Since argument quality, insightfulness, and entertainment elements of the social media messages have been claimed to affect consumer decision making, brand equity, consumer preference, and loyalty, it is expected that the content of such social media messages will have an analogous impact on voters (Kaid, 2012; Godey et al., 2016). The most recent UK election is considered to be an indication of social media altering voters' choices along with their perceptions of the candidates (Hobbs, 2017; BBC Election 2017, 2017). Therefore:

H2a: Content of information shared on social media as a part of political marketing activities positively relates to candidate image.

H2b: Content of information shared on social media as a part of political marketing activities positively relates to relationship equity.

2.2.2 Interaction

One of the most salient reasons for social media's current eminence is its provision of platforms for sharing and exchanging ideas, thoughts, or feelings on various matters (Godey et al., 2016). Social media does not only provide this social interaction space but also allows like-minded people to interact with one another and the brand in a more intimate environment than mainstream media can provide (Muntinga et al., 2011).

Interactions that take place on social media platforms can prompt consumers to develop affection towards brands (Kim and Ko, 2012). Such affectionate feelings can help shape the perceived brand image (Zhang, 2015). Godey et al. (2016, p. 5834) find that one of the reasons behind consumers' willingness to engage and interact on social media is their curiosity to find out more about "the user behind the profile". Though candidates and political parties have been described as brands for the purposes of this study, they are 'human brands' regardless, which encourage the voter to view them as fellow users, hence leading them to become more involved with the said "user behind the profile" (Moulard et al., 2015). Rutter et

al. (2016) also find that interactions that take place on social media can increase brand performance, enhance positive brand image, and the relationship between its customers. Thus:

H3a: Interaction on the candidate's social media positively relates to candidate image.

According to Kim and Ko (2012), the level of brand engagement on social media along with its interaction with its audiences positive affects relationship equity. They define relationship equity as the consumers' willingness and tendency to further develop and maintain the relationship they have with the brand. Therefore, brands make more attempts to establish this willingness in the consumer's mind through marketing activities on different platforms (Kim and Ko, 2012; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). Zhang et al. (2014) also assert that relationship equity is positively influenced by consumer-brand interactions that take place on a more personal level. Many find that interactions taking place on social media are indeed regarded as more personal (Godey et al., 2016). Yuan et al. (2016) explain that parasocial interactions, enhance the consumer's desire to maintain their relationship with a brand. Hence:

H3b: Interaction on the candidate's social media positively relates to relationship equity.

2.2.3 Credibility

Credibility and authenticity of information provided, particularly when intended for marketing purposes, on any platform are crucial elements in making the consumer trust the source (Bhattacharjee and Sanford, 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002; McCroskey and Teven, 1999). Whilst credibility of messages shared on social media has not been widely discussed in the literature as a specific and a separate construct, source credibility, ad credibility, and information credibility have all been discussed in length (Yuan et al., 2016). The SMM

credibility construct combines elements from both source and advertising credibility, and refers to consumers' evaluations of the believability of the content shared on social media (cf. Cotte et al., 2005). Given that source credibility is often highly associated with human brand equity and image, its impact on perceived brand image is discussed in different contexts (Moulard et al., 2015). Bhattacharjee and Sanford (2006) also claim that source credibility has a significant impact on brand attitudes and perceptions whereas Yuan et al. (2016) suggest that the source credibility of social media and the higher credibility of parasocial relationships positively impact relationship equity and brand equity. Therefore:

H4a: Credibility of information shared on social media as a part of political marketing activities positively relates to candidate image.

H4b: Credibility of information on social media as a part of political marketing activities positively relates to relationship equity

2.2.4 Word-of-Mouth

Word-of-Mouth is generally considered significantly more effective than marketer-initiated campaigns (Chu and Kim, 2011). With the growing importance of internet in every aspect of marketing, the effect of on-line WOM on consumer preferences and buying decisions has become visibly eminent and powerful (Godey et al., 2016). Gruen et al.'s (2006) study on online consumer engagement shows that WOM is particularly effective due to its association with higher empathy and credibility. Many brands therefore invest in initiating WOM through social media and encourage consumers' sharing of brand-related information to their peers and close acquaintances (Godey et al., 2016).

Chu and Kim (2011, p. 50) consider the layers of WOM to be of threefold: "opinion seeking, opinion giving, and opinion passing". While seeking opinions, consumers seek advice from others, and social media platforms facilitate such information exchanges, thus

affecting brand image and customer equity (Godey et al., 2016). Given the nature of politics and political campaigns, opinion seeking and giving are not only desirable but also inadvertent outcomes of social media campaigning. Although the WOM's power on voters' decision making has not been widely discussed in literature, marketers deem it as one of the most influential elements in political marketing, particularly due to the increasing use of social media amongst the younger generations (Hobbs, 2017).

Saboo et al.'s (2016, p. 525) study on the effect of social media on human brands shows that positive WOM on social media positively affects brand sales, customer loyalty, and further brand advocacy. Social WOM is also considered amongst the most influential elements on building and maintaining a stronger relationship between the brand and the consumer (Mooradian and Swan, 2006; Rauschnabel et al., 2016). Given that perceptions of a brand affect the perceived brand image, it can be inferred that WOM has a significant impact on perceived candidate image as well (Winchester et al., 2014; Aaker, 1996). Hence:

H5a: WOM shared on social media as a part of political marketing activities positively relates to candidate image.

H5b: WOM shared on social media as a part of political marketing activities positively relates to relationship equity.

2.3 Moderating Role of Political Ideologies

Differences between people from different ends of the political spectrum are not merely limited to their understandings of the societal issues and voting behaviors, but also include how certain emotions are handled and their reactions and responses towards activities carried out by both commercial and political entities (Carney et al., 2008; Hibbing et al., 2014; Edsall, 2012). Conservatives, for instance, are thought to respond more strongly to fear-induced claims in political campaigns and to avoid uncertainty, whereas liberals are better

able to cope with negativity and uncertainty, and are less likely to change their voting decisions solely based on these (Carney et al., 2008; Edsall, 2012). Whilst liberals tend to value empathy, egalitarianism, fairness, and self-fulfillment, and respond better to candidates representing such values; those leaning towards conservatism are more likely to vote for candidates with stronger stances on preserving values considered societal norms, assertive, and attractive images (Edsall, 2012; Carney et al., 2008, Hibbing et al., 2014). Based on the aforementioned views on psychological and characteristic distinctions between individuals with different political ideologies, it is thus reasonable to expect that the influence of perceived candidate image on voter-candidate relationship equity varies across conservatives and liberals in that the effect would be stronger for those more liberally inclined.

H6: The positive relationship between candidate image and relationship equity is moderated by political ideology in such a way that the relationship is stronger (weaker) among liberals (conservatives).

3 Methodology

3.1 Data collection and sample

In alignment with the purposes of this study, a descriptive, cross-sectional quantitative research method was applied amongst the younger population that are eligible to vote in the UK. Reasons for targeting the younger population were twofold: first, given the nature of social media, younger generations' involvement in social media activities is objectively stronger and more evident; second, the 2017 UK General Election has drawn much attention to the younger voters in the UK (Hobbs, 2017; Conick, 2016). Alongside the rise in younger population's participation in the election, political parties have started realizing that younger generations should indeed be the target of such political campaigns because of their potential influence on future policies (Conick, 2016; Bennett, 2012; Bolton et al., 2013).

For these reasons, only respondents between the ages 18-45 were included in the study. The survey was distributed to multiple social media groups and platforms, from youth politics groups on Facebook to non-politics related groups and pages on social media, in order to enable access to a larger and more representative young voter sample. Prior to the start of the data collection process, a pre-study test was conducted amongst university students that were eligible to vote in the UK. Based on the feedback gathered, certain items' wordings were altered to a very minor extent.

The sample consisted of a total of 305 respondents, of which only 235 (77%) were fit for study purposes. Specifically, incomplete responses, along with those who were not eligible to vote in the UK and who were above the age 45, were discarded. The sample comprised all of UK, with the majority (85%) registered in England, followed by those from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The majority of the respondents were female (58%). About 34% of the sample size were young adults aged 18-24, 52% were aged 25-34, and 14% belonged to the 34-45 age range. Around 84.7% of the respondents' income was between £10k-60k. Only 24% of the sample size comprised first time voters.

Two separate descriptive analyses were carried out to assess the political ideologies of the respondents, one based on the political parties the respondents voted for, or would have voted for, in the last general election, and the other based on the Social and Economic Conservatism Scale (SECS) political ideology scale (Everett, 2013). The latter is explained more in detail in the subsequent section. The political ideology assessment based on political parties revealed that around 76% of the sample voted for liberal or center-left parties, whereas the rest voted for parties that are considered more conservative or right-wing. However, analysis done based on the SECS revealed that only 48% of the respondents could indeed be considered truly socially and economically liberal, whilst 52% were socially and economically conservative.

Differences between the potential measurement methods of political ideologies could be explained by a variety of factors. Whilst the scale used to measure the social and economic conservatism is deemed a valid scale, matters such as political ideologies are heavily dependent on the cultural context and the current political and economic conditions in a given country (Carney et al., 2008; Hibbing et al., 2014; Abelson et al., 1982). Additionally, the current political climate in the UK is thought to have led some to vote for the parties they did not consider voting for prior to the most recent general election (Wainwright, 2017). Political instability and the feeling of insecurity about current world events combined with the repercussions of the Brexit vote has likely prompted some British voters to change their traditional voting behaviors (Hobbs, 2017).

3.2. Measures

The online questionnaire was designed to open with a screening question to prevent those who are not eligible to vote in the UK from attending to the survey. Alongside the demographics questions, respondents were also asked two questions in regards to their voting decisions. First, respondents were asked about what party they voted for in the most recent UK General Election. Respondents were also provided with the option ‘Did not vote’ amongst the answers for this particular item. The second voting decision-related item mainly targeted those who selected the ‘Did not vote’ option in the prior question, and inquired about which party they would have voted for in case they had voted. Respondents were thereafter probed to answer the remaining questions with the political candidate with which they were most familiar in mind.

The constructs incorporated in the survey were sourced from extant literature and adapted for the purposes of the current study. Social media *content* was based on items gathered from Kim and Ko (2012) and Bhattacharjee and Sanford (2006). Three items from

Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2014) were used to measure *WOM*, whilst *interaction* was measured using three items provided by Kim and Ko (2012). Message *credibility* was measured incorporating items from Bhattacharjee and Sanford (2006) and Chang et al. (2015). *Candidate image*, a second-degree formative construct was assembled based on literature on human/celebrity brand image and candidate image. It comprised six first degree constructs including *trustworthiness*, *attractiveness*, *candidness*, *morality*, *originality*, and *competence* (McCroskey and Teven, 1999; Moulard et al., 2015; Newman and Sheth, 1985; Yuan et al., 2016). *Relationship equity*, the dependent variable, was operationalized using Yuan et al. (2016) and Vogel et al. (2008)'s relationship equity items. Finally, the *political ideology* moderator was assessed using the Social and Economic Conservatism Scale (SECS) developed by Everett (2013). Whilst Everett (2013)'s original scale consists of 12 items, having considered the cultural context of this study, only 10 were deemed fit for current purposes. Items regarding 'gun control', for instance, were found to be irrelevant as the pre-study test showed that the respondents were indifferent to such items. Whilst gun control is an issue frequently discussed in the US context, the UK voters are more apathetic towards this particular matter. Most constructs were measured using a 7-point Likert-type scale, whereas SECS items were measured using a 11-point scale. Table 1 shows the constructs and items used in the study.

- Table 1 here -

4. Analysis and results

4.1 Measurement model

Following precedence in the literature (Kaid, 2004), candidate image was assessed as a formative construct since the six indicators (*trustworthiness*, *originality*, *candidness*, *morality*, *competence* and *attractiveness*), are assumed to be causing the higher-order latent variable

rather than reflecting it (Thornton et al., 2014). In a formative construct, changes in the indicators would often lead to a change in the value of the latent variable (Treiblmaier et al., 2011). Candidate image was, thus, calculated as the sum of averages of its six reflective indicators.

The study's reflective constructs were assessed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS in where each item in the model was restricted to load on its preassigned factor while the latent factors were set to correlate freely (Gerbing & Anderson, 1988). The CFA model fit indices were within the acceptable range and the item loadings were all high and significant on their predetermined constructs ($> .6$) and average variances extracted (AVE) all above $.5$, evidencing convergent validity.

All variables comprising the social media marketing activities including content, interaction, credibility, and WOM, were found to be reliable with Cronbach alpha levels of $.866$, $.773$, $.939$, and $.853$ respectively. The dependent variable, relationship equity, was also deemed reliable as evidenced by its $.887$ alpha value. Similarly, the moderator variable, CEST, was reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of $.824$. As shown in Table 2, the construct reliabilities and square roots of AVEs are all higher than the interconstruct correlations, evidencing acceptable discriminant validity (Gaski, 1986).

- Table 2 here -

Due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, there is a risk that common method bias (CMB) might have affected the results. To minimize potential CMB, the research followed a number of Podsakoff et al.'s (2003) procedural recommendations such as anonymous questionnaires, assuring respondents that there were no right or wrong answers, different scale formats, and counterbalanced ordering of variables. CMB was also statistically controlled via a single factor test where a superordinate construct was estimated based on all the study's

manifest variables through CFA (Podsakoff et al., 2003). As this alternative model did not fit the data at all CMB is unlikely to severely impact the study results.

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

4.2.1 Mediated Regression

A mediated regression analysis was conducted using both AMOS and the PROCESS macro in SPSS to ensure robust findings. Both methods yielded analogous standardized and unstandardized estimates for the variables. Having run the structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis in AMOS, the model fit indices were initially assessed to proceed with the interpretation of the estimates. The model fit indices along with chi square/degrees of freedom and the probability level are all above the required acceptable threshold levels with RMSEA: .003, PCLOSE and CFI: .998; AGFI: .999, GFI: .998; p-value above .05 and chi square/df lower than 3.

The process macro in SPSS provided the overall mediated model estimates with direct and indirect effects. Based on the model types provided by Hayes (2013), Model 4 was initially used to analyze the mediated regression. The results of the mediated regression analysis in both AMOS and process macro in SPSS show analogous result patterns and are thus deemed robust. The SEM results displayed in Table 3 specifically show a direct positive relationship between candidate image and relationship equity ($\beta = .529, p < .01$) and that the relationship between content and candidate image is also positive ($\beta = .173, p < .01$). Similarly, interaction yields a coefficient of .252, credibility .491, and WOM .304 (all at $p < .01$). The first part of the model's adjusted R-square suggests that social media marketing variables explain approximately 43% of the variance in candidate image. Thus, these combined results support H1, H2a, H3a, H4a, and H5a respectively.

Though all social media marketing variables were found to have significant direct positive relationship to candidate image not all of them related significantly to the ultimate dependent variable. Specifically, whilst credibility on social media ($\beta = .204$) and WOM ($\beta = .149$) were significantly positively related to voter–candidate relationship equity ($p < 0.01$) in support of H4a and H5a respectively, no significant relationships were established between either content or interaction and relationship equity. Thus, H2b and H3b are not supported. The total model explains 53% of the variance of the relationship equity variable.

- Table 3 here -

The mediating role of candidate image was tested using bias-corrected (BC) bootstrapping in AMOS (with 500 bootstrap samples and 90 percent BC confidence intervals) (Hayes, 2009; Preacher & Hayes, 2008; MacKinnon, 2008). The mediated regression results yield total, direct, and indirect effects of each independent variable on the mediator, and the effect of each independent variable and the mediator on the dependent variable. The model paths in Table 4 reveal that candidate image does indeed mediate the relationship between the SMM activities and relationship equity link. Specifically, the pattern of results reveals that there is full mediation by candidate image on the content–relationship equity link and interaction–relationship equity link as evidenced by the insignificant direct relationships. Moreover, candidate image appears to exert a partial mediation effect on the relationship between credibility and relationship equity, and WOM and relationship equity respectively.

- Table 4 here -

4.2.2 Moderation

Prior to running a mediated regression with the moderator through PROCESS, the moderator was tested independently from the overall model to investigate its direct effect. The SECS

political ideology moderator was therefore dummy-coded using median split for liberals and conservatives separately. The results showed that the ideologies had a significant impact ($p > .05$), with conservative ideologies yielding a negative coefficient, indicating that conservatism impacts the influence of candidate image on relationship equity in a more negative way ($\beta = -.034$, $p = .039$). The moderated mediation regression with the moderator (PROCESS model 14), however, shows that the moderator has no impact, thus yielding no support for H6.

5 Discussion and conclusions

This study was aimed at investigating the role of SMM activities play in forming political CI and voter-candidate relationship equity. On the whole, the findings are broadly in line with the conceptual model. Whilst each of the SMM variables are found to have a positive impact on CI, the strength of these effects appears to differ.

A difference of slopes test indicates that the credibility of SMM is considerably more important in the formation of CI than both interaction ($t = 1.923$, $p < .1$) and content ($t = 1.679$, $p < .1$). This fact strengthens extant arguments regarding source credibility in politics (Yoon et al., 2005). As expected, the relationship between CI and relationship equity was also positive. This is aligned with literature on human brands, as the strength of the relationship formed is often influenced by perceived public person brand image (Thomson, 2006, Speed et al., 2015). The mediation analysis shows that whilst the relationship between SMM variables and perceived CI is strong and positive, the formers' direct impact on voter-candidate relationship equity is weaker and sometimes insignificant. These findings could be caused by several factors. For instance, relationship equity is stronger when there is an existing relationship between the customer, or voter, and the brand, or the candidate/party (Yuan et al., 2016; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). Given the fact that study respondents included first time

voters along with non-voters, around 25% of the respondents may not have yet developed existing relationships with the candidates they voted for or intend to vote for. This could also partly explain the lack of significant effect of SMM content and interaction on relationship equity.

Interestingly, the hypothesized moderating effect constituted by political ideology is not fully supported by the data. This indicates that a candidate's image is important regardless of where potential voters might find themselves on the political spectrum. An alternative explanation might also be that the traditional liberal–conservative continuum might not be as effective in explaining voter attitudes and behavior as initially thought. An investigation using alternative political classifications such as the Gal/Tan dimensions (cf. Marks, et al., 2006) might reveal more nuanced results, especially considering the younger population sample used in the current study. Nevertheless, results indicate that SMM competencies are important in building CI and relationship equity regardless of whether more conservative or liberal voters are targeted.

The overall model explains about 53% of the variation in relationship equity. This is also an understandable conclusion given the fact that relationship equity is explained by a variety of factors beyond SMM and SI, and is usually taken into consideration alongside brand equity and value equity as a part of customer equity drivers in literature, rather than taken as a separate construct (Ou and Verhoef, 2017; Kim and Ko, 2012; Lee et al., 2014). Yet from a political marketing perspective, the included variables are valuable and actionable for managers due to their parsimonious and easily comprehensible nature.

5.1 Implications

The study findings contribute to existing literature on CI and SMM, regarding its use in political marketing and its use at large. First, the study provides insights to which dimensions

compose the perceived candidate image by combining approaches taken by previous researchers (e.g., Balmas and Sheaffer, 2010). Secondly, the SMM variables are augmented and adjusted through the addition of constructs such as overall content of posts and messages shared as a part of SMM to fit the human brand and political context. Whilst previous research (Chang et al., 2015; Yuan et al., 2016) provides comprehensive SMM elements, the current study allows these elements to be applicable to political and human brands. Political marketing advisors and consultants can therefore easily use the scales and measures developed in this study and apply them to their candidates as well as for benchmarking against the competition.

The results also provide managerial implications for both political campaigners and marketing managers in general. The effect of SMM on brand image and equity has been discussed to a limited extent before, hence this study shows which aspects of SMM have stronger impacts on CI and relationship equity. Therefore, given the often limited marketing and campaign budgets, especially for smaller candidates, political marketers and campaign workers could make more use of social media by specifically focusing on generating WOM and increasing their credibility to strengthen the relationship between their voters and candidates. The findings also show that whilst the interaction and content on SMM are effective in the likes of the luxury industry, WOM and credibility appears to play more important roles in industries that involve human brands and in politics in particular (Kim and Ko, 2012). The role of CI also proves to be important, both directly and indirectly, in shaping relationship equity. Political campaigners are therefore strongly recommended to invest more in SMM aimed at CI building in future elections.

Finally, the insignificant moderation posed by political ideology indicates that the effect CI is capable of, with regards to creating lasting links between voters and candidates, is strong and global. In fact, voters appear to be equally strongly reliant on the image of their

preferred political candidate in forming relationship equity regardless of where they might find themselves on the political spectrum. Thus, political consultants may find the current study results useful regardless of their political ideology.

5.2 Limitations and future research avenues

Whilst the sample was intended on being as representative as possible for young UK voters, there were some issues regarding gender and income group representativeness, although we don't expect these issues to severely impact the study findings, future researchers are encouraged to investigate the current issues using a wider range of respondents as this might add to the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the current study was conducted, for good reasons, within the UK context. Future research can focus on different cultural contexts and conduct cross-cultural comparisons to further enhance the global applicability of the current findings.

Social media is a relatively new and very dynamic area of research in the political context, hence the extant literature regarding SMM in political campaigning is limited and the current study took a general approach to social media rather than focusing on specific platforms. Future research could therefore decompose some of the variables investigated in the current study and compare their applicability and relative effect across various platforms as this would give richer insights and highly actionable managerial implications, especially considering recent developments with questionable credibility of certain social media platforms.

Winchester et al. (2014) discuss a wide variety of different factors and circumstances affecting the voting decision-making amongst young adults. Following their recommendations, future researchers studying political marketing and its relationship with social media and CI are encouraged to incorporate, and control for, additional elements such

as satisfaction, information seeking, and voter involvement, for a more comprehensive model (Winchester et al., 2014). Finally, the current study investigated the conditioning effect of political ideology on one of the studied relationships. Although we were unable to find a moderated mediation relationship, the 53% explained variance in the dependent variable indicates that there are a number of uninvestigated potentially moderating factors that might impact the strength and direction of our investigated relationships. Whilst some of Winchester et al.'s (2014) aforementioned variables will constitute a good starting point, an interesting additional moderator would also be voters versus non-voters.

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Table 1: Study constructs and items

Constructs and items	Reference(s)										
<p>Social Media Content Content of the candidate’s social media (accounts) seems interesting. The information provided on candidate’s social media was informative. I believe the candidate’s social media accounts are effective in helping me make my decision.</p>	Kim and Ko, 2012; Bhattacharjee and Sanford, 2006										
<p>Social Media Interaction The candidate’s social media enable information-sharing with others. It is easy to provide my opinion through the candidate’s social media. Conversation or opinion exchange with others is possible through the candidate’s social media.</p>	Kim and Ko, 2012										
<p>Social Media Credibility Information shared on the candidate’s social media accounts was credible. Information shared on the candidate’s social media accounts was trustworthy. Information shared on the candidate’s social media accounts was reliable. Information shared on the candidate’s social media accounts was believable.</p>	Bhattacharjee and Sanford, 2006; Chang et al., 2015; He et al., 2009										
<p>WOM I would speak positive things about the candidate’s social media accounts. I would recommend the candidate’s social media accounts to my friends. If my friends are looking for information regarding the current election or current social/ political issues, I would tell them to have a look at the candidate’s social media accounts.</p>	Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist, 2014; Balaji et al., 2017										
<p>Candidate Image (2nd order 6-dimensional formative construct) 1. Trustworthiness The candidate is trustworthy. The candidate is ethical. The candidate is genuine. The candidate is authentic.</p>	Yuan et al., 2016; McCroskey and Teven, 1999; Moulard et al., 2015										
<p>2. Attractiveness The candidate gives his/ her party an attractive image. The candidate is attractive. The candidate pleases people.</p>	Yuan et al., 2016										
<p>3. Candidness The candidate is known for being straightforward. The candidate is known for being honest</p>	Moulard et al., 2015										
<p>4. Morality The candidate cares about me. The candidate has my interest at heart.</p>	McCroskey and Teven, 1999; Moulard et al., 2015										
<p>5. Originality The candidate is unique in his/ her own ways. The candidate has distinctive characteristics. The candidate has something about him/ her that makes him/ her stand out.</p>	Moulard et al., 2015										
<p>6. Competence The candidate is an experienced politician. The candidate has extensive knowledge on current social and political issues. The candidate is a skilled politician. The candidate is competent. The candidate is intelligent</p>	Yuan et al., 2016; McCroskey and Teven, 1999										
<p>Relationship Equity I feel intimately connected with the candidate and his/ her party. I know the candidate and his/ her party very well. The candidate and his/ her party matches my image. The candidate and his/ her party matches my lifestyle and my values. The candidate and his/ her party will provide what I want. I am glad to have met fellow voters of the party I voted for. I am familiar with the politicians of the party.</p>	Vogel et al., 2008; Yuan et al., 2016										
<p>Social and Economic Conservatism <i>Please indicate the extent to which you feel positive or negative towards each issue (11-point scale: 0 very negative; 5; neutral; 10 very positive).</i></p> <table data-bbox="209 1827 842 1962"> <tr> <td>Limited Government</td> <td>Military and national security</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Religion</td> <td>Welfare benefits</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Traditional marriage</td> <td>Fiscal responsibility</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Traditional values</td> <td>Business</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Family unit</td> <td>Patriotism</td> </tr> </table>	Limited Government	Military and national security	Religion	Welfare benefits	Traditional marriage	Fiscal responsibility	Traditional values	Business	Family unit	Patriotism	Everett, 2013
Limited Government	Military and national security										
Religion	Welfare benefits										
Traditional marriage	Fiscal responsibility										
Traditional values	Business										
Family unit	Patriotism										

Table 2: Interconstruct correlations, descriptive statistics, and measurement statistics

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Social media content	4.632	1.126	1						
2. Social media interaction	4.977	1.105	.697**	1					
3. Social media credibility	4.844	1.165	.567**	.398**	1				
4. WOM	4.406	1.392	.757**	.589**	.600**	1			
5. Candidate image	31.781	5.902	.430**	.369**	.562**	.497**	1		
6. Relationship equity	4.943	1.072	.462**	.344**	.559**	.515**	.691**	1	
7. Political ideology	5.500	1.364	.093	-.021	.007	.073	-.107	.039	1
Composite reliability			.892	.801	.944	.850	.882	.831	.843
Average Variance Extracted (AVE)			.722	.562	.794	.713	.720	.684	.692
\sqrt{AVE}			.850	.750	.891	.844	.849	.827	.831

**= p < .01

Table 3: Structural equation model estimation results

Independent variables	Dependent variables	
	Candidate image	Relationship equity
	$\beta(t\text{-value})$	$\beta(t\text{-value})$
Social media content	.173(3.495)**	.079(1.717)
Social media interaction	.252(5.093)**	.051(1.077)
Social media credibility	.491(9.913)**	.204(3.835)**
WOM	.304(6.147)**	.149 (3.093)**
Candidate image		.529(8.974)**
r^2	.427	.533

**= p < .01

Table 4: Mediation analysis results

Relationship	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
Content → CI → RE	.079	.091*	.170**
Interaction → CI → RE	.051	.133*	.184**
Credibility → CI → RE	.204**	.260**	.463**
WOM → CI → RE	.149**	.161**	.310**

**= p < .01; *= p < .05; CI = candidate image; RE = relationship equity

Figure 1: Conceptual model

