Mapping influence: an assessment and visualization conceptual model of civic and political engagement in the UK.

Throughout the twenty-first century profound technological, social and environmental changes has radically transformed the socio-political environment. The unparalleled growth in media influence (Bettelheim et al., 1999; Greenblatt, 2004) and accessibility (McMahon & Chesebro, 2003), facilitated by the inexorable growth in social media epitomized by virtual communities (Bagozzi & Dholakia 2002), online social networks (Brown et al., 2007) and online opinion leaders (Lyons & Henderson, 2005), and the emergence of new social, economic and political issues, notably environmental concerns (Lake, 1983; Lowe, 1983), has radically altered the environment in which politicians operate. Such changes are compounded by declining engagement in local politics (Dalton, 2006; Richardson, 1995), increasing cynicism regarding political marketing activities (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Henneberg, 2008; McChesney, 1999; Pinkleton et al. 2002; Savigny & Temple, 2010; Smith & Saunders, 1990; Yoon et al., 2005) and a reduction in civic engagement (Putnam, 2000, cited in Vitak et al. 2010), all of which poses serious challenges for modern political marketing researchers and practitioners. It is the contention of this study that a central facet of these challenges is the growing diffusion of influencers within the socio-political environment. As Blondel and Venneson (2010: 523) asserted, “... the discipline should cease to be concerned exclusively with politics in public bodies and in particular in the state: it must also devote itself to politics at the level of the ‘man in the street’.” It is therefore proposed that the rapid transformation of influence distribution vis-à-vis civic and political engagement necessitates a new approach to influence mapping and evaluation based on three elements: opinion leadership, reference groups and civic and political engagement. The author knows of no other research which has addressed the issue of influence mapping with specific reference to these three bodies of research. The development of the following conceptual framework (figure 1) will accordingly guide empirical research to allow the closing of this research gap.

![Figure 1: Influence Mapping Conceptual Framework](image_url)

**Opinion Leadership**

Lazarsfeld et al. (1944), cited in Chaney (2001), initially coined the phrase ‘opinion leaders’ during their investigation of the role played by co-workers, relatives and friends in voting decisions in the 1940 US presidential election. Kingdon (1970) identified three different types of opinion leader - activists, talkers, and passive leaders, highlighting important differences between opinion leaders and non opinion leaders of the electorate. The level of political information possessed by opinion leaders was significantly higher than possessed by non opinion leaders, leading to a key role played by opinion leaders as sources
of political information in the voting process. As Kingdon (1970:261) stated ‘for every “follower” they influence … their significance multiplies’. Indeed, the role of opinion leaders as information sources is directly linked to voter perceived risk, highlighted by O’Cass & Pecotich (2005:408) who stated “electoral risk … may be viewed as both the motivator of the search process and a consequent outcome variable”. Some voters will be willing to tolerate the ‘cost’ of educating themselves regarding an election, whilst uninformed voters frequently utilise so-called ‘information shortcuts’ consisting of information obtained from opinion leaders (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Frank et al. 2004; O’Cass & Pecotich, 2005).

Whilst a number of opinion leader variants have been proposed, such as market mavens (Clark & Goldsmith, 2005; Feick & Price, 1987; Fitzmaurice, 2011; Higie, Feick & Price, 1987; Puspa & Tjandra-Ruhardja, 2009), the role of opinion leadership in the voting decision making process is recognised by political parties. “Mainstream European parties indeed appear disproportionately responsive to opinion leaders (in fact we find no evidence that parties respond at all to other segments of the electorate)” (Adams & Ezrow, 2009:206), because party elites believe opinion leaders possess a significant amount of influence over other voters’ decisions. In the context of local politics, community opinion leaders will therefore have an important role via their activities in the local constituency, in not only impacting on local politicians’ brand images, but also on the mobilisation of engagement with public affairs at a local level (Parsons & Skinner, 2012).

Moreover, the impact of opinion leaders can now be seen to be much wider when their followers are members of virtual communities. Research has suggested that wider engagement with civic issues occurs from those who belonged to Facebook groups than those who belonged to political parties (Parsons & Skinner, 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2009). Croft and Deane’s (2011) investigation of the use of social media in UK political campaigns similarly confirmed that the nature of social media ‘thrives on individual narratives’ and so may be more effective when used by individual politicians or opinion leaders than by political parties. The influence of opinion leaders has therefore been augmented by the advent of social media (Lin, 2012), supporting Lyons and Henderson’s (2005) assertion that internet opinion leaders possess higher levels of computer proficiency and engagement with the internet than non-leaders (Parsons & Skinner, 2012). The use of social media by opinion leaders, according to Ross (2011:6) has resulted in the deterioration of the power of governments and an increase in the influencing power of communities and the ‘super-empowered’. This assertion was graphically illustrated by the use of Facebook and Twitter to organise civilian uprisings against authoritarian regimes in Tunis, Cairo, Tripoli, Sanaa and Damascus (Rutzen & Zenn, 2011).

Reference Groups

The ability of groups to influence others has been researched within the marketing discipline in terms of reference groups. Hyman first employed the phrase ‘reference group’ in 1942 to describe groups to which an individual associates their attitudes. Whilst subsequent research (French & Raven, 1959; Newcomb, 1946; Sherif, 1948; Shibutani, 1955; Turner, 1955) refined and expanded the initial concept numerous studies have highlighted the influence exerted by reference groups on individual’s viewpoints, actions and intentions, including product and advertisement evaluation (Whittler & Spira, 2002), purchasing behaviour (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Hoyer & Maclnnis, 2000; Moschis, 1976), message influence (Haslam et al., 1994) and brand usage (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Bearden et al., 1989; Bumkrant & Cousineau 1975; Childers & Rao, 1992; Moschis 1985). A reference group can be defined as a “...group of people that significantly influences an individual’s behaviour.” (Beardon & Etzel, 1982:184). Whilst there are evidently numerous possible groups White and Dahl (2006) identified two broad categories of reference groups: in-groups
and out-groups. In-groups (also referred to as membership groups) refer to groups to which the consumer belongs, such as a family, a peer group or one’s gender group (White & Dahl, 2006), which typically exert positive influence on individuals based on their identification and psychological involvement with such groups (Abrams et al., 1990; Turner, 1991, cited in White & Dahl, 2006:404; Whittler & Spira, 2002).

Out-groups refer to groups which an individual does not belong (Wei & Yu, 2012). Such groups consist of two types: aspirational and dissociative. Aspirational reference groups are similar to membership groups vis-à-vis their ability to exert positive influence and are comprised of a group that an individual wants to join (Englis & Solomon, 1995). Notable figures such as athletes or actors are therefore commonly used by marketers in order to adopt a reference group appeal. Dissociative reference groups refer to groups which individuals wish to avoid any form of association (Englis & Solomon, 1995). Such avoidance can be derived from groups that do not impart positive associations (disidentification) (Englis & Solomon, 1995; Jackson et al. 1996), possess negative symbolic implications (Banister & Hogg, 2004), provide a means of demonstrating a desired positive ‘self’ image by avoiding particular products linked to the group (Muniz & Hamer, 2001; White & Dahl, 2007) or provide undesired selves that individuals wish to avoid (Ogilvie, 1987).

In addition to membership, aspirational and dissociative reference groups a new type of group – virtual groups - has recently emerged as a direct result of the growth of worldwide Internet usage (Okleshen & Grossbart, 1998). Virtual groups, commonly referred to as communities (Rothaermel & Sugiyama 2001), are typically founded on online interactions between individuals who share common interests (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Williams & Cothrel, 2000). Unbounded by geographical location (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002) virtual communities are based on social interactions and the sharing of comparable beliefs, usually by way of shared conventions and language such as jargon (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002), which typically results in uniform attitudes and behaviours across community members (Brauer, et al., 1995). Although the growing importance of virtual communities for marketers (Evans et al., 2001; Kim et al., 2008; Kozinets, 1999; Maclaran & Catterall, 2002) has been noted in a number of studies, including positive word-of-mouth (Bickart & Schindler, 2001) and stronger brands (McWilliam, 2002), an agreed definition of virtual communities remains elusive (Jang et al., 2008). Whilst Barnes and Hunt (2001) identified a number of different types of virtual community, including communities of interest, fantasy communities and relationship communities, marketing research has extensively highlighted the power of brand communities, comprised of individuals who share a common interest in a particular brand (Algesheimer et al., 2005; McAlexander et al., 2002), to influence consumers (Schau, et al., 2009; Schouten et al., 2007; Thompson & Sinha, 2008).

Irrespective of category the ability of reference groups to influence individuals is, according to Blythe (2008) based on four means: 1) reference groups influence members’ behaviour via the socialization process (Blythe, 2008) which is commonly associated with normative influence (Soloman, 2013); 2) individuals develop a self-concept through their interactions within reference groups (Haslam et al., 1994; Platow et al., 2000; Tajfel 1986, cited in Wei & Yu, 2012; Terry & Hogg, 1996; Whittler & Spira, 2002); 3) reference groups affect individuals through conformity (Blythe, 2008; Folkes & Kiesler, 1991) based on compliance and acceptance of the reference group’s behaviour (Hyman & Singer, 1968, cited in Dawson & Chatman, 2001; Kelley, 1955; Newcomb, 1948; Oshagan, 1996); 4) individuals utilise groups for social comparison (Blythe, 2008) derived from their ability to provide a point of comparison against which an individual can evaluate himself and others (Cocanougher & Bruce, 1971; Merton & Rossi, 1957 cited in Oshagan, 1996) rather than conformity to group norms (Cocanougher & Bruce, 1971).
The influence of reference groups’ vis-à-vis civic and political engagement is well documented. Political research has determined that reference groups are actors in the political arena (Miller et al., 1991). Lau (1986), cited in Miller, Wlezien and Hildreth (1991), for example, determined that reference groups, alongside political candidates and issues, are highly important in determining an individual’s political views. Whilst the power of reference groups to influence members’ concerning politics can be linked to three influence mechanisms: informational (Calder & Burnkrant, 1977), value expressive (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975) and utilitarian (Park & Lessig, 1977) a key source of political influence by reference groups undoubtedly resides with the identity, norms and values (social meanings) shared by members of reference groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Haidt, 2001; Thompson & Sinha, 2008). Virtual reference groups have been identified as having a particularly important role in supporting and enhancing political engagement, so called e-democracy (Maciel et al., 2010). As Valenzuela et al. (2009:891) noted, “Belonging to political groups in Facebook was strongly related with political participation...” Indeed a number of e-democratic virtual applications have been developed to facilitate political engagement. For example, the Democratic Citizenship Community (DCC) is a virtual community designed to allow individuals to discuss matters of common interest vis-à-vis voting (Maciel & Garcia, 2007, cited in Maciel et al., 2010). Whilst e-democratic initiatives such as the DCC are still in their relative infancy they undoubtedly represent a growing awareness and understanding of the importance of reference groups, particularly those that exist virtually, in terms of civic (Jang et al., 2008) and political engagement.

**Civic and Political Engagement**

Academic interest regarding the decline in civic (Putnam, 2000, cited in Vitak et al., 2010) and political (Dalton, 2006; Richardson, 1995) engagement has expanded during the past two decades (Ekman & Amna, 2012). As Pharr and Putman (2000: xviii) observed “it is a remarkable irony that just at the moment when liberal democracy has defeated all its enemies on the battlefields of ideology and politics, many people in the established democracies believe that their own political institutions are faltering, not flourishing.” An agreed definition of the term ‘civic engagement’ nevertheless remains elusive (Adler & Goggin, 2005). Indeed, the term ‘civic participation’ has been employed by scholars, journalists and public officials to describe an extensive range of activities ranging from community service to participating in political rallies (Berger 2009). As Adler and Goggin (2005: 241) stated “civic engagement refers to activities by ordinary citizens that are intended to influence circumstances in society that is of relevance to others, outside the own family and circle of close friends”. As such the term ‘civic engagement’ is typically integrated with that of ‘political engagement’. For example, while political participation, notably electoral turnout, is not the only indicator of civic participation it does demonstrate the trend of continued decline in participation (Livingstone & Markham, 2008).

A number of researchers, such as Verba and Nie (1972, 1978), cited in Ekman and Amna (2012) and Teorell et al. (2007) have proposed typologies of civic and political activities. Whilst both of these typologies focused on political rather than civic forms of engagement Ekman and Amna (2012) developed a typology based on disengagement, civic engagement and political participation: 1) Manifest political participation involving formal political participation (e.g. voting, donating money to political parties) and activism (e.g. signing petitions, demonstrations); 2) Latent forms of participation entailing social involvement (e.g. perceiving politics as important, identifying with a certain ideology and/or party) and civic engagement (e.g. giving money to a charity, activity within community based organisations); 3) Disengagement divided between active forms (e.g. political disaffection,
deliberate non-political lifestyles such as hedonism) and passive forms (e.g. non-voting, perceiving politics as uninteresting and unimportant).

A variety of theoretical models have likewise been developed to analyse civic and political engagement (Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley 2004). Such models can be broadly divided between structural models which examine why individuals utilise civic and political knowledge in terms of participation and choice theories which investigate the reasons why individuals seek civic or political information (Livingstone & Markham, 2008). Notable structural models include: 1) The civic voluntarism model (Livingstone & Markham, 2008; Verba et al. 1995 cited in Whitley et al., 2009) which explains engagement in terms of resources, civic skills, mobilization and political efficacy; 2) The equity-fairness model which emphasises social comparisons and relative justice (Livingstone & Markham, 2008); 3) The social capital model focuses on social and interpersonal trust which allows individuals to become involved with social organisations, thereby furthering political and civic engagement (Brehm & Rahn 1997; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000, cited in Whitley et al., 2009). A key choice theory is the cognitive engagement model which focuses on the role of media usage and political knowledge and interest (Clarke et al. 2009, cited in Whitley et al., 2009).

Within the political marketing literature academics have investigated influence in a myriad of contexts, including the impact of polling places on voting behaviour (Rutchick, 2010), the role played by physical attractiveness on voter influence (Hart et al., 2011) and the influence of news media (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Miller & Krosnick, 2000) and advertising (Falkowski & Cwalina, 2012) on political attitudes and voting behaviour. The use of ICT for creating opportunities for civic engagement (Hampton, 2007; Hampton, 2010; Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Kang & Gearhart, 2010; Kavanaugh et al., 2007) and democratic governance (Boyd, 2008; Kang & Gearhart, 2010; Loukis et al., 2010; Stanford & Rose, 2007), such as the Swedish Aktiv Demokrati Party (Lofgren & Smith, 2003), has also been the focus of increasing academic interest. However, the topic of influence mapping vis-à-vis opinion leaders, reference groups and political and civic engagement within the UK has not been examined.

Proposed Methodology

Due to the objective of this study, namely to elicit a greater understanding of the influencers on civic and political participation, it is proposed that the research begin with a qualitative phase aimed at mapping the overall range of behaviour and attitudes of individuals towards the research topic (Smith & Fletcher, 2001, cited in Moss et al., 2008) founded on the conceptual model developed (figure 1). Whilst representativeness is a key element of quantitative sampling qualitative sampling is concerned with the richness of data (Gummesson, 1991). As such it is “possible to use small samples to provide a fairly robust indicator of the overall direction of people’s behaviour and especially attitudes “ (Smith & Fletcher, 2001, cited in Moss et al., 2008: 67). It is therefore proposed that six focus groups, selected via non probability sampling, be initially conducted during this research stage. Findings from these focus groups will subsequently be tested during the second phase of the research involving possible quantitative methods such as a questionnaire which will provide statistical reliability and validity to the research findings.

Conclusion

The diffusion of influence within the socio-political environment has changed the nature of social, group, and individual influence vis-à-vis civic and political engagement. The proposed research will contribute to the political marketing literature by eliciting a greater theoretical and practical understanding of the key influencers in respect to civic and political engagement.
Reference List


