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The Components of Effective Advertising Message of Candidates in Presidential Elections: A Case Study of Instagram

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ABSTRACT

Objective: : Instagram social network has a high capacity in the field of interaction, dynamic and continuous between audience and content producers. Therefore, the purpose of the current research is to identify and provide indicators related to the production of content or effective Instagram advertising messages of candidates during the presidential elections.

Methods: The research method was a qualitative approach and data analysis was done through in-depth interviews (semi-structured open questions), coding (open, selective and axial). The sampling method is theoretical (snowball). After conducting an in-depth interview with 12 knowledgeable and expert professors and experts in the field of research; Qualitative content analysis of collected data, in three stages of coding, finally leading to extraction; 45 core codes, 4 main categories and 182 subcategories.

Results: The results showed: 4 basic indicators emphasized by experts as fundamental factors related to the characteristics of effective Instagram advertising messages of candidates in the presidential elections; It consists of: 1- persuasive and effective content of the message, 2- having a competitive advantage of the candidate, 3- complying with the musts of election campaigns, 4- avoiding the musts of election campaigns.

Conclusions: Consequently, the respondents in this research considered the Instagram space according to the type of user and its nature in terms of the content of the messages; They emphasized on being short, visual and clear as the most important feature of an effective advertising message for candidates.

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Introduction

New media and social networks have had an impact on various aspects of human life since their emergence. One of the most significant domains of social networks' influence lies in their impact on relationships and political participation, particularly on voters' behavior in elections. Conversely, diverse social networking platforms like Twitter and Instagram offer distinct avenues within this realm. To illustrate, Instagram fosters a unique space for ongoing, interactive engagement between audiences and content creators. The pervasive influence of virtual spaces and social networks on societal dynamics has notably affected various social behaviors, notably political communication; this is evidenced by shifts in voters' electoral conduct. Moreover, as highlighted by Dancy, audience research seeks to enhance understanding of media consumers' perspectives, characteristics, and viewpoints (Danesi, 2017).

Among these platforms, Instagram stands out for its extensive user engagement. Consequently, this social networking site has played a pivotal role in bolstering the campaign efforts of electoral candidates and attracting social media users, particularly during the Iranian presidential elections, underscoring its critical significance in this regard. Hence, the growing significance of new media platforms like Instagram in shaping discussions on political communication and power representation, particularly within the context of election campaigns, cannot be overlooked. In Iran, the evolving landscape of political communication and electoral processes, notably presidential elections, underscores the imperative for further scholarly inquiry in this domain (Zare, 2022).

The theoretical foundation of this study draws upon several fundamental theories related to the subject matter, which are examined and assessed. Structural functionalism theory is a theoretical framework that can be employed to scrutinize various aspects of electoral behavior, such as the impact of values and attitudes on citizens' voting. Initially introduced by Radcliffe Brown, the concept of "structural functionalism" was popularized by Talcott Parsons, becoming a prevalent theory in sociology (Sadeghi Jeghe, 2016). Within this theoretical paradigm, society is likened to a system where components collaborate to maintain social cohesion and stability. According to this theory, the endurance and stability of a social system are dependent on fulfilling its fundamental functions, thereby establishing corresponding structures within society. The social system, as per the theoretical framework, comprises four subsystems.

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The cultural system, situated at the highest tier among these systems, comprises elements such as ideology, knowledge, collective beliefs, values, and customs. Its primary role is to ensure stability and perpetuate cultural norms. The social subsystem, positioned as the second level, shapes social structures by imposing functional requirements on social institutions, thereby fostering social cohesion (Sadeghi Jeghe, 2016). The personality sub-system occupies the third tier of the systems and influences goal setting, as well as the choice of methods and mechanisms to achieve these goals. The biological subsystem, positioned at the lowest level, serves the organism and the natural environment in support of the social system (Sadeghi Jeghe, 2016).

Darabi (2008) highlights that electoral tensions evolve over time and are influenced by specific contexts and locations. Therefore, applying global models and theories across various scientific domains without considering contextual factors is impractical. Social and political sociology proves valuable in elucidating the electoral conduct of Iranians, particularly in delineating the unique mechanisms of party and political engagement in Iran compared to countries where these theories originated.

In light of the ethnic diversity within Iranian society, the electoral conduct of the populace mirrors the organic solidarity society of Durkheim and the Gesellschaft society of Ferdinand Tonnies. This suggests that Iranian society is transitioning from a political-social framework characterized by ethnic diversity towards a more organic and cohesive structure. Consequently, ethnic groups play a pivotal role in Iran's political landscape, with significant implications for national security, public rights, alignment with the political framework, and the preservation of national identity (Shahramnia et al., 2017).

Electoral behavior and political participation are essential components of democracy and underpin the peaceful coexistence of ethnic groups within a social system. This is evident through electoral conduct. Huntington and Pelon assert that political participation, a key metric of political advancement, is influenced by the attitudes and priorities of the political elite, as well as the status of groups, associations, and social institutions. Moreover, the process of economic-social development facilitates social mobility and active engagement within the realms of political and social participation (Fezell & Rezaii, 2015).

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The concept of political branding and electoral advertising stated that within the political sphere amidst the era of individualism shaped by the media, Manuel Castells posits that possessing a professional reputation or brand holds significant value in the individualistic, virtual, and online age. This issue is progressively gaining importance and has emerged as a crucial factor for achieving success in life. Scammell posits presently, in the realm of politics, the diminishing influence of mass media and the rise of branding as a strategic tool in political endeavors have become prevalent. This shift impacts the competitive landscape for candidates, enhancing their long-term viability and delivering added value to voters (Nikbakhsh, 2018).

The theory of media agenda-setting detailed that this framework is anchored on the following dual principles:

1 .Media does not merely reflect reality, rather it manipulates and reshapes it, 2 .Media's concentration on select issues and subjects elevates their significance to audiences, making them a focal point (Sheikh-al-Eslami & Asgariyan, 2009). Subsequently, the latter principle of this theory finds greater application in electoral campaigns. Essentially, according to the agenda-setting hypothesis, the media's emphasis on specific matters amplifies their importance in the eyes of the public (Sheikh-al-Eslami & Asgariyan, 2009). Moreover, mass media (such as social platform Instagram) dictates the public's prioritization of issues through extensive news coverage. They sway public priorities and influence the mindset of politicians, executives, and national leaders through news dissemination and sagacity (Hermida & Mellado, 2020).

The initial stage of agenda-setting involves identifying an issue of significance and interest to the media. Typically, the media selects such topics based on factors like governing ideology, statements by community figures, and the stance of particular parties with their inclinations. Shaping the chosen topic follows this selection. A topic garners public attention when it holds special meaning and emotional weight, necessitating an attractive and significant presentation to the audience (Hermida & Mellado, 2020; Sheikh-al-Eslami & Asgariyan, 2009). Afterward, the use of nominal codes is imperative to resonate with the audience's existing concepts. Lastly, accelerating the topic through endorsement by well-known and respected individuals is crucial.

The media frequently utilizes political, athletic, scientific, and comparable figures to expedite the highlighting of an issue. Introducing a subject through such individuals promptly garners public interest. The process of highlighting is gradual, and the sustained significance of the emphasized

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topic is transient (Sheikh-al-Eslami & Asgariyan, 2009). Hence, over time, the media shifts focus from singular to multiple issues. Consequently, it can be inferred that:

-Through selective presentation and extensive coverage, the media apprise a large segment of society about specific matters.

-By emphasizing certain facts and amplifying them, they influence societal perspectives.

- Their emphasis often pertains to successful topics that are initially unfamiliar to the audience and subsequently align closely with their needs (Adanlawo & Reddy, 2020). Base on this, the research offers detailed insights into the content production and messaging strategies of Instagram ads for presidential candidates. The significant presence of Iranians on this platform underscores the need for further exploration, particularly in understanding the elements that contribute to effective advertising messages during presidential campaigns on Instagram. Hence, this study aims to analyze the characteristics of impactful candidate advertisements in the Iranian presidential election on Instagram. It seeks to identify and outline the key features of these advertising messages within the realm of social media, specifically focusing on Instagram.

Materials and Methods

This investigation was conducted utilizing the qualitative methodology and content analysis. The qualitative approach stands out as a prominent research technique for examining social and human phenomena, as it enables the researcher to comprehend the issues in a concrete and authentic manner, facilitating their analysis. Research data collection techniques and instruments encompass the utilization of library and field for data and information gathering. The primary data collection tool involved carrying out detailed interviews with experts and university faculty members, each lasting between one to two hours. All interviews were conducted in person, utilizing 15 semi-structured questions consisting of open and explanatory inquiries. Following data recording and implementation, multiple analyses were performed to pass codes and categorize concepts and categories, with the outcomes presented in the findings section. Hence, the research involved the collection of data from in-depth interviews and open questions based on the selected method, which were subsequently analyzed through a three-step coding process involving open, axial, and classification-based conceptualization to derive final categories and results.

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The research population and sample encompassed all professors, researchers, and experts possessing scientific and research background, particularly in media management, political communication, virtual space, and communication sciences. The population was identified based on academic expertise and ranked accordingly. A purposive sampling approach was adopted, consisting of 12 selected individuals determined through theoretical saturation.

Regarding data analysis methodology, the data obtained from in-depth qualitative interviews underwent qualitative content analysis, manual open coding, axial coding, and classification of concepts and categories. Initially, in the open coding phase, the researcher identified all codes related to the variables, which were then unified and categorized into fewer codes during the axial coding stage. This process facilitated the conceptualization and classification of primary and secondary research dimensions, ultimately leading to the extraction of relevant concepts. The final stage involved categorizing the identified categories and associating major categories with central codes through semantic connections, with the results of the research, originating from qualitative content analysis, being presented after extensive review.

The research's validity was established through coder agreement, data collection cessation upon theoretical saturation, extensive coverage of interview questions, and positive feedback from professors. Furthermore, criteria for measuring research reliability and validity were rigorously applied, ensuring the confirmation of result validity.

Results

After conducting an in-depth interview with 12 professors, elites of communication sciences, media and having scientific-research experience in the field of political communication and virtual space; Qualitative content analysis of collected data, in three stages of coding, finally leading to extraction; 45 core codes, 4 main categories and 182 subcategories.

In the first step of data analysis from in-depth interviews with experts, 72 open codes were obtained focusing on the topic and research variables. Then, in the second step of data analysis: after a more detailed examination of the codes and categorization of synonymous coding, by removing duplicate codes and classifying them; 8 main categories, 14 concepts (sub-categories) and 45 core codes were extracted from the data, which are described in table 1.

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Table 1. Categories, concepts and core codes

Category	Concepts	Axial codes
Persuasive approaches	Knowing the audience	A key and persuasive election slogan
		Motivational and positive messages instead of negative and disappointing messages
		Creative and distinctive messages
		Messages tailored to the audience
		Use short and concise text messages
		Challenging messages of interest to the audience
	Have a plan	Executive and practical solutions to problems
		Providing practical and objective solutions
		Highlighting programs and benefits of voting for the candidate
The nature of the message	Transparency in the message	Clear expression of views
		Detailed statement of policies and plans
		Avoiding generalization and prioritizing programs
		Quick and clear response to questions
	Interactivity of the message	Valuable messages
		Paying attention to people's wishes and needs
		Survey of people
		Holding question and answer sessions
Message type	Multimedia advertising	Production of messages and video and video content
		Message in infographic format
		Message in video format
		Using live broadcast - hashtag - mention - tag - invite - leave a story and.
		Creating a message in the form of storytelling
		Design the same template or unique graphics for the candidate page
	Visual reflection of the supporters' message	Use of photo content, text, poster, banner
		Reflecting the messages of fans and followers in the form of a story or a permanent main post on the candidate's page
	Categories of topics and messages	Sending messages of less importance in the form of temporary posts
		Justice-oriented issues (equality in all cultural, social and class fields)
		Gender issues
		Ethnic issues
		Economic and livelihood issues
		International relations topics
Message development techniques and tools	Detailed and continuous introduction of programs	National issues (production development and national self-sufficiency - national authority and power)
		Introducing the program schedule
	Media convergence	Notification and introduction of advertising schedule
		Re-reflection of advertising programs broadcasted from other media (TV, etc.) on the candidate's page
		Using the page of middle to high social classes
		Reflecting the news of other media on the candidate's page
The requirements of election campaigns	Recognizing and expressing needs	Emphasis on central justice
		Topics for young people
		Emphasis on the rule of law
	Political ethics	Awareness of people's problems and expectations
		Realistic promises
		Using unifying words instead of divisive ones
		Avoiding the destruction of rival candidates

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The non requirements of election campaigns	Avoiding ambiguity and terminating the position of competitors	Avoiding exaggeration and ambiguity in expressing views and plans
		Avoid criticizing previous policies
		Avoid emotional and irrelevant comments
		Failure to highlight the candidate's personality instead of programs
Brand building by the candidate	Personal and special brand for the candidate	Failure to highlight the party instead of programs
		Fill in the candidate's specialization subjects (economic or cultural.)
		Highlighting programs and benefits of voting for the candidate
Increasing knowledge and political participation	Specific ideology and political participation seeking	Choosing a short, expressive and distinctive election slogan
		Expressing the candidate's political ideology (clear political policy)
		Encouragement to participate in elections
		Providing political knowledge and awareness to the audience

In the final step of the qualitative data analysis, the categories obtained in the previous stage were re-examined in order to finalize and present them in the form of a new and more concise category with the title of the main category of concepts and elements. The table 2 shows the final results of the qualitative analysis of research data in the form of 4 main categories (major categories) and 18 random categories (categories).

Table 2. Categories and major category

Categories	Main category
Detailed and continuous introduction of programs (program oriented)	Characteristics and type of effective message
Categories of topics and messages	
Media convergence	
Visual reflection of the supporters' message	
Advertising is multimedia	
Interactivity of the message	
Transparency in the message	
Audience research in content and message production	
Branding the candidate	Competitive advantage of the candidate
Highlighting programs	
Choosing a distinctive election slogan	
Recognizing the challenges and expressing the needs	
Compliance with political ethics (fair criticism of competitors)	The requirements of election campaigns
Expression of specific political ideology of the candidate	
Encouragement to participate in elections	
Avoiding ambiguity and destruction	The non requirements of election campaigns
Avoid emotional and irrelevant comments	
Highlighting the plans instead of the candidate	

Thus, after the final review of the content of the in-depth interview data with expert participants in the research; 4 basic indicators were obtained as the fundamental factors related to the characteristics of the effective Instagram advertising messages of the candidates in the presidential

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elections, which are: 1- Promotional and effective content of the message, 2- Having a competitive advantage of the candidate, 3- Compliance with the requirements of election advertising and 4 - Avoiding the wrongs of election campaigns.

Discussion

The objective of the present study was to explore the attributes of effective advertising messages used by candidates during the presidential elections in Iran on Instagram. It also aimed to outline the criteria and features of advertising messages during the Iranian presidential elections on social media platforms, particularly Instagram. The results revealed that a key factor in creating a compelling election advertisement by a presidential candidate on Instagram is the emphasis on the "persuasive and effective content of the message." This entails the precise and consistent presentation of the candidate's agendas, categorization of themes and messages, media integration, visual representation of the candidate's message, multimedia content, interactive elements, message transparency, and audience analysis during content creation.

In essence, the presidential candidate dedicates substantial time to public appearances, akin to speeches delivered through other mediums like television or advertising campaigns. Extensive consultations are sought to craft a suitable speech and message text. In the virtual realm of Instagram, caution must be exercised, with adherence to specific media guidelines to craft an appropriate message. This platform possesses unique characteristics and audience demographics, where the potency of the candidate's election advertising hinges on interactivity, transparency, and a focus on imagery and videos.

A notable aspect explored in this study is the "competitive advantage of the candidate," a concept typically fundamental in commercial advertising, but identified by experts (interviewees) as a pivotal factor influencing the message delivery. The Instagram advertisements of election candidates accentuate this aspect, with key factors for success falling under categories such as personal branding, candidate characteristics, program highlights, unique election slogans, challenges acknowledgment, and needs expression. Given the characteristics of Instagram as a social platform, it serves as an ideal avenue for business promotion and a vibrant arena for commercial advertising. Evidence suggests that more competitive advertisements yield greater

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success. Hence, presidential candidates are urged to align with the advertising strategies tailored for Instagram, showcasing their competitive edge through personal branding, program highlights, distinct election slogans, and challenge articulation.

Abdolahinejad et al. (2016) concluded that the utilization, credibility, and efficacy of various social platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram have varying impacts on political engagement and voter conduct. These comprehensive findings contrast with our selective research, highlighting a significant disparity.

Another crucial aspect to consider is the compliance with electoral advertising guidelines on Instagram, encompassing adherence to political ethics, articulation of the candidate's political stance, and promotion of electoral participation. The emphasis placed on this aspect, labeled as "Essentials," underscores its paramount significance in crafting and disseminating electoral messages on Instagram compared to the aforementioned components, warranting attention from candidates and their media teams. Participants stressed the importance of this category and its subsets, further accentuating its importance.

Sheikh-al-Eslami and Asgariyan (2009) underscored the pivotal role of national media in shaping public political consciousness during elections. Each audience segment is distinct. This study explored the overall impact of media, albeit with differing objectives and scopes, focusing on a specific platform (Instagram), rendering comparisons to the present study invalid. Consequently, the unique findings of this research hold practical value for candidates, advertisers, and media practitioners.

The final category highlighted by experts for crafting compelling election messages stresses the avoidance of pitfalls in Instagram election advertising, including steering clear of ambiguity, negativity, emotional tangents, and instead, spotlighting the candidate's agenda over their persona. While these principles are universally effective in crafting campaign messages across various mediums, the experts' insistence on adhering to them within the Instagram sphere is motivated by the potential for candidates to circumvent hindrances and detrimental factors. By upholding these principles, candidates can uphold transparency in conveying their programs and perspectives on this ubiquitous social platform, ensuring maximal efficacy and textual integrity, ultimately enhancing the quality of their advertising endeavors. The studies theoretically propose that social media have an impact on the decision-making processes of political campaigns, specifically in

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relation to the target audiences they aim to engage, the nature and substance of the messages they generate, the spread patterns of such messages, and the distribution of financial resources for online campaigning via social media (Bossetta, 2018; Grusell & Nord, 2023; Priyanto et al., 2021). Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the research subject, selecting a panel of knowledgeable experts for interviews proved to be a challenging and time-consuming endeavor. The constraints posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented in-person data collection, further added to the complexities of the study.

The research findings underscore the significance of "motivational and effective message content," suggesting the need for precise program introduction, topic and message categorization, media convergence, visual representation of supporters' messages, and the creation of photo and video-based content. These recommendations aim to ensure that electoral candidates and their advertising teams adhere to these principles when running campaigns on the Instagram platform. Moreover, the study revealed key aspects such as message interactivity, transparency, and audience engagement in content production for advertising presidential candidates on Instagram. Media teams are advised to tailor content to the intellectual level of the audience based on these elements. It is crucial to carefully monitor and respond to user comments under each candidate's Instagram post to foster transparent and interactive communication between the candidates and their followers.

Future research endeavors should explore the role of Twitter advertising in mobilizing voter support and political engagement, comparing its efficacy with the current study. Researchers are encouraged to delve deeper into the subject matter through discourse analysis and quantitative methods involving a larger sample size. Additionally, investigating the factors influencing an increase in candidates' virtual network page followers through surveys and field studies is advised. Subsequent studies could delve into the correlation between candidates' virtual page followers and their electoral success as a qualitative exploration. Ultimately, the insights garnered from this research and similar studies should be leveraged to address challenges in various academic and practical spheres related to political communication, content production, and media management.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. The author contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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