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The Erosion of Voters' Trust: How eWOM Shapes perceptions of Mainstream Political Parties in Pakistan?

Talha Aslam[1*], Saqib Riaz[2]

Abstract
In this technological age, Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) plays crucial role in making public Voter perception. This study examines the effect of eWOM on voter perception of mainstream political parties in Pakistan. This study majorly focuses on the extent that at what level eWOM influneces voter's attitudes and belief toward these political parties. This study uses arbitration theory to explore how eWOM turns as a casual clash tool, affecting voter trust and perceptions of mainstream political parties in Pakistan. Arbitration theory uses in this study to explore that how eWOM turns as a casual clash tool, effecting voter perceptions of mainstream political parties in Pakistan. Research methodology used in this research is quantitative, data collected from 800 respondents from University of the Punjab, University of Karachi, University of Baluchistan, University of Peshawar, and Quaid-e-Azam University. Data collected through questionnaire is analyzed to identify the patterns and correlations between eWOM exposure and voter perception, with major focus on how eWOM assists as intervening factor the mediation of contradictory political parties. The findings reveal that eWOM plays highly significant role in making perceptions of voter in decision making. This research study highlights that wider exposure to eWOM significantly impacts voter perception. The research also discloses that eWOM considerably forms voters' perceptions, affecting their attitudes and voting behaviors. eWOM influences political parties' deliberate decisions, guiding them to accept platforms and policies that reflect public emotion.
Keywords: Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), Voter Perceptions, Social Media, Political Communication, Pakistan, Political Parties

1. Introduction

The connection of politics and Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM) has become increasingly significant in contemporary discourse, influencing public opinion, electoral outcomes, and policy decision-making. Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) has become increasingly influential in shaping public perceptions and political branding strategies in the digital age. eWOM refers to the dissemination of opinions, recommendations, and information about political entities through online platforms, including social media, forums, and review websites (Chen & Ramzan, 2024 ; Li & Bernoff, 2019). The reliability of word-of-mouth (WOM) is an important selling point because the voters give more importance to it than the political parties' own suggestions. The actions taken by the receiver after receiving information from the WOM is important. The convergence of politics and Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM) has evolved as a key area of research recently, reflecting the increasing impact of online communication platforms on political discourse and public perception (Chadwick & Howard, 2015).

Social media plays an important role in forming the public opinion of political bodies (Ramzan et al., 2023; Smith, 2018). Online platforms engagements significantly influence the voters' behavior towards political parties, emphasizing the significance of supervising online presence significantly. User-generated content plays a pivotal role in shaping the political brand perceptions and candidates to actively involve with digital communities (Wang et al., 2019). In previous years, emergence and wide spread adoption of social media platform have fundamentally transformed the global political communication and discourse (Howard & Parks, 2012).The influence of electronic word -of- mouth on political brand image and voter brand perceptions has emerged as a crucial area of investigation in Pakistan, where mainstream political parties compete for the dominance in the socio-political environment (Khan et al., 2018). However, eWOM perceived as the dissemination of opinions, recommendations, and information about political parties through digital channels, including social media platforms, online forums, and blogs, has the potential to significantly shape public attitudes and behaviors towards political parties (Lee & Youn, 2009).

Developing party image and formulating public opinion through social media platforms is not a new phenomenon. There was a time when traditional media platforms were used for the same purpose and with the advancement and technological revolution (Ma et al., 2024; Akram et al., 2021, 2022) in the world the whole patterns of influencing and persuading audience for achieving political purposes has also been transformed. The process of political branding and image building is no more a single directional or one way process rather eWOM has emerged as a new powerful way of reputation building and constructing positive powerful charismatic and impressive image as a politician (Anstead & Loughlin, 2015). According to Marland & DeCillia (2020) online reviews can bolster the credibility of political brands, while negative feedback may lead to reputational damage. Influencer marketing on digital platforms can significantly influence voter perceptions and attitudes towards political entities.

[1*] Talha Aslam is PhD candidate at Department of Mass Communication, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, talha.interlink@gmail.com
[2] Dr. Saqib Riaz is Professor and Chairman at Department of Mass Communication, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad

This new concept of EWOM has not only empowered audience much more as compared to the past it has also become an interesting area of research for communication scholars. Despite the growing body of literature on eWOM and its implications for political communication, limited research has been conducted specifically on its effects within the context of Pakistan's mainstream political landscape (Kausar et al, 2023).

Keeping in view of fluctuating trust on political parties and democracy at large by the voters of Pakistan, this study aims to determine the extent to which eWOM influences the perception of established political parties among Pakistani voters. This study also seeks what are the significant factors, attributes, and communication techniques being disseminated through digital media that influence voters' perception of the winning of their consent. Hence, following research question and hypotheses formulated for this research.

RQ: To what extent does eWOM contribute to the development of voters' perceptions of mainstream political parties in Pakistan?

H_1: eWOM has a significant contribution to the development of voters' perceptions of mainstream political parties in Pakistan.

H_2: The more voters are exposed to eWOM, the more their perceptions of political parties are influenced.

2. Political Branding and Populism

To explain, political branding is predicated on the notion that political parties, candidates, and Increasing numbers of political marketing theorists are accepting of the concept that causes may be managed in the same way that businesses are used to use in their jargons. These political groups can be studied and analyzed in the same ways as corporations. As rephrasing (Milewicz & Milewicz, 2015) either a distinct political practice (Wolkenstein, 2015: 112) or a one-of-a-kind method of political discourse (Mouffe, 2013: 187-190), populism is defined differently by different authors (Aalberg et al., 2017).

Contrary to Müller (2016), who argues that populism undermines liberal democracy, Mouffe (2013: 236) and Mudde and Kaltwasser (2015) see it as a positive force in certain contexts. According to Tormey (2018), populism is a symptom of a crisis that can have positive and negative effects on democracies. Branding in politics covers the gamut, from the most generic. A politician's standing in the public eye can rise or fall based on the subtlest nuances of his or her delivery (Scammell, 2015, p 7). Everything associated with an event contributes to its reputation. If the policy is adopted or the argument is convincingly presented, the brand's value will rise. Company's reputation if they say anything to the contrary. Brands are more akin to feelings than physical things, so touching one would be a bad idea.

It's no secret that branding is used in political campaigns, and it's feasible to brand political parties, ideas, and even individual politicians has been in marketing for a long time and has been involved in many different campaigns more information can be found in (Scammell, 2007, p. 176). A brand's communication and perception components are intertwined using branding techniques to change people's opinions about them there are die-hard admirers in the audience, but there are also wavering supporters and people who are on the fence might swap party affiliation if offered a more appealing alternative even if a group is successful in expressing their brand, the public may not associate that success with the no guarantee that it will be popular with voters. This calls for a party! Exhibit political leadership by speaking out firmly on contentious matters the emphasized traits may run opposite to the interests of the voters.

Change the Nominee to Someone Else (Scammell, 2007, p 190). The party is also responsible for considering the party participants and deliberate how an internal brand would accomplished whilst during meeting (Schneider & Ferie, 2015, p 86). Brand identifying strategy political parties through social media is an emerging field of research. The Study of Facebook has, however, been utilized in political campaigns and public announcements. Larsson (2016) studies this issue before, during, and after elections, and names their findings

Constant online campaigning with regards to the subject of online social communities Enli & Skogerbo (2013) looked at how Twitter was used to "humanize" politics by analyzing data from two elections in Norway crusades. The outcomes make it clear that statesman operated Twitter for advertising purposes, or their actions matched their declared goal of communicating with one another. Twitter is created to investigate vested interest in a certain issue (Sandberg, 2018). Quantitative studies of media's role in shaping party identities (websites, TV discussions, journal, and elections)

Manifests (Rutter et al., 2016, Walter & de Vries, 2009, Milewicz&Milewicz 2014) importantly as pointed out by Jagers and Walgrave (2007): Populism is a political ideology that seeks to gain power by appealing to and identifying with the masses, and which has its origins in anti-elite sentiments. The populace is seen as a homogeneous whole, with no internal differences other than those of a few carefully chosen categories, who are targeted for exclusion.

It could be based on socioeconomic disparities (the "losers of globalisation or modernization thesis") (Betz 1994; Kriesi et al., 2008) and a hierarchical system that confers authority from bottom to top (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017, Dyrberg, 2003, Ostiguy, 2009). Some schools of security study critique contend that the politics of instability and hysteria provide a fertile ground for a populist to communicate an existential crisis (Wojczewski, 2019), which in turn helps to cast its audience as outsiders (Jones, 1999) whose voices have been stifled.

Discursive reproduction of post structuralism theory is established when persona are articulated as a gesture of opposition and the public group consensus through representation. Using cues from the environment, populists build a discourse through rhetoric and activism (Hansen, 2011). In an effort to make sense of the world, the human brain has a natural, anti-pluralist tendency to split society into two groups: the masses and the governing class, as claimed by authors such as Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) and Muller (2016). Not realizing that post structural discourse populism tries to promote a tolerant atmosphere in which different identities can coexist peacefully despite their differences and ultimately a more inclusive, pluralist normative vision of society, they have failed to see its value (Cleen et al., 2018). The achievement of the pluralist values outlook depends on the development of a decentralized social structure that vulnerable to legislative actions and dislocations that populists can exploit (Panizza & Presbitero, 2014).

2.1. Voters' Perception and eWOM

Zhang and Daugherty (2009) explored how online reviews affect voters' perceptions of which indicates that positive reviews have considerable impact on voters' trust and voting intentions. Similarly, a study conducted by Liu et al. (2016) investigated the role of EWOM in political contexts. They discovered that online discussions and endorsements on social media platforms can sway public opinion and even affect voting behavior during elections. Furthermore, research by Wang and Yu (2017) delved into the psychological mechanisms underlying individuals' perception formation. Their findings suggested that cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias and availability heuristic, shape how people interpret and respond to information online. In a related study, Kim and Lee (2019) examined the impact of visual content in EWOM on consumer decision-making. They found that images accompanying online reviews can significantly enhance the persuasiveness and credibility of user-generated content.

Peoples' perception and Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM) hold significant sway in shaping public opinion and influencing decision-making processes. Recent studies have delved into these phenomena, shedding light on their complexities and implications

Above studies have investigated these topics, revealing their complexities and implications. Hence, these studies underscore the intricate relationship between individual's perceptions and eWOM, highlighting the importance of nuanced understanding across the different domains.

2.2. Politics in Pakistan and eWOM on Issues

Modern Pakistan is an enigmatical case study since both the ruling and opposition parties are prone to populism. Since Pakistan's independence, the "many media," which includes TV, newspapers, and the internet, have been utilized to propagate views that challenge the elite's sense of identity (Mir et al., 2023). The cross-party committee is accountable for how the public views Mehngai Mukao. Imran Khan's regime in Pakistan is based on the same dubious structures of governance that sparked the obstacle opposed the current government in 2017. This is despite the fact that the description surrounding Khan's rise to power has centered on anti-bribery, piety (Hassan et al, 2019), biased freedom from the army, and developing autonomy. According to Milam (2018), Imran Khan stands out among Pakistan's leaders because he can articulate his progressive beliefs with accuracy and clarity. In response to the publicly well-known instances of corruption from various context (Kazi, 2021), awful financial system , and faulty social contract, Imran Khan and his Tehreek-e-Insaf party rose to power in Pakistan in 2018 (Murtaza & Azhar, 2020). Khan's 'Naya Pakistan' platform was successful because of its emphasis on rooting out systemic problems and developing more open government. While in office Imran Khan "has concentrated on reducing the reigning class for nepotism, lack of clarity, governance restructuring , fairness in the society and ethical uprightness" (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021). In spite of how dramatic the changes currently underway may appear, it would be a mistake to assume that they will last forever. In the 1970s, former Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto used similar criticisms to push through legislation reshaping the political system and institutions in the name of "social justice" (Hasan et al, 2019). However, Pakistani populism shifted from pro- or anti -American after the no-confidence campaign's success. Afterward, aftermath of 9th May riots against military establishment of Pakistan, the Khan was ousted from elections of 2024 and her party failed to form government in Pakistan and his populist narrative was diffused by taking several censorship on internet and media.

2.3. Attribution Theory

Attribution theory refers that the masses exhibit feeling and intentions to express other people to understand their behavior. The core idea of attribution has been expanded by many ways since the inception of attribution theory (Malle & Korman, 2013). There are two concepts that extend the attribution theory; internal cause and external cause of attribution. Dispositional attributes or internal cause refers that some internal characteristics reflects in people's attitude rather outside stimulus. These internal attributes are personality, motives and beliefs which reflect in individuals' everyday tasks (Trope, 1986). However, external causes of attribution are the external factors which create a stimulus in an individual to act or re-act the situation. These situations prevail in an environment or in a situation where an individual's perform (Bushong & Gagnon-Bartsch, 2023).

According to (Le-Hoang, 2020) attribution theory inclines to define the effects of WOM or eWOM create a discourse among voters on convincing to create an opinion about a political party. It also discusses how people tends to generate casual interference regarding the behavior of the speakers who defends a certain situation or a

certain path. This theory tries to explain how people attribute the persuasive communication of a communicator as a incentive (productivity) or to non-incentive elements (disposition refers to the inherent qualities or circumstances of the communicator).

3. Methodology

This study is quantitative in nature and employing the survey research method from the potential voters registered with the election commission of Pakistan in their voter list and using internet on their mobile phones. However, significant concentration which is (76%) of internet usage is in Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi and Islamabad (Tribune, 2021). The sample drawn is N =800 through stratified ransom sampling technique from the university students because of their heterogeneity of that region as seen the figure 1.

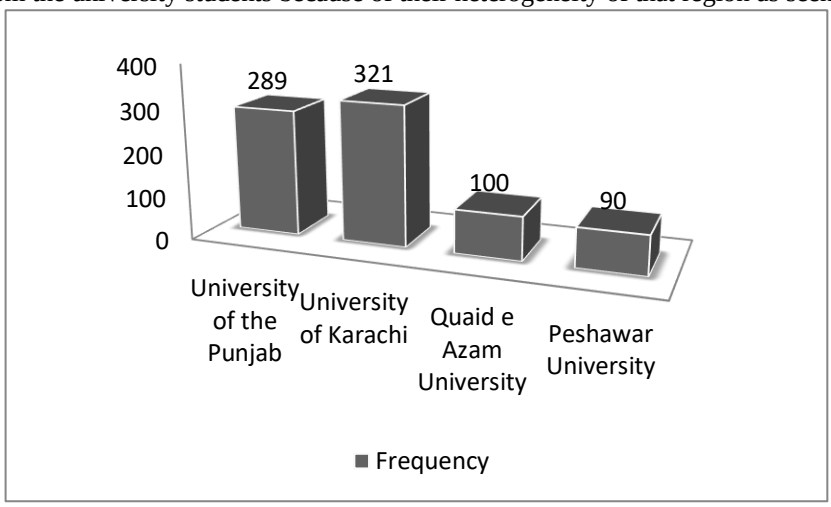

Figure 1: Distribution of the drawn sample across population

The questionnaire is disseminated to the said respondents through google forms via multiple mediums, whatsapp groups, social media pages of these universities and contacted with teachers which disseminated the link of Google form through multiple mediums significantly whatsapp class groups. Male total number of (453) are (56.6%) to total sample whereas (347) are female respondents which is (43.3%) of the total sample size 800. The age of respondents are 18-25, 26-33, 34-41, 42-49. The respondents from different provincial capitals of Pakistan i.e. from Lahore are (27.8%), Karachi (28.2%), Islamabad (12.6%), Peshawar (18.6%) and from Quetta are (12.8%). The reliability of the instrument is significant of this study, $\alpha = .98$.

4. Results and Findings

Table 1 Descriptive of eWOM an Instrument of Public opinion

Statements	M	SD
To what extent you agree that people's views about political leader/political party are significant and important in creating political image of any political part.	4.19	1.15
To what extent you agree that social media platform is playing crucial role in shaping people's perception about the party?	4.19	1.15
To what extent you agree that apart from the quality of the content on social media, the number of the comments on any post and views on the post influence your perception of the party image?	4.23	.91
To what extent you agree that eWOM by political parties can be used as a tool to sway people's opinion in favor or against any political party?	4.23	.91
To what extent you agree that eWOM by general public at large can be used as a tool to sway people's opinion in favor or against any political party?	4.23	.93

N = 800

Table 1 presents respondents' perspectives on the influence of social media and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on political perceptions and opinions. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that public views about political leaders and parties are significant in shaping their political image, with a mean rating of 4.19 and a standard deviation of 1.15, emphasizing the importance of public perception in political discourse.

Likewise, almost all social media platform plays important role in making people perception about political parties, the mean 4.19 and the standard deviation 1.15, emphasizing the effect of platform on people opinion making. Further, mean 4.23 and standard deviation 0.91 disclosed that content quality and especially quantity of comments and views on social media posts, effect on the image of a political party. This previous discussion helps us to understand that how much the engagement metric on social media is important for the formation of

perception. Moreover, the (mean 4.23 and Standard deviation 0.91) showed that respondents agreed that eWOM from political parties and mean (4.23 and standard deviation 0.93) explored the effect of public view point's either it is support form or oppose form towards political parties, underlining the strategic use of eWOM in political communication. In nutshell we can say the table 1 offers an inclusive point of view of how eWOM on social media effect the political perceptions and public opinions, underlining especially the critical role in making political discourse and engagement.

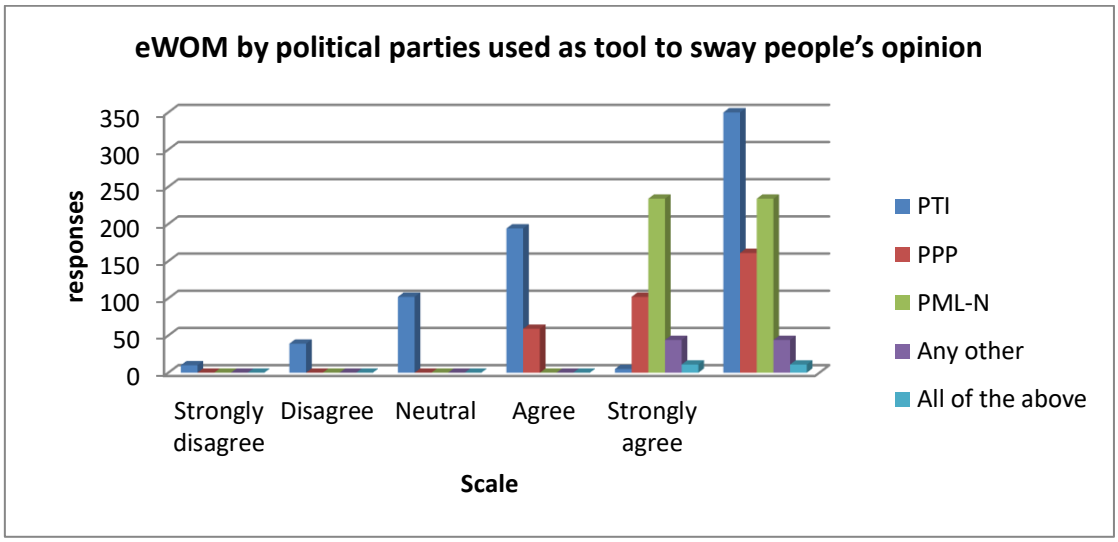

Figure 2: Use of eWOM by political parties as tool to sway public opinion

Figure 2 explores the extent to which respondents agree that electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) by political parties can influence public opinion in favor of or against any political party. The results reflect that out of 800 respondents, 253 (31.6%) agree, and 396 (49.5%) strongly agree that eWOM by political parties can influence public opinion. For PTI, 194 respondents (55.4%) agree, while 102 (29.1%) are neutral. For PPP, 102 respondents (63.4%) strongly agree. And 59 (36.6%) agree. Notably, 234 respondents strongly agree that eWOM by PML-N can influence public opinion. In the category "any other" and "all of the above", all of the respondents (55) agree or strongly agree. This indicates strong consensus that eWOM significantly impacts public opinion across various political parties.

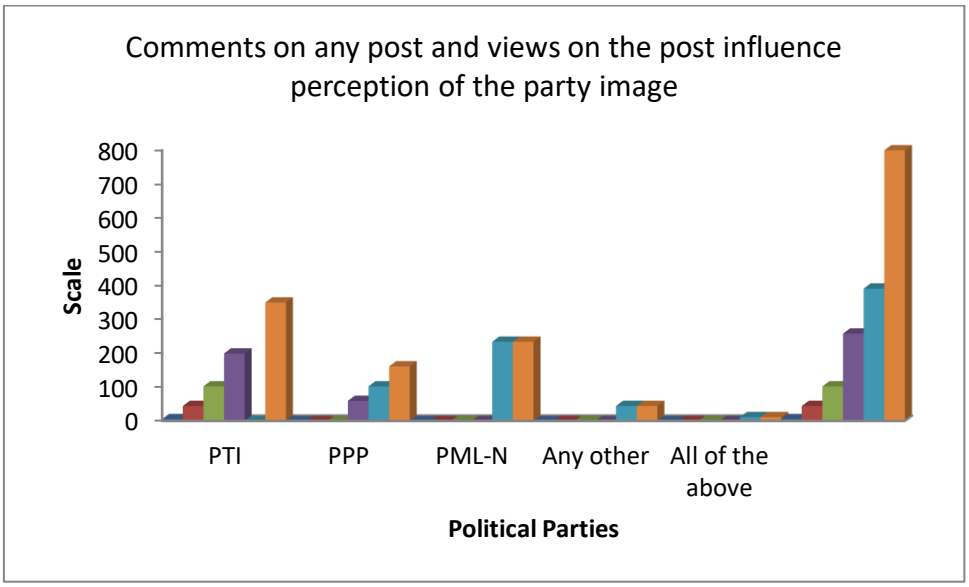

Figure 3 Comments on any post and views on the post influence perception of the party image

Figure 3 shows that Out of 800 respondents, 350 (43.75%) are PTI supporters, with 199 (24.88%) agreeing the comments and views on posts influence party image, 102 (12.75%) being neutral, and 49 (6.13%) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Among 161 PPP supporters (20.13%) agree, and 102 (12.75%) strongly agree. All 234 PML-N supporters (29.25%) strongly agree, while 44 (5.5%) others and 11 (1.38%) supporters of "All of the above" also strongly agree. Overall, 649 (81.13%) respondents agree or strongly agree that comments and views influence party image.

Table 3 Regression analysis of how various aspects eWOM influence voters' perception

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Statements	B	Std. Error	Std. B	T	Sig.
Follow official pages on social media?	.203	.037	.194	5.413	.000
Social media by party influences perception?	.563	.037	.533	15.398	.000
Social media presence predicts election success?	.191	.021	.161	9.118	.000
Trust in posts/videos/comments by parties?	.020	.015	.020	1.384	.167
Celebrity eWOM impact on perception?	.153	.018	.140	8.672	.000

The regression analysis in Table 3 evaluates how various aspects of eWOM influence voters' perception. The findings show that "social media use by party to influence perception" has the strongest impact ($\beta = .533$, $p < .001$), followed by "follow the official pages on social media" ($\beta = .194$, $p < .001$), "Social media presence predicting election success" ($\beta = .161$, $p < .001$), and "Celebrity eWOM impact on perception" ($\beta = .140$, $p < .001$). However, "Trust in posts/videos/comments by parties" has no significant effect ($\beta = .020$, $p = .167$), Indicating that while social media activity strongly shapes perception, trust in party content is less influential.

5. Discussion

The findings of above results suggest that eWOM play significant role in the development of voters' perceptions of mainstream political parties in Pakistan. The results verify that voter views are strongly impacted by exposure to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Choi & Lee, 2019). Voters' impressions of political parties are altered more strongly, the more eWOM they are exposed to the stronger the influence they take. This underlines how social media has a significant influence on Pakistani politics and how political parties must actively communicate with people on the internet. Regression analysis which we applied on the hypotheses explores that the prediction that eWOM effect of voting decision asking process is negatively influenced by the engagement of eWOM involving political parties on social media platforms (Boler & Davis, 2020).

This is a charismatic detection that those voters who participate in online debates and discussions, webinars, and other events, they may not believe that their involvement has a direct impact on how they vote. Conversely, (Huang et al., 2020) explored that on social media the trust of eWOM was not an important factor for predicting, along with exposure to eWOM the content and the context are more important. Moreover, the study investigates the role of eWOM in the growing of political engagement showing that an important negative effect on the perception that eWOM impact on voting decision (Li et al., 2020).

This may be the complex view point which comes across social media where increase engagement of social media may lead towards the enhancement of critical thinking in audience, which is not the main target of the political parties. And the perception that through eWOM people can understand more clearly the mission and vision of the political parties have the positive impact on the believe that eWOM shapes voting decisions (Bhadauria et al., 2024).

This provide clear indication to us that straightforward and informative. and direct content helps audience to understand the political agenda and this content also effect on the note decision making process. The importance of eWOM in making the political perceptions further supported by the study (Iyer et al., 2017). So the eWOM have the fruitful effect of making perception of the target audience especially changing proves of voting. Peer pressure and social conformity have a significant part in shaping political opinions, as demonstrated by the power of the majority view on social media. Lastly, Table 3 regression analysis shed light on the ways in which eWOM engagement is impacted by a number of factors, including the act of following political parties' official social media pages, the opinion that active political party use on social media has a positive influence, and the belief that parties with a strong social media presence have a higher chance of winning elections. The lack of importance seen in confidence in political party posts indicates that more genuine and reliable information is required to improve eWOM involvement. The realistic analysis confirms a substantial relationship between eWOM and leaders political brand image in Pakistan. Positive image relates strongly with the favorable political brand image, and the negative eWOM relates with the Unfavorable political brand image. This outcome is exact similar to the previous studies related to the use of social media for making public perception (Smith, 2018). The findings support Arbitration Theory by highlighting the complex role of eWOM in shaping voters' perception of political parties in Pakistan. While increased eWOM engagement can lead to a more critical audience, as suggested by Li et al. (2022), the theory explains that arbitrator – voter – evaluate eWOM content critically, balancing various influences before formatting a perception.

This aligns with Huang et al. (2020), who found that on social media the trust of eWOM was not an important factor for predicting, along with exposure to eWOM the content and the context are more important. So Political parties must make credible and highly informative content that positively influence the voter decision making process (Iyer et al., 2017).

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that the eWOM significantly the political party's voter's perception in Pakistan, and if the target audience exposure with more eWOM then high chance of influence. Through eWOM voter can increase their knowledge about that particular political party, eWOM can develop the understanding of political agenda, increased information about party leader, and help the voters to finalize their decision critically. Political parties must keep in mind the content and context of eWOM when crafting their messages for target audience.

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