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Does Media Matter? The Effect of Digital Media Exposure, perceptions and attitudes towards voting

ABSTRACT

This study determined the direct effect and mediating effect of the presidential candidate's perceived image, attitude towards voting and perceived image of the political party on the relationship between digital media exposure and voting intention. A quantitative research approach was utilised. Of the 350 questionnaires distributed, 302 usable self-administered questionnaires were retrieved for the final data analysis, representing a response rate of 87 percent. Partial least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed in the data analysis. Significant relationships were found between the presidential candidate's perceived image and attitude towards voting and between attitude towards voting and voting intention. Important to note about the study findings is that the mediating variables perceived image of the presidential candidate, perceived image of the political party and attitude towards voting partially mediates digital media exposure and voting intention relationship. This study contributes new knowledge to the existing body of digital media literature in Africa - a context that is often most neglected by some researchers in developing countries.

Keywords: Digital media exposure; perceived image; attitude towards voting; voting intention

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INTRODUCTION

With the current proliferation of media technologies, research has come to position the internet as a strategic tool to stimulate consumer behaviour (Effing et al., 2011). A meta-analysis of research on the interaction between internet usage and political participation found a strong relationship between social media use and political engagement (Boulianne, 2015). For political marketers or policymakers to establish cohesive tactics that provide a conducive environment adequate to affect decision making, it is crucial to analyse how exposure to digital media (online news, social networking, and websites) affects consumer perceptions, attitudes toward political brands, and voter decision making. In this article the theory of planned behaviour is contextualised to develop a model of voting behaviour. The proposed framework incorporates the personal qualities of candidates as attributes in attitude formation, the influence of party image on voting propensities, and the impact of attitudes and digital media exposure. The model is then tested in the Zimbabwe context.

Scholars generally agree that the media play a role in the process of public learning and political engagement. However, extant literature is divided on this matter, with some focusing on the informative and mobilising role of the media (e.g., Breuer, 2016; Norris, 2000) and others on the contribution of the media to political inefficacy, public cynicism, and disengagement (e.g., Schuck, 2017; Lin & Lim, 2002; Howard & Parks, 2012). This study investigates the relationship between digital media exposure and propensity to participate in elections. This study builds on previous studies and explores some of the concerns arising from the academic debate regarding the interaction between the media and political involvement. This study hypothesises the relationship between digital media exposure, attitude towards voting, perceived image of political brands (i.e., the presidential candidate and the political party) and voting intention. The study surveys data to assess the relationship between digital media exposure and voting behaviour.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: the next section presents the literature review. The research methodology section which includes data collection procedure, construct operationalisation and measurement, follows after that. The subsequent section offers data analysis and results, and discussion and the implications of the study findings. Lastly, in the concluding section, the study's limitations along with suggestions for future research are highlighted.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 PERCEIVED IMAGE OF THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

The perceived image of a presidential candidate represents the candidate's personality as

perceived by the voter and has a significant positive impact on the voter decision making (Ben-Ur & Newman, 2002; Speed, Butler & Collins, 2015). Literature has highlighted that power; leadership; competence; intelligence; credibility and morality are the key attributes of a political candidate (Benoit & Hansen, 2004; Farrag & Shamma, 2014). Therefore, a candidate's image can be conceptualised as how the voter-consumers perceive the candidate, perceptions based upon the voters' subjective evaluations and the messages, utterances, attributes, qualities transmitted by the candidate and the political party. However, there is lack of theoretical consensus regarding the nature and constitution of candidate images.

1.2 ATTITUDE TOWARDS VOTING

Thorhauge et al. (2016) define attitude as the extent to which the performance of the behaviour is positively or negatively valued. In consumers' decision-making processes. An attitude towards behaviour directly impacts behavioural intention (Zhang & Kim, 2013). Thus, resulting attitudes toward voting are a critical factor to compete and survive in the competitive electoral market. Also, numerous empirical findings reveal that attitudes are good predictors of behaviour and information search (Liaw & Huang, 2003) patronage (Moye & Kincade, 2003); and behaviour intention (Hernández et al., 2010). In view of voter-consumers' use of online media for information search and decision making, it may also be that voter-customers with favourable attitudes toward voting sometimes use party websites solely to find information about the competing political parties or candidates. Drawing from this literature, in this study attitude towards voting refers to the strength of voter-consumers' feeling of favourableness or unfavourableness towards voting. Attitude is generally understood as a psychological state that predisposes an individual to act positively or unfavourably to an event or situation. However, attitude is multidimensional, consisting of interrelated constructs, cognitive components (knowledge of specific-issues related to the elections), belief or affective components which include those variables that measure feelings and beliefs about voting and its consequences; and conative components which are an assumption that attitude has a causal effect on intentions to vote (Schahn & Holzer, 1990). Attitude is also influenced by judgments of the ethicality of behaviour (Ellis & Griffith, 2000).

1.3 PERCEIVED IMAGE OF THE POLITICAL PARTY

The fundamental and unifying core of the political product is the party leader and his or her image (Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy, 2007), personifying the political party (Harrop, 1990) serving as the principal source of identity (Parker, 2012) marketed to political consumers including voters (Lees-Marshment, 2001), the media and other audiences the party intend to influence (Burkitt, 2002) in exchange for votes (Baines, Brennan & Egan, 2008). Therefore, the political product may be offered using a branded leader in candidate-centered systems such as America's (Busby & Cronshaw, 2015), or a leader co-branded with their party in party-centered systems (Downer, 2016). Comprehensive political marketing is applicable to the entire behaviour of a political organisation, the way parties' campaign, the way individual

candidates organise for success, and the way parties design their product (Lees-Marshment, 2015). Perceptions regarding the attributes and benefits of a brand are formed based on the marketing communication in respect of the brand, word-of-mouth from other consumers, and direct experiences with the brand. Similarly, political perceptions are formed based on the campaigns, word-of-mouth from within the electorate and direct experiences with the contesting political parties. Consumer attitudes toward a particular product brand are formed not only by positive recall but also negative cues and recall (Aghekyan-Simonian et al., 2012). Similarly, voter-customer attitudes towards a political party are formed by both positive and negative cues and recall. However, the brand image of a political candidate is influenced by the organisation or corporate brand of the political party, and the political climate.

1.4 DIGITAL MEDIA EXPOSURE

Accordingly, digital marketing is defined as using all kinds of digital and social media tools that allow political parties and politicians to foster interactions with the electorate (Al Kailani & Kumar, 2011). Use of social media involves affecting and influencing perceptions, attitudes and end behaviour while bringing together different like-minded people (Laroche et al., 2012). According to consumer socialisation theory, communication among consumers affects their cognitive, affective, and behavioural attitudes (Wang et al., 2012). A consumers' purchase decision is affected by their acquaintance's comments on social media, and friends' attitudes can influence consumer selection of a service or good (Forbes, 2013). This study defines digital media exposure according to Slater (2004), who expressed it as the extent to which voter-consumers have encountered explicit media content and the extent to which these voters have access to, recall or recognise the involvement.

1.5 FUTURE VOTING INTENTION

The study of electoral choice has yielded notable progress in providing insight into voter decision-making (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008). The basic assumption of most extant research on voting decision making is that most voters are incapable of dealing with political intricacies; hence voters rely on heuristics to simplify political decision making and guide their behaviour. Voter-customers are expected to make decisions that have profound and irreversible consequences in inherently uncertain environments. How do people decide whether to vote or not? Do they base their decision on an assessment of anticipated costs and benefits? In this study, voting intention refers to a reflection of an individual's motivation as shown by how much effort the person is willing and planning to exert to vote and what the person plans to do (Ajzen, 2011; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975). Essentially, intention is an individual's anticipated or premeditated future behaviour (Lam & Hsu, 2006). Therefore, voting intention refers to individual voter-consumers' willingness or reluctance to participate in electoral process at some impending date. Voting intention is an attitudinal variable for measuring voter-customers' future contributions to a political party.

2. CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model reflecting the distinct paths and connections between the constructs under investigation. The subsequent sections will then provide the formulation of the hypotheses for the present research.

2.1 DIGITAL MEDIA EXPOSURE AND PERCEIVED IMAGE OF A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

In contemporary politics, voters have few chances to meet political candidates in person. Nevertheless, voters increasingly rely on the media for information, forming or modifying their perceptions of candidate personal traits. When individuals are exposed to media advertisement, they are likely to develop perceptions that then influence their voting behaviour. Media enable voter-consumers to re-assess candidate image to come up with future voting decision (Cwalina, Falkowski & Kaid, 2005). Use of media for advertising is meant to create awareness of some important characteristics or traits of a product, an individual, organisation or business entity as well as refining and reasserting unique competitive brand positioning, with the ultimate aim of maintaining share of the market and profit levels (Keller, 2013) and improving the chances of winning the election. Media exposure often reinforce existing beliefs of audience and assure them that they need to maintain loyalty as the values associated with the brand remain steady and true. Moreover, Jones et al. (2011) found a positive relationship between media exposure and the image of a leader. Therefore, based on the forgoing discussion and empirical evidence this study posits that:

H1: Digital media exposure has a direct and significant effect on the perceived image of the presidential candidate.

H2: The perceived image of the presidential candidate has a direct and significant effect on voting intention.

H3: The perceived image of the presidential candidate mediates the relationship between digital media exposure and voting intention.

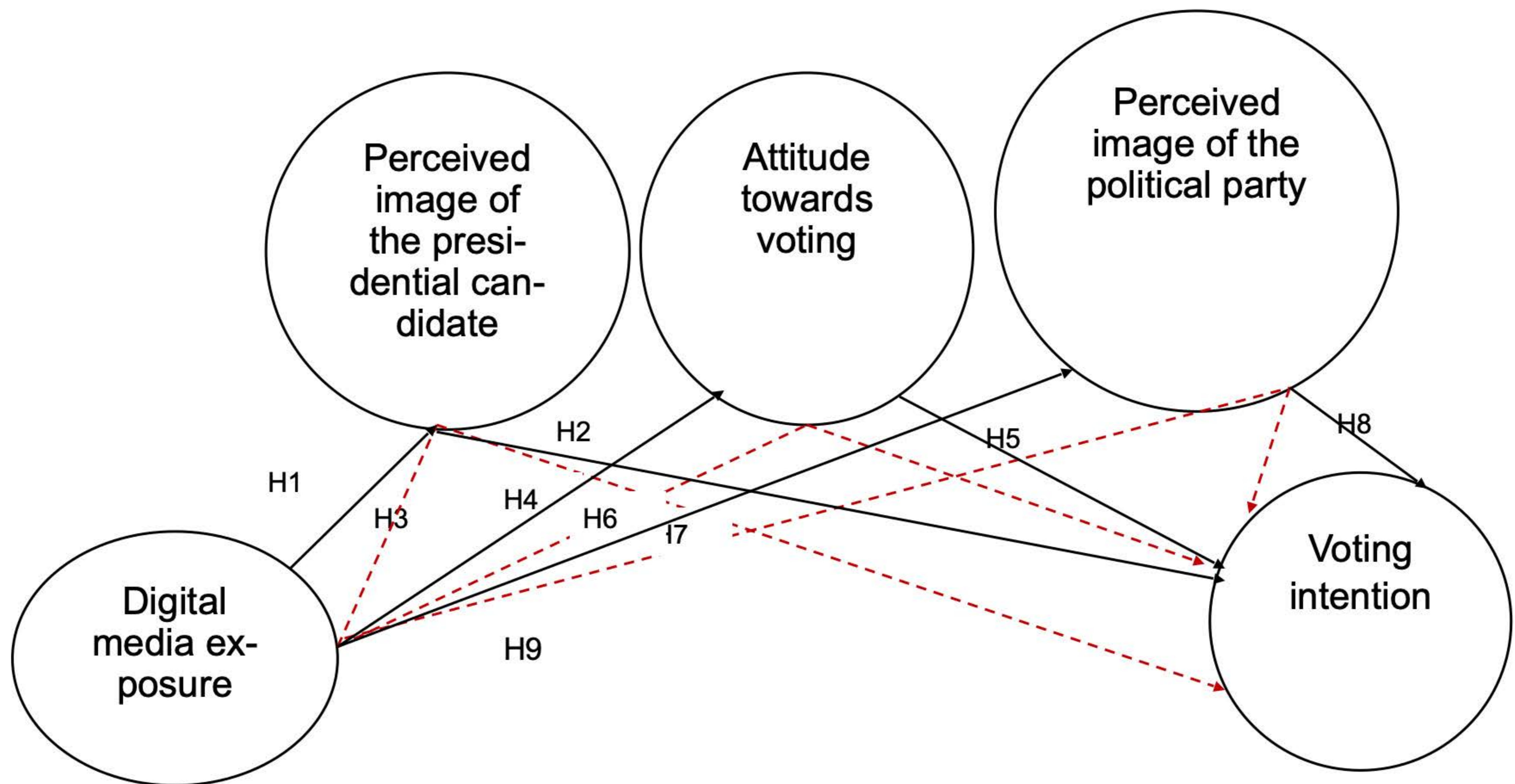


Figure 1: Conceptual model

2.2 DIGITAL MEDIA EXPOSURE AND ATTITUDE TOWARDS VOTING

Media exposure's most powerful effect is that it spreads information to a large audience rapidly. The fact that media can alter the behaviour of beliefs is indisputable, though most of the effects are small and cumulative, as tiny bits of information are added up (Qader & Zainuddin, 2011). Repetition of a message, its ultimate consistency and apparent corroboration can facilitate a shift in public opinion in the long term, thereby assisting in changing attitudes and behaviours in various contexts. Previous research findings have supported a positive linkage between digital media and voting attitudes (Chiang & Knight, 2011). Similarly, in this study, it is expected that exposure to digital media will influence attitude towards voting (Dimitrova et al., 2014). Thus, based on the discussion above and empirical evidence, this study posits that:

H5: Attitude towards voting has a direct and significant effect on voting intention.

2.4 DIGITAL MEDIA EXPOSURE AND PERCEIVED IMAGE OF THE POLITICAL PARTY

Media provides an opportunity to voter-consumers to access political information and analyse the programs and manifestos presented and propagated by the different political parties (as brands) and candidates during the election campaign (Wang et al., 2012). Similarly, media is expected to provide voter-customers with information on the political parties' functional capabilities that the voters will use as heuristics in their voting decision making. The media informs consumers of the brand's functional capabilities while concurrently imbuing the brand with symbolic values and meanings relevant to the consumer. Therefore, based on the aforementioned discussion and empirical evidence, this study posits that:

H6: Attitude towards voting mediates the digital media exposure and voting intention relationship.

H7: Digital media exposure has a direct and significant effect on the perceived image of a political party.

2.5 PERCEIVED IMAGE OF THE POLITICAL PARTY AND VOTING INTENTION

According to Lee and Tan (2003) brand image is often reflected by perceptions about the brand and brand associations held in a consumer's memory. Therefore, the more favourable the brand image, the more positive the feeling consumers will have towards the political brand (Bennetta, Charmine & McColl-Kennedy, 2005). The underlying factor of interpersonal trust functions as an activator towards political opinion and voting behaviour (Chirumbolo, Leone & Desimoni, 2016). Self-generated beliefs about the political party as a brand are developed in each consumer-voter's mind through controlled signaling and other uncontrollable information that the consumer receives about the brand and that shapes the evaluation of the brand or the brand reputation. Previous research findings have supported a positive linkage between political brand image and voting intentions (e.g. Ajzen, 2011; Arcuri et al., 2008). Similarly, in the current study, it is expected that the more positive the attitudes of consumers toward a political party, the stronger would be their intentions to search for information about the party. As such, if the information gathered is positive, it is likely to evoke positive emotions towards the political party, providing voters with a justification to either vote or not vote (Wojcieszak et al., 2016). Thus, based on the aforementioned discussion and empirical evidence this study posits that:

H8: Perceived image of the political party has a direct and significant effect on voting intention.

H9: The perceived image of the political party mediates the digital media exposure and voting intention relationship.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION

The target population for the study comprises all eligible voters in Zimbabwe. According to the Zimbabwe Constitution, only those above the age of 18 years are eligible to vote, hence the respondents are expected to be 18 years and above. In this study the research sampling frame was the national census database of Zimbabwe. The sampling unit was the individual voter-consumer. The population from which data was collected includes a proportion of males and females within different age bands, in urban, rural and mixed areas. In the study, since the sampling frame data are considered comprehensive and can be easily divided into strata based on demographic details and on geographic areas (urban, rural and mixed), a proportional stratified sampling technique for the distribution of questionnaires was used. Using systematic sampling, four out of ten provinces were selected, Harare, Masvingo, Mashonaland Central, and Bulawayo. Each of the selected provinces is stratified into districts: Harare – four (4) districts; Masvingo – seven (7) districts, Bulawayo – five (5) districts; Mashonaland Central – nine (9) districts and the number of respondents apportioned proportionally to each province. According to data from the National Central Statistical Office, Zimbabwe had a total of 6 295 517 people in the 18 and above age band, inclusive of those who turned 18 years in 2016 (Zimbabwe Inter-censal Demographic Survey, 2017). Based on these population statistics, 3 617 963 males and 3 147 759 females constituted the research population. Research assistants were recruited to distribute and collect the questionnaires in the different areas designated in the research. Of the 350 questionnaires distributed, 302 usable self-administered questionnaires were retrieved for the final data analysis, representing a response rate of 87%. To eliminate differences in response patterns due to different reference points, all respondents were prompted to answer the questionnaire with reference to digital media and voting.

3.2 MEASUREMENT INSTRUMENT AND QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

Research scales were operationalised on the basis of previous work. Proper modifications were made in order to fit the current research context and purpose. “Website exposure” used a seven-item scale adopted from a previous study by Foot and Schneider (2006); “social network exposure” used a 16-item scale (Hoffman & Novak, 2012), and “online news” used an 8-item scale (Gasser et al., 2012). “Perceived image of the presidential candidate” used a 9-item scale adopted from Cwalina, Falkowski & Kaid, 2005. “Attitude towards voting” was measured using a 9-item scale adopted from Ajzen (2001). “Perceived image of the political party” adopted a 10-item scale from Kapferer (2004). Finally, “voting intentions” used a 4-item scale adopted from Ajzen and Fishbein (1975) and a 5-item scale from the works of Levy and Gend-Guterman (2012) and a 2-item scales adapted from Glynn, Huges and Lunney (2009). All measurement

items were measured on a 5-point Likert-scale and the scale indicators were affixed to a strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7) Likert-scale continuum.

3.3 RESPONDENT PROFILE

The profile indicates that more than half of the participants were below the age of thirty-five (35) while two fifths were below the age of fifty-four (54) and the minority of them was above fifty-five (55) years of age (Table 1). Fifty-seven percent (57%) of the participants had an educational level above diploma level (certificate qualification lower than a degree); and forty-three percent (43%) had an educational level below diploma level. The analysis further indicates that the majority of the participants live in urban areas with a frequency of 72% while the remaining 28% live in either rural area or in peri-urban areas, classified in the study as mixed areas. On the type of media frequently used, the analysis indicated that the majority, representing 68% of the respondents, use online media as their source of current news and information while 32.4% indicated radio and television as their main source of current affairs and information. On voter registration fifty-nine percent (59%) of the participants were registered voters while forty-one percent (41%) were not registered to vote despite being above eighteen years.

Table 1: Sample demographic characteristics

Educational level			Age		
	Frequency	%		Frequency	%
Primary school	16	5.3	≤ 18-24years	72	23.8
High school	113	37.4	25 -34years	84	27.8
Diploma	81	26.8	35 -44years	76	25.2
Degree	75	24.8	45-54years	53	17.5
Postgraduate degree	17	5.6	55years≤	17	5.6
Total	302	100	Total	302	100
Geographic location			Gender		
	Frequency	%		Frequency	%
Urban	217	71.9	Male	166	55
Rural	44	14.6	Female	136	45
Mixed	41	13.6	Total	302	100
Total	302	100			

Employment status			Media most frequently used		
	Frequency	%		Frequency	%
Student	66	21.9	Social media	131	43.4
Employed	91	30.1	internet	73	24.2
Self Employed	62	20.5	Radio	26	8.6
Unemployed	83	27.5	TV	72	23.8
Total	302	100	Total	302	100

4. DATA ANALYSIS

In the current study, a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach using Smart partial least squares (PLS) statistical software (Chin, 2001) was employed to test the postulated hypotheses in the conceptual model.

4.1 MEASUREMENT MODEL

The researchers checked the reliability and validity of the measurements. Reliability was mainly checked using composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach’s α values. To ensure convergent validity, the researchers checked if items loaded on their respective (a priori) constructs with loadings greater than 0.5, while discriminant validity was checked by the average variance extracted (AVE) value, ensuring that there were no significant inter-research variable cross-loadings (Chin, 2001). Smart PLS achieves a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (Table 2) while estimating the structural model (SEM) (Table 4).

Table 2: Accuracy analysis statistics

Sub-construct	No. of items	Item mean value	SD	Cronbach’s α value	CR value	AVE	rho_A
DMX Website Social network On-line news	7 16 8	3.12	1.94	0.958	0.960	0.491	0.961
PPC Perception Personal characteristics Personal traits	2 7 7	5.2	1.56	0.944	0.954	0.603	0.954

ATV	9	5.05	1.88	0.871	0.906	0.659	0.876
PP	10	2.6	1.63	0.851	0.909	0.768	0.870
VI	10	5.57	1.68	0.943	0.955	0.779	0.946

Notes: DMEX=Digital media exposure; PPC=Perceived image of the presidential candidate; ATV=Attitude towards voting; PI=Perceived image of the political party; VI=Voting Intention. Scores: 1-Strongly Disagree, 4-Neutral, 7- Strongly Agree.

Model of fit improved with the deletion of three indicators from perceived image of the presidential candidate, four indicators of attitude towards voting, seven indicators of perceived image of the political party, four indicators of voting intention and three indicators of digital media exposure. All items have loadings greater than 0.6 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), indicating that they explain at least 60% of their expected measure (convergent validity). The lowest AVE value is 0.491 which is above the recommended threshold of 0.4 (Fraering & Minor, 2006), indicating the existence of discriminant validity. To guarantee sufficient discriminant validity between the research constructs, the square root of the AVE of each factor should exceed the correlations between that factor and all other factors (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In this study, the least squared root of AVE is 0.700 while the highest inter-construct correlation value is 0.708, further confirming the existence of discriminant validity. The measurement instrument's reliability was assessed using the CR value and Cronbach's α value, indicating 0.906 and 0.851 as the lowest values, therefore exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Overall, these results confirm the reliability and validity of the measurement used in the study (Table 3).

Table 3: Inter-construct correlation matrix

Research con-structs	ATV	DMEX	PP	PPC	VI
ATV	1.000				
DMEX	0.467	1.000			
PP	0.561	0.427	1.000		
PPC	0.629	0.403	0.680	1.000	
VI	0.708	0.441	0.503	0.618	1.000

Notes: DMEX=Digital media exposure; PPC=Perceived image of the presidential candidate; ATV=Attitude towards voting; PI=Perceived image of the political party; VI=Voting Intention.

Smart PLS software provides only R² values for the dependent variables. Since Smart PLS software does not provide goodness-of-fit (GoF) measures for the full path model like LISREL and AMOS, a global GoF statistic (Amato et al., 2004) was used. The GoF statistic method considers both the quality of the measurement model and the structural model (Tenenhaus et al., 2005; Streukens, 2008). The global GoF statistic was calculated using the following equation:

$$\text{GoF} = \sqrt{\text{AVE} \times \text{R}^2}$$

Where:

AVE represent the average of all AVE values for the research variables, while

R² represents the average of all R² values in the full path model.

The calculated global GoF is 0.384, exceeding the threshold of GoF > 0.36 (Wetzels et al., 2009). This indicates that the model has a large prediction power compared to the baseline values (GoF criteria). This finding adequately validates the complex PLS model globally. Thus, this study concludes that the research model provides an overall good fit.

5. HYPOTHESES TESTING

The results in Table 4 provide support for five unmediated hypotheses except one: hypothesis H8.

Table 4: Results of structural equation model analysis-direct relationship

Proposed hypothesis relationship	Hypothesis	Path coefficient	P-value	t-statistics	Decision
DMEX → PPC	H1	0.403	0.000	5.166	Supported
PPC → VI	H2	0.265	0.022	2.294	Supported
DMEX → ATV	H4	0.467	0.000	6.349	Supported
ATV → VI	H5	0.491	0.000	4.518	Supported
DMEX → PI	H7	0.427	0.000	5.626	Supported
PI → VI	H8	0.003	0.978	0.027	Rejected

Notes: DMEX=Digital media exposure; PPC=Perceived image of the presidential candidate; ATV=Attitude towards voting; PI=Perceived image of the political party; VI=Voting Intention. *p < 0.01, **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.000 two-tail

H1 posited a positive relationship between digital media exposure and perceived image of the presidential candidate while *H4* postulated a positive association between digital media exposure and attitude towards voting, *H7* predicated a positive relationship between digital media exposure and perceived image of the political party. Consistent with *H1*, *H4* and *H7*, our results indicated that higher levels of digital media exposure will lead to high levels of perceived image of the presidential candidate ($\beta = 0.403$, $p < 0.00$), attitude towards voting ($\beta = 0.467$, $p < 0.000$) and perceived image of the political party ($\beta = 0.427$, $p < 0.00$).

The standardised coefficient of perceived image of the presidential candidate and voting intention (0.265 , $p < 0.05$) is positive and significant. This is consistent with the prediction of *H2* and is supported. Therefore, a higher level of perceived image of the presidential candidate is associated with higher levels of voting intention.

The standardised coefficient of attitude towards voting and voting intention ($\beta = 0.491$, $p < 0.000$) is positive and significant. This is consistent with the prediction of *H5* and is supported. Thus, a higher level of attitude towards voting is associated with higher levels of voting intention. Finally, research results reject *H8* ($\beta = 0.003$, $p < 0.05$) (Table 2) and posit that perceived image of the political party does not exert any influence on voting intention.

With the exception of perceived image of the political party-voting intention relationship (*H8*) whose t-statistic is 0.027, the minimum t-statistic is 2.294 and therefore exceeds the recommended threshold of 2. This means that all the posited positive relationships are supported; *H8* is rejected and is statistically insignificant. Therefore, the statistical significance of all the posted relationships is confirmed except *H8*.

The R^2 values for the respective endogenous variables are 0.558, 0.182, 0.218 and 0.162 respectively, which suggest that the modelled variables can explain 55.8% of voting intention, 18.2% of perceived image of the political party, 21.8% of attitude towards voting and 16.2% of perceived image of the presidential candidate.

In addition, the Q^2 values for voting intention ($Q^2 = 0.429$); perceived image of the presidential candidate ($Q^2 = 0.098$), attitude towards voting ($Q^2 = 0.179$), and perceived image of the political party ($Q^2 = 0.175$) are all greater than the value of 0, suggesting that the model has predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2013).

5.1 TESTS FOR MEDIATION

In addition to the direct effect of construct, mediated effects of the construct through three mediating constructs are investigated. To test for the mediating effect of perceived image of the presidential candidate, attitude towards voting and perceived image of the political party the study performed percentile bootstrap confidence interval (Hayes, 2013) as well as the causal step approach to testing mediation which relies on regression analysis, as suggested by Judd

and Kenny (1981). See Table 5.

Table 5: Testing for mediation effect among variables

Relation- ships	Pat h 'a'	Pat h 'b'	Indi- rect effect	To- tal ef- fect	Std Er- ror	t- val ue	p- val ue	Boot- strapped confi- dence in- terval		VA F	%age propor- tion Media- tion
								Low er	Up- per		
(H3) DMEX→PPC →VI	0.2 79	0.5 92	0.165	0.55 2	0.8 5	3.06 9	0.00 3	0.09 3	0.40 8	0.7 01	70.1%
(H6) DMEX→ATV →VI	0.4 26	0.6 26	0.267	0.65 4	0.0 79	1.86 9	0.06 4	-.00 9	0.30 3	0.5 92	59.2%
(H9) DMEX→PI→ VI	0.1 62	0.8 75	0.142	0.52 9	0.0 81	3.33 8	0.00 1	0.10 9	0.42 8	0.7 32	73.2%

Notes: DMEX=Digital media exposure; PPC=Perceived image of the presidential candidate; ATV=Attitude towards voting; PI=Perceived image of the political party; VI=Voting Intention *p < 0.01); p**p < 0.05 (1.645); ***p < 0.001 two-tailed

The bootstrap result for *H3* displays an indirect effect $\beta = 0.165$ (0.279*0.592), which is significant with a t-value of 3.069. If the indirect effect 0.165, at 95% bootstrapped confidence interval: [Lower = 0.093; Upper = 0.408] is non-zero, then the mediation is partial (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Therefore, we can conclude that the presidential candidate's perceived image mediates the digital media exposure and voting intention relationship. To confirm the findings, variance accounted for (VAF) was used to determine the mediating effect's strength. Perceived image of the presidential candidate as a mediator, the ratio of indirect to direct effect (0.165/0.387) generated 43% and the proportion of indirect effect to total effect (0.165/0.552) generated 30%. Thus, *H3* is supported. Next, the bootstrapping result for *H6* displaying an indirect effect $\beta = 0.267$ (0.426*0.626) was insignificant with a t-value of 1.869, which is below the threshold of 1.96. The indirect effect 0.267, at 95% bootstrapped confidence interval I: [Lower = -.009; Upper = 0.303] includes a zero on the upper-level confidence interval. However, using variance accounted for, the ratio, attitude towards voting as a mediator, the ratio of indirect to direct effect (0.267/0.387) generated 69% and the proportion of indirect effect to total effect (0.267/0.654) generated 40%.

Therefore, we can conclude that voting attitude mediates the relationship between digital media exposure and voting intention. Thus, *H6* is supported. Next, the bootstrapping result for *H9* displaying an indirect effect $\beta = 0.142$ (0.162×0.875) is significant with a t-value of 3.338. The indirect effect 0.142 at 95% confidence interval: [Lower = 0.109; Upper = 0.428] is non zero, indicating partial mediation. For perceived image of the political party as a mediator, the ratio of indirect to direct effect ($0.142/0.387$) generated 37% and the proportion of indirect effect to total effect ($0.142/0.529$) generated 27%. Hence, we conclude that the political party's perceived image mediates the digital media exposure-voting intention relationship. Therefore, *H9* is supported. VAF for all relationships were above 20% but lower than 80%, therefore indicating partial mediation (Hair et al., 2013).

6. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The rationale behind this study was to investigate the influence of digital media exposure on perceived image of the presidential candidate, attitude towards voting, perceived image of the political party and subsequently voting intention. Significant to note about the study findings is the fact that digital media exposure has stronger effects on attitude towards voting (0.467) than on perceived image of the presidential candidate (0.403) and perceived image of the political party (0.427). The study found that the political party's perceived image does not exert influence on voting intention (0.003). The insignificant relationship between perceived image of the political party and voting intention may be explained by the fact that consumers are likely to develop primary and secondary brand associations based on political brand marketing stimuli such as publicity and marketing communication.

This study demonstrates that digital media exposure affects attitudes and voting intention positively. However, exposure also positively affected the perceived image of the presidential candidate. Overall, this suggests that the relationships between digital media exposure and attitudes and perceptions are positive. Accordingly, a political party's reputation affects perceptions of the value and integrity of the party products. Based on the mediation effect calculations, it can be concluded that the presidential candidate's perceived image, attitude towards voting, and perceived image of the political party serve as partial mediators of the link between digital media exposure and voting intention. By implication, this finding indicates that digital media exposure can have a strong influence on voting intention mediated by leader perception, party perception and attitude towards voting.

6.1 IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

Overall, it is anticipated that the results of this empirical research will provide both academics and political marketing practitioners with prolific implications. From an academic view, this research contributes significantly to consumer behaviour literature. This study's findings provide tentative assistance for the suggestion that digital media exposure, perceived image of the presidential candidate, attitude towards voting and perceived image of the political party

should be recognised as critical factors influencing voting decision making. Marketers can gain consumer confidence by enhancing consumer perception of the political brand image through digital media interaction.

6.2 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Attitudes and perceptions are key variables in the discussion of the role of the media in the voting process. The relevance, conceptualisation, and measurement of media exposure is subject to critical scrutiny (e.g., Slater, 2004) and there is disagreement on how to operationalise and measure both knowledge and participation. Slater (2004) argues that the use of global self-report measures of media demonstrates the imprecision of measurement due to the inevitable uncertainty concerning the exact nature of the media's pertinent content to which respondents are exposed. Finally; this study stresses the importance of considering behavioural intention as a dependent as well as an independent variable. While the media can influence behaviour, both media exposure and brand attitudes affect political participation. This highlights the dual role of the digital media in engaging the public in politics.

Despite the usefulness of this study, the research has its limitations. The study can be significantly strengthened by increasing the sample size and including participants in other geographical areas. Second, the current study was limited to Zimbabwe. For comparison of results, consequent research should envisage replicating this study in other developing countries. The present study did not examine such factors as social imagery, current events and political affiliation. Future studies should focus on antecedents and their potential effects on political participation. Overall, these suggested future avenues of study stand to contribute greatly to the existing body of political marketing literature in Africa – a context often neglected by researchers in developing countries.

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