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## **<sup>1</sup>Strategic Political Communication, Public Relations, Reputation Management & Relationship Cultivation through Social Media**

### ***Abstract***

Recent years have witnessed the rapid proliferation of a new class of information technologies, commonly known as social media, which support interpersonal communication and collaboration using Internet-based platforms. In social media, political communication has become increasingly focused on personalities and personal traits of politicians. Politicians and political parties need a constant presence on these platforms to promote their image and maintain interactive, real-time communication with their supporters and potential voters. There is a plenty of literature on how political actors use social media to gain their benefits all around globe but no study has been conducted to highlight the usage of social media under the umbrella of strategic political communication, online public relations and reputation and relationship cultivation and management. This paper intends to highlight different theoretical foundations to analyse the usage of social media for political purposes. This paper is establishing a relationship between the producers, message and consumers as Facebook and Twitter are considered to be more direct mean of two-way communication. Political Public Relations focus on reputation cultivation and controlled candidate communication in the political process. For political purposes, the political actors are managing their reputation on social media by measuring audience engagement on the posts and tweets.

**Keyword:** Online reputation, relationship building, public relation, strategic political communication

### **1.0. Introduction**

Every advancement in technology has an impact on everyday life that particularly holds correct for advances in media technology (Baker, Megan). The media is an essential part of daily life, and it turns out to be even more significant in regard to government and political awareness. The advent of social media is accepted by the growing number of users who share text messages, pictures, and

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videos online (Duggan, 2013; Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015).

Social Media is an important tool for political actors to interact with their public directly and build one to one relationship with them. It is also regarded as the ideal platform to measure public opinion about political actors, politicians and government policies, (Steiglitz, Brockmann, & Xuan, 2012). Thus, social media provides both citizens and political actors a platform to take part in political deliberations and privately or publicly share any political content.

This paper reviews strategic political communication & political public relations, Reputation Management and Relationship Cultivation Strategies through social media as the theoretical foundations of this study. Reviewing these above-mentioned concepts, this chapter provides theoretical rationales about how political actors use social media strategically to cultivate relationship and manage their online reputation among the public and how people react to their posts and tweets.

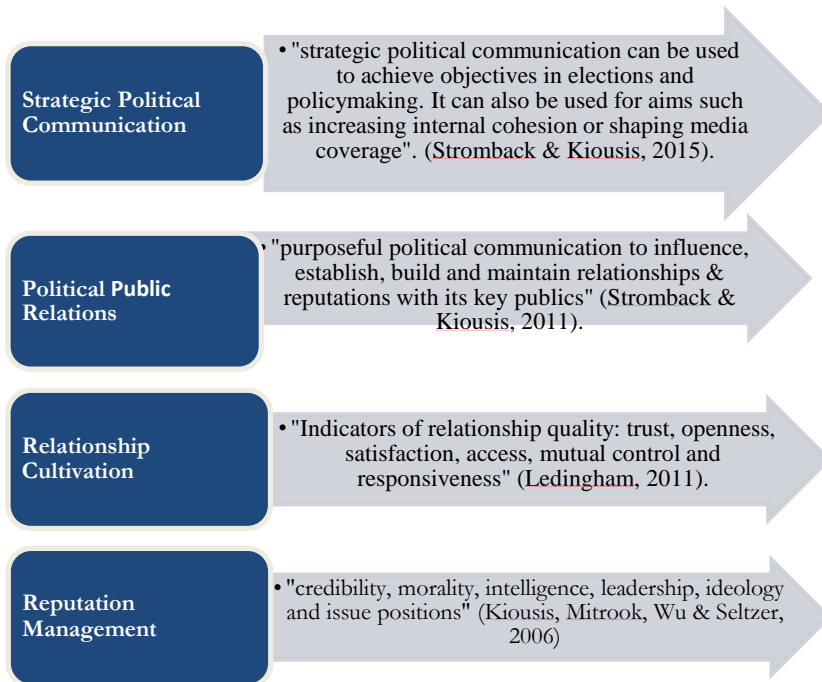
The number of social networking tools has grown exponentially over the last few years. Subsequently, the number of users have also increased rapidly. The social landscape is continuously changing and evolving and as a result, the uncertainty makes it a challenge to use these tools from a strategic standpoint. So far, politicians have generally adopted the “trial by fire” method of learning the effectiveness of using social media tools for their strategic communication. Therefore, it is imperative to study the ways and methods in which political actors are including social media into their communication strategies in order to access and communicate with public. This study reviews the theoretical foundations of strategic political communication, political public relations, reputation Management and relationship cultivation through social media. This study also provides theoretical rationales about how do politicians use social media strategically to cultivate relationship and manage their online reputation among the public and how do people react to their posts and tweets which has never been under consideration of social media researchers. Therefore, this study is divided into four sections on the basis of the theoretical concepts related to political communication and social media.

Part A. Strategic Political Communication

Part B: Political Public Relation

Part C: Reputation Management

Part D: Relationship Cultivation



**Figure 1. Relevant Approaches of Political Communication**

## **2.0. PART A: Strategic Political Communication**

### **2.1. Political Communication**

According to McNair (2011), the purposeful communication regarding politics is known as political communication. The three points about political communication, which are:

- 1) Political actors use different forms of communication to attain specific goals and objectives.
- 2) Non-politicians including columnists and voters, use different forms of communication to address to these political actors.
- 3) Communication regarding political actors and their activities done through columns, news reports, features, editorials and many other forms of media debate of politics (McNair, 2011).

Political communication is a subfield of political science and communication. It refers to the dissemination of political information and its effect on the politics, policy makers, and media and on the general masses.

Political communication focuses on the distribution of public resources (revenues), authority and power distribution (who has power to make decisions, laws, and methods and rules to follow) and official sanctions about rewards and punishments by the state (Denton & Woodward, 1998). Moreover, in Political Communication, the sender has intention to influence or affect the political

atmosphere and it is said that the source of a message does not make communication “political” but the vital feature which makes communication “political” in its content and the purpose (Denton & Woodward 1998).

## **2.2. Political Actors and Strategic Political Communication**

Under the umbrella of statements discussed about political communication above, it is argued that politicians use different communication tools to interact with the public directly or indirectly, to run political campaigns, to build good image or repute among the public, to achieve certain political goals and objectives, to shape public opinion in their own way and to seek personal political benefits. Over the years, there has been a significant change in the ways that the election campaigns are systematically organized and conducted (Negrine 2008). Politicians are continuously using new tools (Tenscher, Mykkanen, & Moring 2012) to communicate as purposefully and efficiently as possible (Plasser & Plasser, 2008; Stromback, 2008 & Vliegthart, 2012). In essence, this means the inception of the notion of strategic political communication, which means party’s intentional planning of information and communication is to attain the desired political agendas (Stromback & Kioussis 2015). The increased trend of using strategic political communication by politicians in political campaigns (Esser & Stromback 1997) are often referenced as an enduring process of changing socio-political contexts and media coverages (Stromback & Kioussis 2015). According to Williams (2016), 44% of the U.S. citizens relied on social media for political awareness about candidates in the 2016 presidential elections. It was argued that there were almost 10 million followers of Trump on Twitter while Hillary Clinton had almost 7 million. Whereas on Facebook Trump had nine millions that were about double her number of followers. It was found by the Pew study that political candidates used Facebook for five to seven posts per day and used Twitter for 11 to 12 tweets per day.

Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, and Sriramesh (2007) defined strategic communication as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission” (p. 3). Similarly, Frandsen and Johansen (2017) argued, “all types of organizations, including private and public sector, political parties, NGOs, and social movements, use strategic communication to reach their goals” (p. 2250). Macnamara (2012) examined party’s self-interested usage of strategic communication to achieve an objective, attain impact, and to work upon an agenda highlights dynamic ethical issues but little attention has been paid to the usage of strategic political communication by politicians. In this research, the role of the political actors in enhancing the importance and usage of strategic political communication is explored.

## **3.0. Part B: Political Public Relation**

Social media’s increased popularity has transformed the landscape of public relations. Politicians are generally seen modifying their communication strategies and making social media as an important part of it. Since political public relations are considered as a kind of strategic political communication, the increasing usage of internet and social media has had a important place in this discipline.

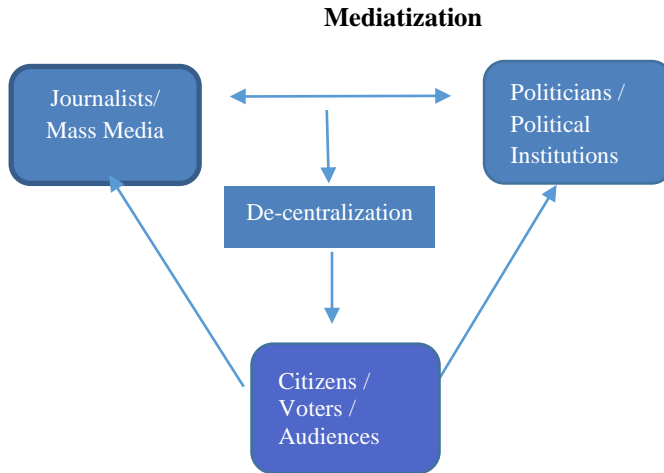
It is essential for a public relations practitioner to be aware of all the present forms of social media and to prepare for any emerging forms in the future. The practitioner should also know and understand the usage of different tools and should be able to determine the appropriate tool for a particular task and also be able to examine its effectiveness. The very nature of social media is two-way flow of information stream. This can help in promoting and fostering democracy by including participation of citizens, information of different government plans, and more aspects for involvement. Social media highlights “interactivity, co-creation of content, subscription-based information services, and third-party application development” (Toledano, M. (2017)). The public relations for political purposes is a growing dimension of research by merging mainstream public relations and political communication. The main emphasis of the dimension revolves around the service to the public through communicating concerns to the news media. However, Froehlich and Rudiger (2006) argued that the main objective of political public relation is the use of media platforms to express specific political opinions, resolutions, and clarifications of issues to gather public support for political policies or election campaigns. It is worth mentioning, though, that due to the increasing trend of personal publishing, the users of political public relations’ technique don’t depend on exclusively media for communication and reaching their target audience.

Strategic public relations may be considered asymmetrical or even manipulative if being strategic results in fulfilling the aims of an organization, primarily or solely (Toledano 2017). Many in the field of PR (Heath, 2001; Heath et al. 2006) have argued the need of dialogue (Kent & Taylor 2014) as a major ingredient in building trustworthiness and ethical relationships (Paquette et al., 2015; Pearson, 1989) between organizations and stakeholders (Piecicka 2011, 2013, 2016; Stewart & Zediker 2000).

### **3.1. Strategic Political Communication & Political Public Relations through Social Media**

In the contemporary era, social media is the most popular among other forms of media. People use social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Linked Inn, etc. to interact with each other in the whole world. These sites are considered as a forum for sharing activities, opinions, attitudes and behaviours and also, they are the forum for discussion and debates. About more than 2.19 billion people have membership of Facebook while about more than 336 million people have accounts on Twitter globally (Steiglitz, Brockmann, & Xuan, 2012). From few years, social media is being used for strategic political communication. Political participation is constantly increasing through social networking sites. Now the political actors have their own official pages on these sites and they have direct interaction with the public. Political actors share their activities and get immediate reaction/response by the public. Similarly, the public share their beliefs and opinions regarding politics and political actors on these sites. This gets intense during election campaign as social media is regarded as the ideal platform to measure public opinion about political actors, politicians and government policies (Steiglitz, Brockmann, & Xuan 2012).

Public relations practitioners have started to pay attention to the role and potential of an emerging web tool, weblogs or blogs for short, as a tool to express and reach out to the key public (Edelman & Inteliseek 2005; Hallett 2005) and build relationships (Kelleher & Miller 2006).



*Figure 3.1. Change in Political Communication. Adapted from “Introduction: Mediatization and De-centralization of Political Communication” by K. Brants & K. Voltmer, 2011, Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy: Challenging the Primacy of Politics, p. 4. Copy rights 2011 by Palgrave Macmillan. Adapted with Permission*

Over a period of time, with the increasing popularity of the social media, the principles of the communication through mainstream media have also reformed. In Social media the entire communication is based on the principles of “social interaction”, “multidirectional communication” and “the public impose the media agenda”, on the other hand, since feedback in traditional media is delayed and sometimes even absent, the communication is focused on “broadcast” or “unidirectional communication”. Thus, the structure of communication mediated by the social networks underwent substantial modifications from the one explained in the so-called “third phase of development of political communication systems” or “postmodernism”. The decentralization of the communication to social groups of online opinion leaders and eradicating the horizontal dimension, in which vital role is played by mass media and political actors to spread the political message to the public, can explain the uniqueness of this communication mechanism. In Social Media, the message is decentralized from source (Facebook page of political actor) by some regular users, which in time become effective leaders in the online environment. Hang and Nadler (2012) argued politicians and government use Twitter to increase their impact of traditional forms of press releases and conferences (Chun, Shulman, Sandoval, & Hovy 2010). They also use the social networking sites to convey their messages to a large audience (Chun & Warner 2010; Chun et al. 2010; Jaeger & Bertot 2010; Bertot, Jaeger, Grimes 2010). Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, and Glaisyer (2010) added that Twitter and Facebook would be an effective platform of freedom and objectivity. Shogan

(2010) also emphasized that social networking websites have capacity to bring changes in constituent communication strategies.

In a very short span, political actors in modern democratic societies all over the world have started to use Facebook and Twitter for reaching their target public (Chi & Yang, 2011; Williams & Gulati, 2010). According to the statistical portal of 2018, Facebook is the most popular social networking site across the world with more than 2 billion active users (The Statistics Portal, 2018). These political actors have adopted new media because they consider it fascinatingly important for successful communication more than traditional media (Posetti, 2010; Westling, 2007).

Steiglitz, Brockmann, and Xuan (2012) argued that new advance technology oriented tool such as Twitter is considered as less funding means of direct constituent communication that evades the expensive and large budget political campaigning of mainstream political advertising on television. In recent years, social media have become most popular among other forms of media. People use social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Linked Inn, etc. to interact with each other in the whole world. These sites are considered as a forum for sharing activities, opinions, attitudes and behaviours and also, they are the forum for discussion and debates (Steiglitz, Brockmann, & Xuan 2012). Social Media specifically Twitter promote plausible changes in political communication and public involvement (Pingree 2007). As Trammell (2006) argued that “compared to traditional media, internet platforms allow for more interactive and two-way communication” and research shows “higher levels of interactivity” (Shah et al., 2007; Tedesco, 2007). From few years, social media is being used for strategic political communication. Political participation is constantly increasing through social networking sites. Now the political actors have their own official pages on these sites and they have direct interaction with the public. Political actors share their activities and get immediate reaction/response by the public. Similarly, the public share their beliefs and opinions regarding politics and political actors on these sites especially making it intense during election campaigns. Social media is regarded as the ideal platform to measure public opinion about political actors, politicians and government policies (Steiglitz, Brockmann, & Xuan, 2012). However, no investigation has been done to explore the uses and abuses of social media before for political interests (Wattal, Schuff, Mandviwalla, & Williams 2010).

### **3.2. Online Public Relations**

Online public relations (OPR) is “the state which exists between an organization and its key publics, in which the actions of either can impact the economic, social, cultural or political well-being of the other” (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 62). This increasing trend of the Internet usage and embracing the social networking sites provide political actors new ways to build relationships and maintain their credibility in public. To check relationship quality and the effects of using strategic communications, Hon and Grunig (1999) designed four dimensions of organizational public relations that are trust, gratification, commitment and control empathy. According this four dimensions’ model of interactive strategy is properly applicable to public relations for political interests because “organizations

and their strategic publics are interdependent, and this interdependence results in consequences to each other that organizations need to manage constantly” (Hung, 2005, p. 396). Thus, it is also added that the relational viewpoint uses these four indicators to measure the level to which the audience trusts political actors to act with responsibility (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Huang, 2001). Hence, the politicians do not rely on conventional news media any longer. They use social media web networking in their political campaigns to build relationships with target audience (Sweetser 2011). The usage of strategic campaign communication is so evident in the US presidential elections campaign since 2004 (Stromer-Galley & Baker, 2006; Williams & Gulati, 2012). In addition, the personalized promotion of the political actors on social media “may foster stronger relationships between the campaigns and the publics, humanize the opposition, and result in greater levels of political trust” (Baldwin-Philippi, 2012).

#### **4.0. Part D: Relationship Cultivation through Social Media**

This segment focuses on the idea of relationship cultivation. As the systematic circle firstly, the relationship is built and then comes the sustainability. The smoothness of the circle depends upon the strategy building and then the execution of the plan. Both of the notions need to be carefully tied as in case of a little unconscious act the whole may be collapsed. The Relationship cultivation theory is developed in the context of public relations theory. Organizational study has demonstrated that any organization’s behaviour can affect the status of its relationship with its strategic publics. Organizations cannot merely maintain relationships with the publics, but must devote time and resources to improve their relationships and/or restore any damaged relationships. To properly cultivate relationships with their strategic publics or stakeholders, organizations/persons can integrate a range of relationship cultivation tactics into their day-to-day communication activities.

Relationship cultivation strategies originated from theories of interpersonal relations (Canary & Stafford 1994), specifically romantic relationships (Stafford, Dainton & Hass 2000). Public relation researchers (e.g., Grunig & Huang 2000) “transformed the concept of relationship cultivation strategies in interpersonal communication and applied the strategies to Public Relations” (Hon & Grunig 1999). Relationship cultivation tactics are day-to-day communication activities employed by organization/persons to improve the quality of its relationships with various publics or stakeholders and are often considered proactive approaches to fostering high quality relationships. The most effective strategies, which have been identified to produce positive relationship outcomes (Grunig & Huang 2000), are “access, positivity, openness, sharing tasks, networking, and assurances” (Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2013; Ki & Hon 2006, 2009a). In a study of the 2008 U.S. presidential election, Seltzer and Zhang (2008) explored “the impact of the relationship maintenance strategies of mediated communication, social activities, interpersonal communication, and online communication on relationship quality with political parties along the dimensions of trust, satisfaction, commitment, control mutuality, and supportive behaviours”.



From a general standpoint of Public Relations, Hon and Grunig (1999) added five indicators that are commitment, satisfaction, relationship quality, trust and control mutuality. Similarly, Ledingham (2011) also identified the indicators of trust, openness, satisfaction, access, mutual control, and responsiveness as arguably the most critical in determining relationship quality in a political public relations setting. It is worth recognizing that this approach goes beyond defining political public relations as communication to include actions and behaviours. Relevant outcomes in strategic political communication include favourable attitudes towards political candidates, parties, or legislation and supportive behaviours such as vote choice, vote intention, volunteering, donating, attending events, joining an organization, protesting, or engaging in activism (Strömbäck & Kioussis 2011b).

Regardless of the scales development to measure the relationship cultivation plans, a few researches have been conducted to investigate how organizations integrate these relationship maintenance policies into their visibility on internet, particularly for religions networks. The main concept of relationship management adds that the major objective of PR practitioners is to develop, maintain, and endorse longstanding rapport between both the parties (organization and stakeholders) no matter who they are (Ferguson, 1984). This dimension is an important exit from the exploiting of public views to the unification of balanced two-way communication. Though, it was not an easily embraced standpoint, public relation scholars took almost 15 years to accept this concept. This developing model has made substantial interest among the academic and professional groups due to the emphasis on relationship management. Broom, Casey and Ritchey (2000) added that public relations practitioners accept this new dimension to the extent that now the field is known as relationship management rather than strategic communications. Relationship management is not a part of public relations only because it has been comprehensively combined with the programs of corporate and integrated marketing communications. Morgan and Hunt (1994) defines the notions of building trust and pledge with target public. According to Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988), one of the first attempts to check the level of relationships is the SERVQUAL scales from marketing discipline. These scales quantify the statements presented to stakeholders' reservations and the party's tilt to support or reject them. Keep the introduction of these scales in view, Bull (2003) argued that relationship management scholars proposed investigation of different aspects of the rapport with target audience. These aspects of relationship management depend on leadership, message construction interactivity and culture (Eagle & Kitchen, 2000 ; Duncan & Moriarity, 1998 ; Grönroos, 2004). All of these features effect the cultivation and maintenance of organizational relationships with public. Tilson and Venkateswaran (2006) restated that "devotional-promotional communication" and added "aims to establish and maintain good clergy-congregant/ devotee relations as well as inspire devotion to the faith" (p. 115). Despite the availability of the wide range of communication channels, organizations build relationships with target audience in similar patterns reflected by the process of relationship development between two persons.

According to Grunig and Huang (2000), public relations researchers have already worked on face to face communication for conceptions that can be amended or adapted for a theory of organization-public relationships. Based on interpersonal communication theory, Hon and Grung (1999) argued that “standardized scales have been developed for evaluating organizational relationships. These scales primarily focus on the measurement of the four dimensions of relationships commitment, power balance, satisfaction, and trust” (p. 3). Following a quick idea of cultivation plans by Hon and Grunig (1999), asked for supplementary investigations of relationship management and complete explanation of the face to face approaches that might be applied to the organizational contexts (Toth, 2000). This perspective of Dialogic Theory (Kent and Taylor 1998, 2002) is accustomed with the prevailing thoughts on the function of communication in making relationships, where these constructive relationships between an organization and its shareholders are built through communication with the help of public relation practitioners (Ledingham, 2003). This “socially informed generation calls for and expects dialog as governments shift their views of citizens from consumers to allowing citizens to contribute online to the development of government” (Azyan, 2012). One exclusive advantage of using social media networks in public relations practitioners is their ability to involve many citizens in two-way communication even in the low budget structure (Pew, 2010). In addition, Bruning (2002) stated that “To effectively manage relationships, it is critical that practitioners conceptualize of communication with key public members (rather than simply a transfer of information), and use communication to support an ongoing relationship” (p. 44).

### **5.0. Reputation Management through Social Media**

Another useful perspective is reputation management for the understanding of strategic political communication. The application of reputation management to strategic political communication requires, of course, that it has to be moved out of the traditional business context. That is, the reputation concept is applied to political parties, leaders, nations, and so forth (Scammell, 1999). A growing body of research has confirmed this application (Donsbach & Brade, 2011). A related body of work on political candidate images has also illustrated the importance of reputation in strategic political communication. Such research has examined how the portrayals of political leaders in candidate communications, news media messages, and public opinion can closely correspond to one another. Among the most common attributes of the candidate (Kiousis, Mitrook, Wu & Seltzer., 2006) images studied were credibility (does the candidate seem believable?), morality (do the candidate’s actions reflect well on his or her ethics or integrity?), intelligence (is this reflected in his or her knowledge or skills?), leadership (is he or she charismatic or inspiring?), ideology and issue positions (what are his or her policies?), and biographical information (details of his or her hometown or family) (Weaver, Graber, McCombs & Eyal, 1981).

The spreading of new media technologies incorporated with the Grunig’s (1992) idea of public relations as “building relationships with publics that constrain or enhance the ability of the organization to meet its mission” and to move public

relations from mainly one-way communication model of relationship management to more systematic, communicating, two-way communication models for developing Online Public Relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002). The applied tactic to communication orders the crucial component in this dialogic or conscious communication model i.e. two-way communication among the companies, shareholders, and the target audiences. This type of dialogic communication enables organization and target audience to get awareness and have joint understanding about agreement and views. Therefore, organization considers legitimate publics' interests and concerns (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Public relations have conventionally focused on the organisation of strategic communication amongst an organization and its stakeholders. Though, the rise of relationship management as the main model in public relations has led this discipline to emphasize on relationship building and maintenance (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Just as people cultivate social capital that aids them build relationships and careers, corporations and other organizations improve reputational capital that supports them build relationships and develop their organizations. A critical first step in reputation management is the constructing and cultivation of relationships with main constituencies. The emerging paradigm of relationship management is a new start to examine various tactics that organizations/ politicians can use to foster relationship growth with their shareholders in physical contexts even though "increasingly individuals are using the Internet to stay connected with organizations" (Ki & Hon, 2009).

## **6.0. Conclusion**

The theoretical concepts discussed in this study is knit around Strategic Political Communication and Political Public Relations through Social Media, where the political actors are producers, posts and tweets are messages and voters are the consumers. This paper established a relationship between the producers, message and consumers as Facebook and Twitter are considered to be more direct mean of two-way communication. Political Public Relations focus on reputation cultivation and controlled candidate communication in the political process. As mentioned earlier, from a general standpoint of public relations, Hon and Grunig (1999) identified the indicators of relationship quality, control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment whereas Ledingham (2011) identified the dimensions of trust, openness, satisfaction, access, mutual control, and responsiveness as arguably the most critical in determining relationship quality in a political public relations setting. In this study, the indicators of trust and responsiveness have been taken into consideration to analyse the relationship cultivation strategy of the political actors keeping in view that these two can be the most important indicators of relationship cultivation. The political actors should try to give audience authentic and true information in this age where social media has become a tool of propaganda more than a career of information. To explore the reputation management strategy of the political actors, supportive and discouraging behaviour of the audience has been analysed through the audience engagement and the language of the comments made on the posts and tweets.

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