

# FACEBOOK IMAGE-MAKING IN ZIMBABWE'S 2018 ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

## *Social Media and Emerging Trends in Political Marketing*

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### ABSTRACT

*This article explores changing political communication and marketing trends in Zimbabwe when presidential candidates used Facebook to reach out, largely to the youth and urban voters, during the 2018 election campaign. Recent studies have identified the power of social media as a platform on which politicians portray images that convince the electorate to vote for them. These images can be created through the photographs, video footage and texts that politicians post on their Facebook pages. The study employed a qualitative approach to establish the role played by political imagery used by contesting parties and candidates in the campaign period ahead of the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe, in particular the frontrunners and larger political parties. MDC-Alliance presidential candidate Nelson Chamisa and Zanu-PF candidate Emmerson Mnangagwa were both serious contenders for the presidency. The analysis sheds light on the implications of image-making and modern political trends in Zimbabwe and how Facebook manages to reach out to the targeted electorate.*

**Keywords:** political marketing, social media, image-making, online politicking, Zimbabwe

### INTRODUCTION

Since its independence from Britain in 1980, election campaigns in Zimbabwe have been conducted mainly through offline platforms and print and electronic

media. However, these forms of political communication have been largely stifled by state interference. The state-controlled media have been tightly controlled by the ruling party, former liberation movement Zimbabwe African People's Union Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF), while the opposition parties have found a space in the independent media to disseminate political communication. Apart from interference by state security agents and ruling party officials, offline campaigns and the use of both print and electronic media have often attracted huge costs for the contesting candidates and political parties. The use of social media for election campaigns ahead of the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe thus offered political candidates and parties an equal chance to portray favourable images to the voters. This paper seeks to establish how social media, particularly Facebook, fill the void created by offline campaign forums; and traditional media's failure to offer contesting parties and candidates an equal opportunity to market their political brand.

#### THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN ZIMBABWE'S 2018 ELECTIONS

Zimbabwe's 2018 election campaign period was relatively peaceful. Instead of resorting to violence, intimidation, coercion and hate speech, political parties seized the opportunity offered by social media to turn that campaign into a marketplace of ideas whereby they would engage with and mobilise citizens to support their political parties as the best brand. As a result of partisan behaviour by the state media, opposition political parties did not receive fair coverage, so they resorted to social media to market their political party activities.

The Global Political Agreement (GPA) of September 2009 brought the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) led by Morgan Tsvangirai into a power-sharing transitional government. This produced a political road map that was meant to guarantee a free and fair electoral environment during the 2013 elections. However, Zanu-PF deliberately delayed implementing the 2013 constitution which guarantees media plurality and diversity, and as a result the 2018 elections were held under the old legislation.

A few independent radio licenses were issued in 2013 to Zi-FM, Star FM and some community radio stations. However, this was merely a cosmetic implementation of the GPA as research established that the owners of these independent radio stations had links with the ruling party. By controlling the media space, the ruling party Zanu-PF consistently used the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) to glorify itself and vilify its opponents. Zimbabweans who had grown tired of listening to relentlessly pro-Zanu-PF propaganda on ZBC resorted to social media to find alternative sources of information.

### *The Advent and Influence of Social Media*

The exponential rise in mobile phone penetration rates in Zimbabwe since the inception of the Government of National Unity (GNU) in 2009 has provided a powerful discursive platform for ordinary citizens to engage in political, commercial, or social communication. The advantage of technology-based applications such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and many more social media applications is that they have the power to gather large amounts of data quickly from thousands of participants (Leo, Morello, Mellon, Peixoto & Davenport 2015). Previous elections in Zimbabwe indicated that the youth, particularly those living in urban areas, showed signs of fatigue in political participation because of allegations of vote rigging and human rights violations in every election from 2000 up to the 2013 polls. The 2013 election campaigns targeted mainly youth voters on social media. These millennials born after 1992 have grown up in an era of technological innovation so they are tech-savvy, having high levels of confidence with technological advancements and innovation. The public sphere offered by social media is a significant communication platform for them and this discursive space empowers them to influence politics in a different way.

Leo et al. (2015) observed that the most popular social networking sites in Zimbabwe are Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter, with the youth spending hours on these sites discussing anything from fashion and gossip to sport, religion and music. By removing the youth from serious engagement with issues that affect their lives, social media is cultivating political apathy among this Zimbabwean demographic (ibid.). However, ahead of the 2013 elections there was a major shift and political players targeted youth voters through marketing strategies on the same popular social media platforms.

Zimbabwean politics was partly inspired by the American presidential campaign in which Barak Obama's campaign team succeeded in using social media to mobilise, involve and empower voters. Obama's social media campaign enlisted supporters, shared information, constantly updated citizens on developments and encouraged genuine conversations without the bias of political campaigns. The trust and confidence elicited by this approach resulted in victory for the Democrats in both the 2008 and 2012 US elections (Hong & Nadler 2012).

Social media became an increasingly popular political marketing and campaign tool ahead of the 2013 elections. The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) led by its founding leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, split in 2009. The then Secretary General Welshman Ncube led a splinter MDC while Morgan Tsvangirai rebranded the remaining larger fraction of the party, MDC-T (Tsvangirai). The opposition MDC-T, whose efforts to use state media during the campaign

period had been stifled by the partisan officials at the ZBC as well as in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, resorted to the use of Facebook to reach out to voters. The party's Facebook page, MDC-T, led by the late Morgan Tsvangirai attracted over 1, 2 million followers. On this platform, the party had the opportunity to engage citizens on a range of issues such as their election manifesto, campaign programmes and messages, photos and videos of campaign rallies, and political regalia.

### *Social Media, Political Campaigns and the 2018 Elections*

In the run-up to the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe political parties and candidates did not only rely on traditional media; they used social media as a platform to market both the political party and the politician as a brand.

The ability of social media to bring together political communities reflects the fact that information and communication technologies (ICTs) are seen as alternative public spheres. They are able not only to bypass restrictive state and corporate mainstream media, but also have the capacity to overcome the limits of time and space (McCaughy & Ayers 2003). Ahead of the so-called harmonised elections in 2018, which included presidential, parliamentary and local government elections, MDC-T created a Facebook page as part of their online campaign strategies to communicate directly with citizens.

While Zanu-PF was not visible on Facebook, some of its influential politicians like Professor Jonathan Moyo, the Minister of Information, Media and Broadcasting, were active on Twitter, attracting the participation of Zimbabweans across the political divide. By using social media, the parties sought to include the youth, using the language of young people to inspire robust political discourse. During the entire election campaign period, the number of followers and quality of political discussions were vital for politicians across the spectrum as they offered insights with which to gauge the general attitudes of young voters.

For the majority of users whose confidence in the polarised landscape of the traditional media had diminished, social media platforms offered more accessibility to political information, which was perceived as being personal, genuine and transparent. However, the outcome of the 2018 elections was not entirely influenced by social media because several factors limited voter freedoms through draconian legislation such as the Public Order and Security Act (POSA). This authoritarian legislation limited offline participation of voters, together with threats and arrests of social media users on allegations of undermining a constitutionally elected government. Other factors that limited the influence of social media on the Zimbabwean electorate, in particular youth voters, included the cost and lack of access to the smartphones used to access social media, the cost of accessing data, and low signal strength.

### *Scepticism About the Influence of Social Media on Elections*

Critics of social media such as Baumgartner & Morris (2010) argue that the credit given to social media for its role in creating and mobilising social movements has been exaggerated. Apart from disseminating political information and creating a platform for users to engage both among themselves and with the candidate, there has been no substantial claim about the ability of Facebook activity to transform into quantifiable political outcomes such as increased votes. A study of the political engagement of Facebook in the 2012 elections in the US revealed that simply following the candidate's Facebook page and subsequent posts did not necessarily increase voter turnout or the efficacy of the election itself (Pennington, Winfrey, Warner & Kearney 2015).

The explanation provided for the disconnection between online activity and political engagement is that many may consider political information derived from online interaction to be less credible than information from offline interaction (Kushin & Yamamoto 2010). While acknowledging that many young Zimbabwean voters and urbanites are increasingly active on social media, the traditional offline methods of political marketing remain highly influential. Baumgartner & Morris (2010) suggest that social media do not increase participants' political engagement with the election itself, and that the political participation of many users seems to be strictly confined to online activity. Aouragh (2011) opines that online tactics must be complimented with other offline techniques. Kenya's presidential election on 8 August 2017 produced one important finding: that when it comes to political change, the efficacy of social media, including Facebook, is far from certain because active online participation does not automatically translate into politically meaningful behaviour (Bing 2015). Instead, the key variables that impact politics are the 'societal contexts and arrangements around the technology' (Lim 2012, p. 638). Through Facebook, political parties could reach a wider public and bring out news more freely than is possible through traditional media.

The success of civic resistance demonstrations against a declining economy under former president Robert Mugabe, such as the #Zimshutdown2016, has been largely credited to social media for their ability to rally protesters together online. However, the majority of citizens continued to rely on traditional media for reliable information about the protests (Sabao & Chikara 2018). Fenton (2011) argues that online platforms may offer citizens the opportunity to organise, campaign, and increase political participation; but as these platforms are victim to civic privatism resulting in dispersed and fragmented groups unlikely to muster enough power to influence, the changes they seek remain a substantial challenge. Faris (2010) argues that social media networks can trigger information cascades through their interaction with independent media outlets.

### *Internet Access in Zimbabwe*

In 2013, Zimbabwe opted for so-called harmonised elections which were held in a comparatively tolerant media environment, in contrast to the violent elections of 2000, 2002, 2005 and 2008. This relatively peaceful campaign environment was made possible by the GNU signed in 2009 between Zanu-PF and the two MDC formations led respectively by Morgan Tsvangirai and Professor Arthur Mutambara. The GNU was a SADC-initiated transitional government with the mandate to bring stability to Zimbabwe's dire political and economic situation, after Mugabe's one-man election in the run-off was discredited by local, regional and international election observer missions.

The introduction of the multi-currency system composed largely of the American dollar and the South African rand, coupled with the country's Look-East policy (trade relations with Asian countries), saw a flood of mobile technology gadgets such as cell phones and laptops. Therefore, the relative economic stability that came with the GNU offered many Zimbabweans an opportunity to acquire phones at reasonably affordable prices. According to the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ 2018), by 2018 Zimbabwe had a total of 6 759 032 internet subscribers and an internet penetration rate of 12.7%. The growing use of the internet by ordinary citizens, particularly urban and youth, offered presidential candidates an opportunity to engage with them online, mainly through Facebook. According to POTRAZ (2018), during the official campaign period from May to 29 July 2018, official figures about social media usage indicate that Facebook was the second most popular social networking site after WhatsApp with an estimate of 3 200 000 active subscribers. This platform thus became a convenient public sphere where presidential candidates would connect with their voters, giving them information and feedback about campaign rallies and campaign messages.

### *Image-making in Zimbabwean Politics*

Political image-making has been defined as the strategic development and use of 'symbolic devices, which can be constructed with both visual and verbal messages, that provide a shorthand cue to audiences for the identification and enhancement of specific attributes of an individual, an organization, a phenomenon, or a cause' (Strachan & Kendall 2004, p. 135). Offline social media users can become offline agents to spread the popularity of political candidate.

Through maintaining visibility on Facebook, political parties and candidates were able to compete and offer the electorate an opportunity to appreciate them based on the imagery they presented. The significance of public image on election

campaigns has been outlined by Strachan & Kendall (2004, p. 135) who suggest that the broader goal of political image-making is to generate, maintain, sharpen, and strengthen favourable perceptions among members of the public in order to affect their personal political attitudes and, by extension, decision-making in strategic ways. Newman (1999, p. 92) observes that an image is often 'created through the use of visual impressions that are communicated by the candidate's physical presence, media appearances, experiences and record as that information is integrated into the minds of citizens'. During the 2018 presidential campaign period, neither presidential candidate had ever contested those positions previously. Through Facebook both Zanu-PF and MDC-T managed to disseminate favourable images about their candidates' messages and political activities in real time and to a wider audience.

Bennett (2016) further unpacks political image-making by isolating a key mechanism which consists of developing simple images, usually targeting narrow slices of the public ('image shaping'). The simplicity of political images is critical as it makes them more likely to be 'emotionally and intellectually accessible' to their target audience (Bennett 2016, p. 109). Lalancette and Raynauld (2017) contend that political images can also optimise the politicians' ability to penetrate and shape the traditional media coverage of politics which ultimately has more impact, as evidenced by recent research on sound- and image-bite politics.

Both contesting presidential candidates Nelson Chamisa and Emmerson Mnangagwa used Facebook to reach out to the online community and use them as offline agents to spread their political image. Campaigns for the 2018 presidential campaign were uploaded on Facebook as a way of reaching out to the youth and urban vote. Both Zanu-PF and MDC Alliance posts on their presidential candidates sought to portray them as the ideal candidates to take Zimbabwe forward. In Zimbabwe's 2018 elections, ordinary citizens were interested in bread-and-butter issues, so political parties posted pictures of their presidential candidates engaged in activities that indicated their potential to transform the economy of Zimbabwe.

The media landscape in Zimbabwe is polarised, with the state media openly showing a bias towards Zanu-PF, as highlighted in the European Union Observer mission report for 2018 elections. The opposition MDC-Alliance were more robust in exploiting Facebook for political marketing and communication in order to address their absence from the state media. In a political context, situational political involvement is a point of entrance into the political process, as the involved voter is more motivated to seek out information, which in turn leads to knowledge gain (Tan 1980) and voting intent (Pinkleton & Austin 2001). Prior research done by Wells and Dudash (2007) suggests that attention to social media is positively associated with situational political involvement, because social media offer users new channels for political information.

In using Facebook for political marketing in a political environment where there is increased competition between an expanding pool of political players with varying interests and objectives, image-making can help by creating images that are straightforward, coherent, and salient across all the communication platforms through which they are circulated. By repeatedly emphasising clear and specific points as well as benefitting from high visibility, political images can have greater and more consistent effects on audience members (Bennett 2016). This study notes that while several scholars have explored the role of Facebook in political communication and marketing, particularly in mature democracies, much more research is needed to understand African electoral environments.

### *Online Political Communication: Regional Experiences*

The use of new media in southern African elections has significantly increased as a growing number of citizens are using the android mobile phone which allows them to access the internet. Success stories of the use of online political communication have been noted in recent elections held in Botswana and Kenya. The campaign period for the 2014 general election in Botswana was arguably the most hotly contested election in the history of that country's democracy, as political parties and contesting candidates reached out to the predominantly young voters by using social media. According to Masilo & Seabo (2014) this extensive use of social media, in particular Facebook, added a new dimension to the campaigns. Candidates did not have to rely on traditional media to communicate with the electorate; their messages could be delivered undiluted and in real time. Opposition parliamentary candidate Ndaba Gaolathe had his own Facebook page called 'Ndaba Gaolathe-Gaborone Bonnington South 2014'. By 22 September 2014 this page had accumulated more than 8 000 likes (Masilo & Seabo 2014). The candidate was able to connect with the electorate through sharing campaign messages, updates on rallies through audios, videos, texts and pictures, and contact phone numbers in order to enhance a two-way communication with the electorate.

Kenya has had hotly contested elections in the last decade which have often become violent. One interesting aspect of these elections is the use of social media as a campaign tool. In Kenya's 2013 general elections, Ndavula & Mueni (2014) note the centrality of branding and campaign messages during online campaigns. Presidential candidate Raila Odinga included a photo of his running mate Kalonzo Musyoka in the cover shot (Ndavula & Mueni 2014), and one of the explanations for Odinga's defeat has been attributed to this inclusion of an unsmiling Musyoka, which could have been negatively perceived by keen observers. The presidential candidates also packaged their campaign messages in a way designed to lure the youth vote. Ndavula and Mueni (2014) note that

one of the presidential candidates, Uhuru Kenyatta, presented himself mainly through Twitter and Facebook as a representative of the digital era, while Raila Odinga presented himself as a visionary and reformist. As indicated by the online political communication experiences of Botswana and Kenya, social media offered politicians and political parties a chance to reach a broad and diverse audience.

## THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

### *Habermas's Public Sphere*

Habermas's theory of public sphere is useful in understanding the interactive space offered by Facebook to political parties and candidates and the voters. Habermas (1989, p. 27) defines the public sphere as 'the sphere of private people who come together as a public'; that is, the public sphere is composed of private individuals brought together by societal interests that transcend the boundaries of their personal lives. Facebook users are seen as a community of interest as they follow presidential campaigns online, and not only as observers. This platform also offers them an opportunity to be both producers and consumers of content.

To understand the functional role of Facebook as a platform for political communication, the Habermas theory of public sphere can be used to answer the following questions: First, how does the public sphere theory explain the use of social media in Zimbabwe as a platform where politicians interact with voters? Second, how does this theory explain the power of social media in shaping a political candidate's image? Habermas's theory explains the centrality of the virtual discursive platform offered by Facebook to political parties and presidential candidates to gauge the public perceptions about them.

### *Theory of Planned Behaviour*

Political marketing has been generally referred to as the application of marketing principles and processes in political campaigns. The aim is to position the party and its leader positively in the political or electoral market to appeal to the electorate, thereby garnering votes for the party (Newman 2012). Political marketing considers voters as consumers whose needs and wants have to be satisfied (Ediraras, Rahayu, Natalina & Widya 2013). In order to capture the voters' hearts and minds, politicians used Facebook to communicate their promises to the voters and also receive voters' messages through the same platform.

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) explains why politicians across the globe have resorted to social media in order to galvanise support and influence public opinion. This theory aims to predict intentions and actions and suggests that attitudes, norms and ability predict behaviour (Nchise 2012). TPB has

assisted researchers of voting trends to understand the predictors of intention and behaviour. In addition, political marketing studies understand voters as consumers; consumer behaviour has thus found a place in voting studies because voting behaviour and decisions are shaped by a range of factors. These include demography, political party image, leadership and partisanship, government policies and performance, and public sentiment. The manner in which voters choose which political party to vote for can be compared to how consumers choose their purchases, which has been researched extensively.

### METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

This research has applied the qualitative research paradigm on the basis that it is more reliable in describing, interpreting and exploring the social world. As an interpretive research, this study hinges on the assumption that access to reality (given or socially constructed) is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness and shared meanings. The philosophical base of interpretive research is hermeneutics and phenomenology (Boland, 1985).

Interpretive studies do not believe that the way people behave and communicate can be predetermined and predicted. Therefore, when political parties and candidates use Facebook to market their ideology, manifestos and political brands, the Facebook platform allows them to have an interface with the electorate without having to be physically in the places where they reside. The choice of a constructivist research paradigm thus reflects what Walsham (1993) describes as an attempt to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them. An interpretive method of research is aimed at producing an understanding of the context of the information system, and the process whereby the information system influences and is influenced by the context.

#### *Virtual Ethnography*

This paper obtained data through virtual ethnography, which differs from conventional ethnography in that it involves no fieldwork. According to Dominguez, Beaulieu, Estalella, Gomez, Schnettler & Read (2007, p. 1) the label 'virtual ethnography' includes a broad range of methodological approaches aimed at answering the complexities of the object of research and the different ways in which the object has been constructed. Howard (2002) defines ethnography as the systematic description of human behaviour and organisational culture based on first-hand observation.

The proliferation of social media networks posed a new challenge to ethnographers to move away from the physical presence of the researcher to the virtual, where the researcher is a participant observer online. Ethnography is a

useful method for studying organisational behaviour and the social diffusion of new media technologies, but it is still a rigorous and demanding method in that the ethnographer has to give careful thought to the selection of real or virtual field sites (Howard 2002).

The Zimbabwean political landscape is dominated by polarised electronic and print media; but ahead of the 2018 elections social media registered a significant increase in usage, particularly as a political marketing platform. In order to understand the attitudes, feelings and perceptions of ordinary citizens towards presidential candidates, virtual ethnography allows the researcher to be embedded in the Facebook platform while playing a dual role of participant and observer.

Another advantage of virtual ethnography lies in it being centred on specific actors, and this has earned it a reputation for rendering rich description – narratives with historical depth and contextual perspective that trace social processes within groups (Howard 2002). Virtual ethnography gives a detailed narrative of the human rights violations shared as texts, audio or video accounts. The process of participant observation characteristic of virtual ethnography has an advantage in that it drops the reader into the social setting, revealing the mundane and everyday experiences of ordinary citizens (Bate 1997).

Social media has often been referred to as a subaltern space; therefore, political communication shared online is best observed and analysed through virtual ethnography. Ethnography allows the researcher to explore all the open-ended questions that cannot be asked in typical surveys, and these questions allow the researcher to delve into the culture of a new community (Howard 2002). Social media as a subaltern platform allow users to subvert the formal norms of communication, thereby finding independent space to tell stories about how members enter and experience the group, their images of the group, of winning and losing, being injured or surviving, as well as describing and discussing their perceptions about politicians and political parties. Ethnography therefore allows the researcher to discover culture and closely experience organisations (Fineman & Gabriel, 1996).

### *Purposeful Sampling*

The study employed purposeful sampling to obtain data. Yin (2011) defines purposeful sampling as the selection of participants or sources of data to be used in a study, based on their anticipated richness and the relevance of information in relation to the study's research questions. Patton (2015) describes purposeful sampling as a method whose logic and power lie in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. The current study's focus on unravelling the power of Facebook in political communication and marketing presidential candidates

ahead of Zimbabwe's 2018 elections is an information-rich case in which the Facebook posts of political parties and candidates offered citizens an opportunity to understand and interact with them. Much can be learnt from information-rich cases like these about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry (Patton 2015).

The study used qualitative methods to gather and analyse data. Unlike quantitative research where sufficiently large sample sizes are required to produce statistically precise quantitative estimates, smaller samples are used in qualitative research. Gentles, Charles, Ploeg & McKibbin (2015) suggest that accounts for the necessity of smaller samples in qualitative research. They argue that the general aim of sampling in qualitative research is to acquire information that is useful for understanding the complexity, depth, variation, or context surrounding a phenomenon, rather than to represent populations as in quantitative research. In order to determine the point when sufficient sample size has been reached, some qualitative researchers use saturation but other qualitative researchers like Cohen offer different view. Gentles et al. (2015) define saturation as reaching a point of informational redundancy where additional data collection contributes little or nothing new to the study.

Collection of data for the current study started on 1 March 2018 and continued to 30 July 2018. The sample size for this study has been relatively small for qualitative research, and Facebook posts related to particular themes discussed in this research were extracted for analysis. Following a hermeneutical tradition, data was collected intensely over four months. Three Facebook pages were observed and these include MDC-T, Zanu-PF Cape District and Nelson Chamisa Facebook platforms. One advantage of qualitative methods is that they allow researchers to expose how people build up culture from the bottom. Gentles et al. (2015) account for the necessity of smaller samples in qualitative research. They argue that the general aim of sampling in qualitative research is to acquire information that is useful for understanding the complexity, depth, variation, or context surrounding a phenomenon, rather than to represent populations as in quantitative research. Therefore, once there were enough Facebook posts that would speak to the thematic focus of this research, saturation was reached.

## ANALYSIS OF ZIMBABWE'S 2018 ELECTIONS

### *Qualitative Content Analysis*

In analysing data gathered on Facebook platforms, this study used qualitative content analysis. Outlining the stages of content analysis, Berelson (1971) suggests that these stages focus on the number of times a word, theme or issue emerges, and meaning is applied to that numerical data. The choice of content analysis

for this paper was appropriate considering that the study seeks to identify and explain lived human experiences. In conducting qualitative content analysis the first step is to define the source material. In this paper, this included declaring the particular Facebook pages from which data was to be gathered, how the sample was chosen and how the text to be analysed was generated (Mayring 2003). In the process of interpreting data, the paper was informed by scholarly views. According to Mayring (2003) there are three basic forms of interpretation in qualitative content analysis, namely summary, that is the reduction of the data; explication, by finding further material; and structuring, that is filtering important aspects from the data. This study therefore structured and filtered the relevant content from the Facebook texts on political communication by political parties and candidates and arranged them in thematic blocks.

### *Political Trajectory*

Alterations in the type of political information to which an individual is exposed leads to differences in the type of information processing.

In April 2018 Nelson Chamisa reconfigured the party as a revolutionary entity. His message on Independence Day, 18 April, shared on his Facebook and MDC-T Facebook platform, clearly demonstrated that apart from targeting the youth vote, MDC-Alliance also intended to win the rural vote. In addition, he hoped to win support from the liberation war veterans by assuring them that they would retain the liberation ideals of the country's war veterans and that he would deliver economic independence. His message redefined MDC-Alliance as a political movement with a vision to 'finish the unfinished business of the liberations struggle' and to be the 'compass of that struggle'. This new message differed from the negative image propagated mainly by the state media about the opposition MDC-T under the late leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, who was seen by some as an extension of the colonial hegemony.

On the other hand, Zanu-PF's presidential candidate Emerson Mnangagwa intended to portray himself as a clear departure from former President Robert Mugabe. He wanted to be seen as a reformist with business acumen who could turn around the economic fortunes of Zimbabwe. He was also keen to be seen as an extension of the revolutionary image associated with the former president so that he could speak to the war veterans and the rural voters, most of whom had benefitted from indigenisation programmes. His electoral campaigns were hinged mainly on the mantra, 'Zimbabwe is open for businesses'; therefore, Zanu-PF Cape District posted on Facebook all of Emmerson Mnangagwa's re-engagement activities. One of these posts depicted the president receiving Chinese investors in April 2018 for what were termed mega deals. This post was meant to

instil confidence in the ordinary people who had suffered more than a decade of economic stress under the leadership of the deposed Robert Mugabe.

President Mnangagwa wanted to be seen by both the domestic and foreign community as charting a new democratic path for Zimbabwe; thus, most of his Facebook posts presented the president attracting white communities both in Zimbabwe and abroad. On the other hand, Nelson Chamisa and MDC-T Facebook posts echoed the party's vision for social and economic prosperity hinged on technical advancement. The imagery echoed by Nelson Chamisa and MDC-T's Facebook posts were meant to excite the youth which accounted for the majority of the electorate.

### *Political Rallies and Images*

Through use of Facebook, both Zanu-PF and MDC-Alliance combined campaign messages with images of their party programmes, particularly rallies, in order to appeal to Facebook users. In politics, the electorate seldom vote for losers; projecting positive images of their political rallies filled to capacity with supporters was intended to create a sense of optimism in election victory. Both Zanu-PF and MDC-Alliance posted details on Facebook of their final rallies in the capital city, Harare, a few days before elections. Both posts carried messages of what the parties promised to deliver but portrayed different angles to the massive crowds in attendance at the rallies.

The contrasting images of young and old were central to marketing the presidential candidates. However, after the departure of Mugabe, one of the world's oldest presidents, Zimbabwean voters – particularly the younger generation – rejected elderly politicians at all levels, including both council and parliamentary elections. Against this background age became a defining feature of their presidential election. The MDC-Alliance Facebook platform presented the youthful image of their presidential candidate as the future of Zimbabwe. This image of Nelson Chamisa resonated well with their party manifesto and policy document which was based on ICT, and was synonymous with a generational transformation that would inspire the youth to vote for one of their own. Seeing a photograph of a politician is sufficient for constituents to make inferences about the candidate's characteristics, such as their level of competency, honesty, and warmth (Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall 2005).

Zanu-PF, on the other hand countered by presenting the youthful image of Nelson Chamisa as a symbol of immaturity while Emmerson Mnangagwa was depicted as representing mature leadership. His political image was designed to attract both young and older voters with the assurance that the country would be in the safe hands of a mature leader.

### *Role of Religious Imagery*

From the data collected for this paper, it was obvious that Facebook also became a platform to disseminate political communication about the spiritual values of the competing presidential candidates. Images that represented the spiritual values of the candidates were posted on the political parties' Facebook pages. The data collected showed that the presidential candidates were aware that the majority of Zimbabweans take issues of spirituality seriously when choosing political leaders. MDC-Alliance Facebook page posted pictures with inscriptions from Chamisa's UK tour where he was presented as praying for a child. Another image was a prayer in the form of an election advertisement in which Nelson Chamisa prayed for Zimbabwe to be delivered from poverty and tyranny through his ascendance to the presidency. The meaning embedded in these texts was that Nelson Chamisa was the ideal, God-fearing man who could take Zimbabwe forward. The sense of religious conviction and a love of God coming from the candidates was also important for Facebook users. Emmerson Mnangagwa was also presented as a God-fearing leader in one of his pre-election visits to the Johanne Marange Apostolic shrine. Zanu-PF Cape District Facebook page posted pictures of Mnangagwa wearing white garments as part of the huge congregation at this shrine. The impression created by his presence there was that he was a religious man of the people who was willing to join ordinary citizens in prayer.

### *Dress Code as a Form of Political Marketing*

There is no consensus among scholars regarding the definition of political image; however, as noted by Hacker (2004, p.4), the general essence of a candidate's image refers to 'clusters of voter perceptions of candidates'. Berger (2004, p. 11) asserts that many corporations use symbols and icons as a means of establishing some kind of 'corporate identity' because it is easy to remember these visuals. When we 'read' people, either in reality or in mass-mediated texts such as advertisements, commercials and films, we pay a great deal of attention to physical appearance such as their hairstyles, the clothing and the shoes they wear, and their body ornaments. All these objects are signs that convey certain notions about what these people are like (Berger 2004, p.11).

Zimbabwe's political landscape is polarised, so after the departure of the founding president of MDC, Morgan Tsvangirai, the incumbent had to portray an image of the 'anointed one'. Data collected for this paper showed that the dress code for both Nelson Chamisa and Emmerson Mnangagwa as posted on Facebook mirrored both the candidates' connections and disconnections with their predecessors. The 2018 elections came at a time when both presidential

candidates were desperate to present an image that would associate them with the electorate.

In a leaked US cable, the founding president of MDC-T, Morgan Tsvangirai, was described as an 'indispensable leader'; therefore, in order to invoke the memory of Tsvangirai during the election campaign, his successor Chamisa mimicked Tsvangirai's dress code, though with a slight variation. Morgan Tsvangirai had created the image of a humble leader by wearing popular safari bush jackets during campaigns, and Chamisa may have adopted the same dress code for several reasons. First, this presented the image of a leader anointed by both the former president and the party to inherit and continue Tsvangirai's tradition. This image would give the voters the impression that the incumbent, though young and different, was as powerful and popular as Morgan Tsvangirai. Second, the safari dress code depicted a humble, ordinary leader uncorrupted by the excess of power represented by the expensive suits paraded by some politicians. By appearing as a down-to-earth man of the people in the Facebook posts, Chamisa was reaching out to and identifying with the ordinary voters, most of whom live below the poverty datum line.

Zanu-PF presidential candidate Emmerson Mnangagwa, on the other hand, wore new regalia that would present him as a contrast to his predecessor Robert Mugabe, by introducing a scarf with Zanu-PF colours. The meaning embedded in the scarf is that it echoes the scarf that Bob Marley wore when he visited Zimbabwe to perform on Independence Day in 1980. This scarf signified independence from the authoritarian rule of his predecessor, and was a symbolic separation from Mugabe's style of governance.

Berger (2004, p.12) contends that people are 'speaking' all the time, even when this is non-verbal. Hairstyles, eyeglasses, clothes, facial expressions, posture, gestures, and many other physical and corporal manifestations communicate or 'speak'. Considering that Mugabe was removed from power by a military takeover, the electorate was not prepared to support a candidate with the same qualities. Thus, the thinking was that if Mnangagwa projected a different image from Mugabe, voters would have renewed faith in both the person of the candidate and Zanu-PF as a party.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the use of social media in political communication as a pivotal campaign tool during Zimbabwe's 2018 presidential election race. One of the key findings is that serious political candidates engaged with young voters on the social media platforms where they spend much of their time, in order to solicit their vote. Social media has reinforced the importance of the here and now during election campaigns, where politicians generated enticing images on their

Facebook platforms as they communicated with voters in real time. Zimbabwe's political parties and politicians, just like business organisations, regarded the political image as central in marketing the political brand. Although the debate on whether online political communication translates into real votes is inconclusive, the use of Facebook by politicians ahead of Zimbabwe's 2018 presidential elections ensured that they remained in touch with the electorate. Apart from its affordable costs, Facebook, if used well, can help politicians build essential emotional linkages with voters, thereby creating a profound impact on the voting outcomes. The voters can become partners, helping to tell the brand story.

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