Word-of-Mouth (WOM): Voters Originated Communications on Candidates during Local Elections

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Abstract

This study examines factors of word-of-mouth (WOM) about political candidates, and factors related to candidate characteristics affecting vote behavior. The study also analyses data to determine the effect of WOM factors and factors of candidate characteristics on encouraging, discouraging, to be influenced by interpretations, and to be influenced of election decision. The findings indicate the emergence of four factors about WOM and candidate characteristics. First group factors of WOM are referring as personality, party situation, social integration, and demographics. The other factors of candidate characteristics titled as background and attributes, party affiliation, promotional efforts, and communication and modesty. These factors are positively associated with encourage, discourage, to be influenced by interpretations, and to be influenced of election decision. The results of this research have significant implications for both the practice of political marketing, advising behavior about political candidates as a whole as well as would be a contribution to relatively limited literature on the WOM on political elections.

Keywords: Voter behavior, word of mouth communication, political marketing, voting behavior

1. Introduction

In the political marketing, there are several factors that affect who, why, and when consumers utilize choices about political candidates. Consumers find word-of-mouth as compelling source of information. Although the concept of word-of-mouth (WOM) had been described as early as 1898, it had to wait until early 2000 are to reemerge as a popular subject (Graham and Havlena, 2007). In today, many of consumers in variety sectors receive information from different sources, such as physical surroundings, mass media, and other persons. Information from other persons about goods and services may come from sales personnel or from other consumers. In marketing, word of mouth (WOM) is an important strategy and normally used to describe advice from other consumers. In process of consumer decision, WOM is often the considerable factor; for example, Keaveney (1995) observed that positive word of mouth (PWOM) was the main source of information when people found a new service supplier.

Oral communication is one of the most powerful promotional tools among many others. These communications, advices and relationships could be characterized as word-of-mouth (WOM). Arndt (1967) characterized WOM as oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, regarding a brand, product or service (Buttle, 1998). In marketing literature, word of mouth (WOM) is generally employed to illustrate advice from other experienced people. The interactivity, speed, and lack of commercial bias of WOM make it a very effective source of information about prospective consumer choices, particularly with regard to services for which pre-purchase experience may be limited. In consumer choice, WOM is often the dominant factor (East, Hammond and Wright, 2007).

Goyette et al. (2010) stated that word-of-mouth is also probably the oldest means of exchanging opinions on various goods and services. Many of consumer or persons find word-of-mouth (WOM) as compelling source of information (Graham and Havlena, 2007).

Voters too use this tool while making a decision do get some opinions from their inner circle. Nevertheless, candidates also heavily rely on media communications and campaigns as well. If running for a public office is a service to the community, then voters can be seen as "customers" who will benefit it. However, certain characteristics separate voting behavior than consumers. Since individual voter decisions are not enough for a candidate to win an election, communication liaison officers for candidates should use WOM to disseminate information so as to create agendas and they resort to this method quite extensively in order to win an election. According to Goyette et al. (2010), over the past years, WOM has been the object of multiple studies in marketing discipline. WOM could be connected with some concepts or applications such as personal recommendations (Arndt, 1967), interpersonal communications (Goyette et al., 2010), interpersonal relationships (Arndt, 1967), informal communication (Silverman, 2001), personal and interpersonal influence (Arndt, 1967; Brown and Reingen, 1987), and informal advertising (Arndt, 1967; Goyette et al., 2010).

Despite WOM's re-emerging role in marketing communications and relatively sufficient number of books published on the subject; the academic researches and publications on WOM related to political marketing are still limited. Nonetheless, there is a growing struggle from practitioners of researching different aspects of WOM. The concept was examined in many area related marketing goods and services. But WOM researches related political election is very scarce. In this study, the researchers investigated the dimensions related to word-of-mouth on political candidate preferences and, encouraging, discouraging behaviors based on referrals from reliable sources. For this reason, the main aim of present study is to examine the factors underlying political marketing and relationships between variables.

2. Literature Review

Candidates resort to various information resources during election times. Among such resources are the individuals whom deemed informative has experience or expertise about the candidates or the political parties that such candidates are affiliated with. Political campaigns and other types of planned messages are natural sources of information as well (Potters, Sloof and Winden, 1997). Political parties are often resort to use candidate image in order for to shape voters behavior. Concept of candidate image is an un-separable part of contemporary political elections (Hacker, 1995; Nimmo and Savage, 1976). This is because a positive candidate image is quite effective in voters decision making process. (Hacker, 2004; Hellweg, Dionisopoulos, and Kugler, 1989; Miller,Wattenberg, and Malanchuk, 1985; Sheafer, 2008). If voters perceive such positive image, this will certainly affect the popularity of a candidate (Brown, 1992; Shanks and Miller, 1990; Stokes, 1996).

The image is more important than the fact itself (Sears, 1983). Besides, information in local elections are not limited to candidates, rather the party affiliations and demographics of candidates would tell something to individuals. Age, gender, ethnicity, social group affiliations are all having a message attributes and tell something to voters (Bailenson, Iyengar, Yee and Collins, 2008). Voters decide on which candidate to vote for based on above mentioned factors. Candidates' political parties, his or her history and personality patterns are prominent in elections (Tan, 2002).

Traditionally, word-of-mouth has been a useful tool in disseminating messages for products and services. Thus, much of the WOM literature is naturally focused on utilizing WOM as a promotion tool (Elberse and Eliashberg, 2003). The traditional form of WOM is physical transmission of words and sentences to others. However, today, WOM is transformed into electronic formats. This transformation coupled with recent developments in Internet technologies, has evolved to a digital form (Huang and Chen, 2006). The literature on direction of effects of WOM has two streams. These are positive and negative WOM. Research about WOM generally supports the claim that WOM is more influential on behavior than other marketer-controlled sources (Buttle, 1998). In addition, Buttle (1998) pointed out that WOM has been shown to influence a variety of conditions: awareness, expectations, perceptions, attitudes, behavioral intentions and behavior.

The researchers examines the factors related word-of-mouth, and candidate characteristics affecting vote behavior, and relationships between these factors and dependent variables comprising encouraging, discouraging, to be influenced by interpretations, and to be influenced of election decision.

3. Method

This study aims to portray which candidate attributes played roles in voter decision, and how voters used oral communication to share information about candidates in 2009 local government elections that took place in Turkey. Data were gathered between 27 March and 28 April, 2009. These time slots were the last four weeks before the election. A total of 412 potential voters were participated and filled the questionnaire. This is an exploratory research. The sample is the potential 421 voters who could cast their votes during the March 2009 local government elections in Eskisehir. The convenience sampling was employed in the study, and the questionnaire form was self-administered, filled by individuals who did agree to participate to the study. The questionnaire of the study consisted of four parts. The first part is comprised of 16 statements related to items of word-of-mouth about candidates. The second parts of questionnaire enclosed 15 statements of candidate characteristics related voting behavior. Statements used in these parts were adapted from previous studies, literature review and twenty in-depth interviews, and were designed according to potential suggestion of elections. A total of 16 statements (part one) was presented and respondents were asked to indicate their attitudes on a five-point Likert scale ranging from ''5" = very important to ''1" = non important. The third part of questionnaire included four single item measures relating to encouraging, discouraging, to be influenced by interpretations, and to be influenced of election decision as dependent variables. In second and third part, the participants were also asked to indicate their level of agreement on these items on five-point Likert scale with 5 being "strongly agree" and 1 being "strongly disagree". The last part included demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, and average income status etc.) of respondents.

4. Findings and Results

4.1.Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Demographically, out of 412 participants males are 52.3 % (213 individuals), and females are 47.7 % (199 individuals). As for the age groups , 41.7% are in 18-25 age bracket, 27% is in 26-37 age group, 18.7% is in 38-49 age group, and %12.6 is in 50 and over age groups. A for the level of education that participants attained, 57%of them have associate degree, and 24.3% of the participants are secondary school graduates. In terms of average house hold income, 68.5% of participants have 666 USD or less, 23.1% of participants have between 6671333 USD, 3.4% of participants have between 1334-12000 USD , and 5% of the participants have 2.001 USD or more. The percentage of single and married respondents was found 57.8 and 28.2 respondents respectively. Lastly, many of the respondents comprised of university students (35%), laborers (13.2%), public officials (9.8%) and housewives (9.1%) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample

	Frequency	Per cent		Frequency	Per cent
Gender			**Occupation**		
Male	213	52.3	Worker/laborer	54	13.2
Female	199	47.7	Public official	40	9.8
			Retired	35	8.6
Age			Student	143	35.0
18-25	172	41.7	Unemployed	30	7.4
26-37	111	27.0	Tradesman	34	8.3
38-49	77	18.7	Self-employed	29	7.1
50 and over	52	12.6	Housewife	37	9.1
			Other	6	1.5
Income (average monthly)			**Education**		
666 USD and <	282	68.5	Literate	28	6.9
667 – 1333 USD	95	23.1	Primary school	34	8.4
1334 – 2000 USD	14	3.4	Secondary school	99	24.3
2001 USD and >	21	5.0	University	232	57.0
			Postgraduate	13	3.4
Marital status					
Married	116	28.2			
Single	238	57.8			
Other	58	14.0			

4.2. WOM Factors Underlying Candidate Characteristics

Factor analyses about two scales was conducted to the items listed in Table 2-3. The scale related to word-of-mouth components contains a total of sixteen items. The other scale about candidate characteristics comprised fifteen items thus two exploratory factor analysis using principal components with varimax rotation was used to identify the important underlying dimensions effecting Turkish voters behavior. In parallel to Kaiser's (1974) criteria, only factors with eigen values greater than 1 were retained; and only items with factor loadings and communalities of greater than one 0.40 were included in the final factor structure. Cronbach's alpha values for each dimension were computed to confirm the factor's internal consistency.

Prior to the factor analysis about WOM component scale, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test was used to measure adequacy of the sample and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was pursued to test the fitness of the data (Wong and Law, 2005; Zhang et al., 2003). The ratio between 0,5-1.0 is considered as an acceptable value. The KMO was at a good value of 0.821, indicating that the sample was adequate for factor analysis (Kaiser, 1974). This value is a sufficient base for the factor analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (BTS) was at 3842.656 (p <.001), indicating that the hypothesis variance and covariance matrix of variables as an identity matrix were rejected; therefore, factor analysis was appropriate.

Table 2. WOM Factors and Items on Candidate Characteristics

WOM Factors about Candidate	Factor Loading (β)	Mean	S.D.	Eigenvalues (% of variance)	Alpha α
Factor 1. Personality					
Personality of candidate	.833	3,97	1,13		
Honesty of candidate	.852	4,11	1,07	2.651	.73
To be loved in society of candidate	.623	3,86	1,07	(16.569)	
Daily family experience of candidate	.476	3,66	1,24		
Occupation of candidate	.400	3,76	1,14		
Factor 2. Party Situation					
General opinion towards her/his political party	.745	4,02	0,96	2.467	
President of political party	.746	3,98	1,03	(15.418)	.73
Power of political party on society	.705	3,65	1,13		
Political background of candidate	.637	3,96	1,03		
Factor 3. Social Integration					
Election program of candidate	.559	3,76	1,06		
Projects to be transacted	.535	4,18	0,94	2.375	.72
Political promotion efforts	.826	3,75	1,12	(14.841)	
Contribution to society by candidate	.689	3,56	1,24		
News about candidate	.616	3,41	1,21		
Factor 4. Demographics					
Ethnic background of candidate	. 673	3,45	.94	1.516	.49
Gender of candidate	.742	2,70	.86	(9.474)	
Cumulative % of variance				56.302	
Internal consistency of the scale (16 items)					.80

In order for establishing the reliability of factors, the Cronbach Alpha (α) values were tested. A Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was used to assess the reliability of the questionnaire. Normally Cronbach Alpha (α) values should range between 0-1 bracket. The resulting coefficient alphas for the respondents' perception of the four dimensions were 0.73, 0.73, 0.72, and .49 respectively (see Table 2). The internal consistency of scale (16 items) and three of all factors are higer than acceptable level of 0.7, and well above the minimum value of 0.5 (Nunnally, 1978). The total Cronbach Alpha value for all items is calculated as α=0.80' for the study.

The study revealed four factors that were found important for word-of-mouth about candidate characteristics. These factors explain 56.30% of total variance. These factors are titled as "personality", "party situation", "social integration", and "demographics".

4.3. Factors Related to Candidate Characteristics Affecting Vote Behavior

The ratio of KMO (0.84) and BTS (4215,724; p < 0.01) for candidate characteristics affecting vote behavior was fit. The total of 15 items affecting voters choice for candidates who run for local governorship were analyzed by factor analysis and (α) values is for all factors were found is α=81. The factor analysis on dimensions affecting voters choice for candidates revealed four sub-factors under this category. These factors explain 63.47% of the total variance. These factors are "background and attributes", "party affiliation", "promotional efforts", and "communication and modesty" (Table 3). The reliability coefficient for total scale was 0.81 indicating acceptable value for cut-off point 0.70 described by Nunnally (1978).

Table 3. Factors and Items about Candidate Characteristics Affecting Vote Behavior

Factors of Candidate Characteristics Affecting Vote	Factor Loading (β)	Mean	S.D.	Eigenvalues (% of variance)	Alpha α
Factor 1. Background and Attributes					
To be liked in society of candidate	.690	3,94	1,07		
Previous performances of candidate	.679	4,15	,967	2.814	
Election promises of candidate	.768	3,83	1,09	(18.759)	.80
Presented election program by candidate	.758	3,73	1,03		
Living in election location of candidate	.677	3,83	1,13		
Factor 2. Party Affiliation				2.339	
Political party of candidate	.835	4,00	1,16	(15.591)	
Ideological opinions of candidate's political party	.902	4,08	1,02		.83
Democratic insights of candidate's political party	.828	4,22	,97		
Factor3. Promotional Efforts					
Election slogan of candidate	.744	3,23	1,22	2.271	
Employed music by candidate	.887	2,96	1,31	(15.138)	.78
Candidate's election office	.603	2,78	1,32		
Candidate's election promotions	.568	2,60	1,35		
Factor 4. Communication and Modesty					
Candidate's elocution power	.646	3,36	1,19	2.097	
Candidate's modesty	.743	3,78	1,12	(13.982)	.60
Mayor background of candidate	.678	3,24	1,30		
Cumulative % of variance				63.470	
Internal consistency of the scale (15 items)					.81

4.4. Relationships between Factors and Dependent Variables

In order to identify the relationships between the WOM factors about candidate characteristics and independent variables that comprise encouraging, and discouraging behavior, a multiple regression analysis was utilized. Multiple regression analysis were also employed to determine relationships between factors of candidate characteristics affecting vote and to be influenced by interpretations, and to be influenced of election decision.

Table 4. Relationship between WOM Factors and Encouraging, and Discouraging

WOM Factors about Candidate	Dependent variables					
	Encouraging			Discouraging		
	Std. β	t	p	Std. β	t	p
Personality	.046	0.922	0.357	-0.010	-0.201	0.841
Party Situation	.206	4.141	0.000**	0.168	3.323	0.001**
Social Integration	.015	0.311	0.756	-0.025	-0.502	0.616
Demographics	.153	3.076	0.002**	0.125	2.473	0.014*
Constant		53.118	0.000**		51.500	0.000**
	R^2=0.068 Adj. R^2=0.058			R^2=0.044 Adj. R^2= 0.034		
	F= 6.889**			F= 4.363**		
** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05						

Table 4 is a joint display of two regression models. The first model in the table explains the relationship between the factors and encouraging; whereas the second model expounds the relationship between the factors and discouraging. As displayed in Table 4, the results of the regression models indicated that the regression models were statistically significant (for model one F = 6.889; p < 0.01, for model two F = 4.363; p < 0.01). Approximately 6% of the overall voters' encouraging behavior and approximately 3% of the overall discouraging behavior was explained by the four factors. The regression coefficients of model one indicated that the only two factors, party situation (β = 0.206; p < 0.01), and demographic characteristics (β = 0.153; p < 0.01), exerted the strongest influence on the overall encouraging other people to give vote. As for the model two the same factors (for party situation β = 0.168 and p < 0.01; for demographics β = 0.125 and p < 0.05) indicated a statistically significant relationship with the discouraging dependent variable.

Table 5. Relationship between Candidate Characteristics Factors and Influenced by Interpretation, and Influenced of Election Decision

Factors of Candidate Characteristics Affecting Vote	Dependent variables					
	To be influenced by interpretations			To be influenced of election decision		
	Std. β	t	p	Std. β	t	p
Background and Attributes	-0.008	-0.166	0.869	0.136	2.723	0.007**
Party Affiliation	-0.069	-1.411	0.159	-0.003	-0.052	0.959
Promotional Efforts	0.329	6.693	0.000**	0.193	3.861	0.000**
Communication and Modesty	0.142	2.887	0.004**	0.206	4.121	0.000**
Constant		41.074	0.000**		45.807	0.000**
	R^2=0.132 Adj. R^2=0.123			R^2=0.099 Adj. R^2=0.089		
	F= 13.729**			F= 9.841**		
** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05						

The regression analysis of the effects of candidate characteristic factors affecting vote on the dimension of be influenced by interpretations, and to be influenced of election decision are described on table 5. The model of third and fourth multiple regressions were concerned with the relationship between candidate characteristic factors related to voting behavior, to be influenced by interpretations, and to be influenced of election decision. The regression models were found to be statistically significant (for model three F = 13.729; p < 0.01, for model four F = 9.841; p < 0.01). The ratio of 12% of overall to be influenced by interpretations and approximately 9% of be influenced of election decision explained by the five factors. For the model three, the regression coefficients indicated that the factors of promotional efforts (β = 0.329; p < 0.01), and communication and modesty (β = 0.142; p < 0.05) pointed statistically significant relationships with the overall to be influenced by interpretations. Most powerful effect was revealed in promotional efforts predictor variable. The results of regression analysis of model four indicated that the factors of background and attributes (β = 0.136; p < 0.01), promotional efforts (β = 0.193; p < 0.01), and communication and modesty (β = 0.206; p < 0.01) indicated significant relationships with be influenced of election decision, while no significant relationships (p>.05) for party affiliation predictor variable were assessed (Table 5).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The main contribution of this study was to develop scales related to word-of-mouth in political literature. The study developed a 16-item survey instrument to evaluate factors related to word-of-mouth underlying political party candidates. In terms of the second scale (comprising 15 items), the present study revealed dimensions about candidate characteristics affecting vote behavior. The first scale analyze results showed that aspects about WOM could be conceptualized and measured as a four-dimensional construct comprising personality, party situation, social integration, and demographics. The second scale indicated candidate characteristics affecting vote behavior marked four dimension titling background and attributes, party affiliation, promotional efforts, and communication and modesty. The each of two scales could be stated that they exhibited ideal internal consistency and met rigorous conceptual and empirical criteria for validity.

There have been relationships between factors related WOM and candidate characteristics and dependent variables containing encouraging, discouraging, to be influenced by interpretations, and to be influenced of election decision. The results of multiple regression analysis indicated that the aspect of political party situation seemed to exert the strongest influence on overall encouraging behavior in comparison to other aspects. In terms of discouraging, the aspect of party situation has the strongest effect. The third model of multiple regression revealed that aspects of background and attributes, promotional efforts, and communication and modesty were significantly correlated with overall to be influenced by election decision. The results candidate characteristic factors also revealed that promotional efforts exerted the strongest influence overall be influenced by interpretations.

This study revealed that voters do use WOM on candidates during elections and they predominantly circulate information on candidates' personalities, then information on his or her party affiliation, followed by oral comments on candidates' planned promotional efforts. The least mentioned factors in candidate related WOM activities were found the candidates ethnicity, and his or her religious affiliations.

Voters shape their voting behavior about candidates based on planned communication efforts that they have been exposed to during elections, his or her political past and around candidates' personality.

Knowing what motivates voters and how they disseminate and what piece of information may help communication consultants of candidates to shape political campaigns so as to win the elections.

Given the constraints of this study, there are a number of substantive areas that should be addressed by the future research. This study was carried out in the province of Eskisehir, Turkey. A bigger sample or a sample that will be able to represent Turkey would enable the researcher of reaching to clearer and more general results. This study is limited to assess which word of mouth components on voters' attitudes. Traditional advertising forms and electronic based viral marketing are exempted and thus a future study should also include multiple effects of communication tools. Consequently, effect of WOM related to political candidate preferences and its effects on different cultures and political regimes should also be investigated.

Acknowledgement

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