The power of personal branding in political marketing

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Political marketing plays a pivotal role in contemporary society by serving as a bridge between political leaders and the public, shaping opinions on political, social, and economic issues. The importance of authenticity in political communication is emphasized, with the alignment of a political identity to the values of the electorate being deemed essential. The advent of the internet and social media has introduced innovative tools for political marketing, ranging from social media management to public policy formulation, making it a multidisciplinary field that integrates knowledge from diverse disciplines. In this context, Human Branding has emerged as a significant marketing strategy, particularly relevant in politics, where it focuses on promoting the image of an individual as a core component of the message conveyed. Within the political sphere, this strategy seeks to foster emotional and personal connections with the audience by foregrounding the personality and image of the candidate in campaigns. By accentuating candidates' personal traits, values, and life experiences, Human Branding effectively enhances public perception, a process further magnified by its application on digital platforms. This strategy, frequently employed in the campaigns of populist figures, also facilitates the establishment of enduring and influential relationships between political leaders and their electorate. Beyond electoral cycles, it reinforces the concept of a perpetual campaign, maintaining continuous engagement with the public. **Methodology:** Building upon this premise, the objective of this study is to examine the impact of digital political marketing strategies, evaluate whether the political content provided aligns with the expectations and needs of the electoral consumer, and assess how political marketing influences the political and social behavior of society. The methodology employed in this research involves exploratory analysis of secondary information sources, including scientific articles, manuals, reports, and other relevant materials. Additionally, a descriptive research approach of a mixed nature (qualitative and quantitative) was adopted, utilizing primary data collected through an online questionnaire

administered to a sample (*n*=200) of the voting population from the most recent national election in their respective country (Portugal/Brazil). **Results and main conclusions:** This empirical research, grounded in theoretical foundations, yielded significant findings, including the observation that most voters recognize the importance of social networks as a key source for accessing political information and content. Irrespective of their political affiliations, respondents also appear to acknowledge the influence that online political content exerts on voting decisions and their perception of political leadership. The Human Branding approach proves particularly effective in populist campaigns, as it prioritizes the personal image of candidates while relegating the roles of political parties, proposals, and facts to a secondary position. Additionally, it is noteworthy that despite the growing prevalence of misinformation within political content on social networks, respondents exhibit a moderate degree of trust in the information they consume. Nevertheless, they are also aware of the impact that such content and external influences, including the opinions of friends, family members, and digital influencers, have on their perception of political reality.

Keywords: political marketing; political digital marketing; human branding; political leaders; social media; populism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Marketing is a relationship of interests between clients and vendors, centered on satisfaction and consumption. Similarly, political marketing connects voters (clients) with candidates (products). Although often associated with electoral campaigns, political marketing also includes continuous activities like (also encompasses ongoing activities such as) image management and communication, which are increasingly amplified by the internet and social media.

Today, political marketing employs a wide range of techniques, including social media management, audiovisual content production, and data analysis for audience segmentation. In this digital era, political marketing has shifted towards building personal brands. This shift reflects the "continuous campaign" approach within the political arena, where political leadership becomes an integral component of the political marketing efforts. To positively shape public perception of the promoted brand or message, this approach seeks to establish a personal and emotional connection with the target audience, highlighting the individual's unique qualities, values, and characteristics.

The primary focus of this study is to examine the impact of human branding on political marketing. Additionally, it aims to explore how online human branding, influences potential voters, voting decisions, public opinion, and the perception of political figures on social media.

1.1. Political marketing on digital platforms

Political marketing plays a fundamental role in contemporary society, serving as a communication bridge between political leaders and the public, both during and outside election periods. This is particularly relevant in an increasingly complex and interconnected world, where political marketing enables candidates and parties to effectively convey their ideas, proposals, and values, to diverse segments of the population. Moreover, political marketing is instrumental in shaping public opinion, influencing perceptions of political, social, and economic issues. By employing strategies such as social media, advertising, events, and public relations, it helps build and enhance the image of politicians, mobilize voters, and influence public discourse. In today's globalized world, where communication and image are paramount, political marketing has become an indispensable tool for ensuring the success and legitimacy of political actors.

The emergence of political marketing is a complex phenomenon intertwined with the political history of the 20th century, particularly during transitions between authoritarian and democratic regimes. As Figueiredo (1994) notes, "in the dictatorships of the last century, political marketing was closely associated with state propaganda" (p. 23). Under such regimes, the political leader was exalted and presented as a national icon, becoming the focal point of all communication strategies. This approach aimed not only to disseminate political

ideas but, more importantly, to construct a messianic image of the leader, thereby securing their legitimization and popularity.

With the advent of modern democracies, political marketing underwent a significant transformation. Today, it is regarded as a fundamental discipline in the political sphere, concentrating on developing strategies that bridge the gap between the political class and society, particularly voters. Its primary goal is to influence electoral behavior through targeted propaganda. Over the years, the field has benefited from increasing intellectual and strategic contributions.

Lindon (1976) defines political marketing as the process of tailoring candidates and political ideas to voters to address their political needs and secure their support. Newman (1999) has also made a significant contribution to further advance the understanding of political marketing by highlighting the importance of market segmentation. He emphasizes the necessity of identifying and addressing the distinct needs and preferences of voters - mirroring the practices of commercial marketing - by crafting strategies tailored to specific voter groups. This includes selecting appropriate messages, themes, and communication channels, as well as analyzing data and opinion research to inform strategic decisions.

Lavareda (2002) emphasizes the importance of emotions and narratives in electoral strategies and highlights that emotions play a crucial role in voters' decision-making and should be exploited in campaigns to create meaningful connections. Also, this author focuses on the need for authentic communication and coherent political identity to establish lasting bonds with the electorate, and the power of narratives to engage and mobilize people memorably and persuasively. In this regard, he understands that voters are increasingly attentive to the sincerity of political speeches and proposals put forward by candidates. Therefore, building a political identity that is coherent and aligned with the values of the electorate is essential to establishing lasting and meaningful ties.

Almeida (2002) adds that the use of narratives in political marketing is to be noted: stories and narratives have the power to engage, inspire, and mobilize people more effectively than simple presentations of facts and figures. By incorporating authentic and impactful narratives into their strategies, candidates can create a deeper emotional connection with voters, making their messages more memorable and persuasive.

The rise of the internet and social media in recent decades has further accentuated this trend, providing new tools and strategies for building political narratives and interacting directly with voters. Today, political marketing encompasses a variety of techniques ranging from social media management to audiovisual content production and data analysis for target audience segmentation. What's more, political marketing is not just restricted to electoral campaigns. It is also present in the image management of incumbent politicians, in the formulation of public policies and in the way political parties position themselves and communicate with society. It is a multidisciplinary area that combines knowledge of communication, psychology, sociology, information technology, and political strategy.

On the other hand, Almeida (2002) emphasizes the fundamental interconnection between electoral marketing and politics. By stating that these two areas cannot be separated, he emphasizes that success in electoral marketing cannot be achieved in isolation, without considering the wider political context. This means that marketing strategies must be aligned with the political goals and objectives of the campaign, seeking results that meet not only communication interests but also the needs and aspirations of the electorate and the political challenges faced by the candidate or party. This integrated approach recognizes that electoral marketing is a powerful tool when combined with an in-depth understanding of the political dynamics and demands of the environment in which the electoral contest takes place. However, it is important to emphasize that political marketing also faces criticism and ethical challenges.

The excessive use of persuasion techniques, the dissemination of false information, and the manipulation of public opinion are current issues that raise debates about the ethical and moral limits of this practice. Thus, political marketing is a constantly evolving field that requires reflection and regulation to guarantee its responsible and transparent use in the public sphere. In addition, Carneiro and Silva (2012) understand the

field of political marketing as a science that goes beyond being just a tool, but a fundamental element in political relations, influencing the development of the political field. They also state that political marketing involves research, communication, articulation, promotion, and social mobilization, which involves both financial and social costs. In addition, it is necessary to understand the different theories of voter decision-making to analyze their political strategies in the face of the challenges of contemporary society, especially in multi-party systems and plural societies.

1.2.   Contemporary political communication

Mass media, particularly television and newspapers, remain the most influential channels in political communication, with television notably impacting younger demographics (Maarek, 2014). These mediums serve as effective tools for mobilizing and influencing voter decisions, especially among politically disengaged citizens. Television plays a crucial role by broadcasting political programs, interviews, and election coverage that shape public perceptions of candidates and their proposals. Political debates are significant during campaigns, allowing voters to directly compare candidates' ideas and proposals (Zhang & Seltzer, 2010).

However, the advent of the internet has profoundly transformed political communication. While traditional media once dominated political campaigns, politicians and parties now leverage new online strategies to reach voters. Online political marketing has emerged as a powerful tool, enabling candidates and parties to connect with a broader, more targeted audience. Social media platforms facilitate democratic spaces for idea exchange and allow citizens to engage actively in the political process (Braga, 2011).

Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube are essential for shaping the public image of politicians and parties. Through posts, videos, stories, and live streams, candidates can reach millions instantly, conveying their messages dynamically (Braga, 2011). Social media also aids in organizing campaigns and protests, with activists using these platforms effectively to mobilize and influence political agendas (Madureira, 2022). According to Bachini *et al*. (2022), the strategic use of social media in politics has become so significant that one cannot discuss political matters without considering online dynamics. Digital spaces have expanded the public sphere, becoming crucial for politicians and organizations aiming to connect with the public. Consequently, political marketing and election campaigns now focus on data analysis from digital platforms and content production for social media. This shift necessitates increased transparency and collaboration, continuous monitoring of candidates and voters, and large-scale online mobilizations, all while facing challenges like misinformation and cyber-oriented identities (Arnaudo, 2017).

Madureira (2022) also highlights the challenges associated with this evolution, notably information selectivity, where individuals consume only content that reinforces their preexisting beliefs. This leads to opinion bubbles that restrict diverse perspectives and hinder healthy democratic debate. The relevance of social media in political communication raises additional concerns, such as the spread of hate speech, misinformation, and algorithm manipulation.

Rodrigues (2020) notes that Brazilian voters are increasingly connected to the internet and social media, with 70% online and 66% using social platforms. This connectivity significantly affects the dissemination of political information, enabling strategists to map voter profiles for more targeted content delivery. The most popular platforms include WhatsApp, Instagram (especially among young adults), YouTube, and Facebook, with Twitter being less favored. Electors show a preference for visual content like infographics and videos, alongside concise, direct textual information. Conversely, lengthy or audio formats, such as podcasts, garner little interest (Rodrigues, 2020). In Portugal, a study by Obercom revealed Instagram's rising popularity among social media users, while TikTok is emerging as a political platform.

The challenge of fake news is prominent in contemporary political communication. Habgood-Coote (2018) argues that there is no stable public definition for misinformation, while Humprecht (2018) describes it as online content containing false information produced for strategic purposes. Lazer et al. (2018) characterize misinformation as fabricated news imitating journalistic styles but lacking organizational processes. Tandoc et al. (2017) offer a typology encompassing six definitions of misinformation, focusing on factuality and the

producer's intent to deceive. Fake news has the potential to influence elections, distort public perceptions, and undermine trust in democratic institutions. The decentralized and accessible nature of social media facilitates its spread. The 2016 U.S. presidential election, notably marked by strategic use of fake news, exemplifies this issue, including the notorious "Pizzagate" conspiracy regarding Hillary Clinton.

During Brazil's 2018 elections, false information circulated extensively, particularly in WhatsApp groups supporting Jair Bolsonaro, with significant instances of misinformation documented (Benites, 2018). In Portugal, Facebook and YouTube have been identified as primary platforms for misinformation dissemination, with studies revealing thousands of misleading posts before the 2019 legislative elections. Despite concerns over misinformation, the impact of WhatsApp on the 2019 Portuguese elections was minimal compared to Brazil. Combating fake news requires a multifaceted approach, emphasizing media literacy to empower citizens to identify dubious information (Buckingham, 2010). Digital platforms must implement content verification policies, while governments and institutions play a vital role in regulating and promoting transparency in political communication. In summary, contemporary political communication is characterized by the internet's influence, the importance of social media, and the challenges posed by misinformation. Interpreting and addressing these aspects ethically and responsibly is essential for strengthening democracy and ensuring an informed and plural public debate.

1.3.   Human Branding in Political Marketing

Human branding has emerged as a prominent marketing strategy in recent decades, particularly within the political context. It involves constructing and promoting an individual's image as a crucial component of the message or brand. This approach aims to establish an emotional and personal connection with the target audience by highlighting personal attributes, values, and unique characteristics to positively influence public perception of the brand or message.

According to Vergara and Branco (2001), these brands are often engaged in various social initiatives, such as supporting education, combating child labor, investing in employee housing, and disseminating social messages through product packaging. The role of small and medium enterprises is also emphasized, particularly in conducting social actions and offering vocational training for disadvantaged youth, supporting social institutions, providing internships, and even hiring young people from underprivileged communities.

Human branding is essential for building the image of candidates and parties by centering the campaign on the candidate's personality. Nielsen and Larsen (2014) note that just as consumers choose brands that reflect their values, voters prefer politicians aligned with their aspirations. Unlike traditional propaganda focused on ideologies, human branding uses personal traits and emotions to forge intimate connections with voters. Political campaigns may also employ negative strategies targeting opponents with criticisms and direct attacks, focusing on performance indicators, such as competence, policy history, and ethical considerations. The authors stress that these strategies are not limited to election cycles but are part of a continuous political campaign, where leaders and parties strive to maintain a constant presence in voters' minds. This includes public events, media interviews, social media presence, and other forms of public interaction.

Modern voters are increasingly interested not only in political ideas but also in candidates' integrity, authenticity, and leadership capabilities. This paradigm shift reflects a deeper understanding of the role of emotions and personal perceptions in voters' decision-making processes. Several factors can influence the success of human branding in political campaigns. The candidate's authenticity plays a crucial role, as voters generally respond better to political figures perceived as genuine and truthful.

In this context, Speed et al. (2015) highlight that the association between the leader and the party is so strong that the leader's image and actions can significantly affect public perception of the party as a whole. Charismatic leaders can enhance a party's image and attract more support, while controversial leaders may generate distrust or alienate voters who previously supported the party.

This close relationship between leaders and political parties underscores how the identity and personal reputation of political leaders are vital elements in building and maintaining a party's image and influence in the political landscape. This aspect reinforces the perception of political leaders as brands themselves, especially when they occupy prominent positions within established political parties. Furthermore, the authors point out that the ability to communicate a clear and compelling message, the alignment between the projected image and the candidate's actual actions, effective use of social media and communication platforms, and crisis management capabilities are key factors that can determine the effectiveness of human branding in political campaigns.

However, despite its effectiveness in creating emotional connections and influencing public perception, human branding raises ethical and legal concerns that merit consideration. Constructing an idealized image can be seen as manipulative or misleading, especially if it does not reflect the candidate's reality. Additionally, excessive reliance on human branding techniques may lead to superficial discussions of important political issues, diverting attention from substantial debate. Therefore, it is essential to analyze relevant information about candidates, uphold democratic principles of equality and impartiality, and comply with applicable laws and regulations within the political campaign context.

1.4.   Human Branding in Populist Campaigns

Populism has been analyzed and debated in various contexts and historical periods. Laclau (2013) provides a classic definition, describing populism as a discursive strategy that seeks to unite diverse groups under the notion of "the people." This approach typically contrasts "the people" with an elite perceived as distant, corrupt, or disconnected from the general population's interests. As noted by Laclau, populism is characterized by rhetoric that polarizes society into "us" (the people) and "them" (the elite), aiming to create a collective identity around these simplified categories. Populist strategies often exploit emotions, such as anger towards the elite or promises of radical change, to mobilize and unify supporters. In contemporary contexts, populism has acquired new nuances and modes of expression, particularly with the rise of social media and digital communication. Populist leaders utilize these platforms to communicate directly with their followers, bypassing traditional media and establishing a more immediate and emotional connection (Braga & Becher, 2012).

A crucial element of contemporary populism, according to Kumar and Dhamija (2017), is the concept of "permanent campaigning." This refers to a continuous strategy of communication and engagement with the target audience over time, extending beyond traditional election periods. Instead of focusing solely on election times, permanent campaigns maintain a constant and relevant presence in voters' minds. This involves ongoing engagement through social media, events, television programs, and interviews to convey key messages from politicians or parties. Additionally, it includes constant monitoring of public opinion to adjust communication strategies and adapt messages as needed.

Image management is also essential, with continuous efforts to build and maintain the politician's or party's image, emphasizing achievements, projects, and values to strengthen voter identification and trust. This is achieved through multichannel communication, utilizing various media such as social networks, television, radio, newspapers, websites, and, increasingly, virtual apps to reach different population segments. Furthermore, the authors highlight that a permanent campaign involves mobilizing the base and encouraging active participation from supporters and voters through volunteer campaigns, community engagement events, and loyalty programs. This mobilization is primarily stimulated through social media and instant messaging and aims to create a lasting and positive relationship between the politician or party and the electorate, establishing a consistent and influential presence in the political and social landscape. To achieve this, they invest heavily in human branding strategies. This term refers to the practice of constructing and promoting the image of an individual as an essential part of the political or ideological message being communicated.

Two notable examples of contemporary populist leaders who effectively utilized permanent campaign strategies and human branding are Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and the political party Chega! in Portugal. Both figures constructed images under narratives of strength and controversy, polarizing public opinion and mobilizing a fervent supporter base. de Sousa (2019) highlights how Bolsonaro, during his time in the National Congress, was regarded as a low-profile member with little influence.

However, Bolsonaro distinguished himself by advocating controversial issues, such as reducing the age of criminal responsibility and allowing gun ownership for law-abiding citizens, aligning with his conservative views. His political rise was driven by the strategic use of social media, where he shared his opinions and critiques of the government. His Facebook page attracted millions of followers, making him an icon for many Brazilians who saw him as an honest and courageous politician during a period of economic and political crisis in the country. During the 2018 presidential campaign, Bolsonaro survived a stabbing attack that prevented him from attending public events, yet he continued his campaign primarily online. He achieved significant votes in the first round and won the second round, becoming president with a platform emphasizing conservative values and anti-corruption. Before his presidency, Bolsonaro cultivated an image as an outsider, anti-establishment figure advocating for conservative values. He utilized social media, especially Twitter, to communicate directly with followers, employing direct and often controversial language to convey his messages (Russo et al., 2022).

The political party Chega! it is a radical right party founded in 2019 by André Ventura, initially as a political movement. It emerged from dissatisfaction with traditional political elites in Portugal, presenting a platform that combines elements of populism, authoritarianism, and conservatism, focusing on security, anti-corruption, and immigration issues. It is known for its controversial positions and charismatic leadership. Amaral (2020) emphasizes how the party utilized specific political communication strategies on social media, particularly on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Key concepts identified include populism, nativism, authoritarianism, conservatism, and the cult of personality, which are essential for understanding the party's messaging and approach. According to him, populism involves directly appealing to the masses through emotive and simplified speeches. Nativism values national identity and opposes immigration. Authoritarianism relates to advocating for a centralized and strong government. Conservatism values traditional customs and beliefs. Lastly, the cult of personality emphasizes the leader's figure as a party symbol.

The effective use of social media by Chega! Reflected a cultural pessimism among the Portuguese population, fueled by economic and social crises and discontent with traditional political elites. The party capitalized on this sentiment to address contentious issues and attract followers, adopting an aggressive and emotional stance on social media. Additionally, Facebook was central to Chega!'s communication strategy, characterized by informal and emotional discourse that resonates with its followers. YouTube played a significant role, focusing on the leader's image and the cult of personality, while Twitter was used for short messages and political discussions, although it was less popular for the party. Since 2022, Chega! has increasingly leveraged TikTok, significantly improving its penetration among younger Portuguese voters. According to research by ICS-ISCTE, young voters aged 18 to 25 are more likely to vote for Chega!, while older voters between 45 and 88 tend to favor the PS.

Both populist political figures have benefited from the strategic use of social media and the creation of a "man of the people" image that challenges established institutions and promises to represent the interests of the silent majority. Their human branding strategies significantly contributed to their political rise and mobilization of passionate, committed supporters. In conclusion, contemporary populism manifests through direct communication strategies, political polarization, and intensive use of social media. Populist politicians employ human branding to create a strong, emotionally compelling identity, connecting with voters in a personal and persuasive manner. While these strategies can be powerful, they also require critical analysis regarding their impacts on democracy and society.

2.   AIMS OF THE STUDY AND HYPOTHESES

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the impact of human branding on political marketing. Specifically, it aims to investigate how the application of human branding in the online sphere influences potential voters, voting behavior, public opinion, and the perception of political figures on social media. To achieve this, a questionnaire was administered to recent voters in national elections in Portugal and Brazil, providing insights into voter profiles and their engagement with politicians' online presence.

Given the literary and theoretical reasoning just presented, the following hypotheses were developed:

(H1) Digital political marketing is applied to consolidate the electorate (target audience), reach different segments, and influence public opinion and even electoral behavior;

(H2) The image and authentic narratives, which create a deeper and more persuasive emotional connection, have greater mobilizing power than numbers, facts and proposals;

(H3) The excessive use of persuasion and influence techniques, such as the dissemination of fake news, affects (or diminishes) the credibility of online political content; and

(H4) By placing the political figure at the center of the campaign, human branding aims to build a positive image both for the electoral moment and for an ongoing and permanent campaign.

3.   METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining exploratory research through secondary sources—scientific articles, books, and reports—with descriptive research based on primary data collection via an online questionnaire. The questionnaire targeted voters from Portugal and Brazil who participated in the last national elections, allowing for a comparative analysis of digital political marketing strategies.

The central research question investigates whether political marketing techniques, such as human branding in the virtual sphere, effectively influence voter behavior and contribute to the sustainability of permanent campaigns. This inquiry was further refined into two sub-questions: How do consumers perceive current digital political marketing? How does a robust online presence impact the perception and effectiveness of a political figure's campaign?

Hence, the questionnaire was constructed according to the hypotheses that emerged from literature review, with questions on sociodemographic data in the first group of questions, followed by questions on the political profile of the respondents, and finally questions on the consumption of political content on social networks. Data was then extracted from Google forms to be analyzed.

4.1. Characterisation of the sample

The questionnaire was distributed through social media from April 24 to April 27, 2024, reaching a convenience sample of 200 respondents. Participants were adults aged 18 and older from Portugal and Brazil who engage with political content online. The sample comprised 61.5% female and 38.5% male respondents. The largest age group was 30 to 65 years (56%), followed by 18 to 30 years (39.5%), and over 65 years (4.5%).

In terms of professional status, 30.5% were employees, 28.5% self-employed, and 13.5% student-workers. Other categories included retirees (6.5%), students (5.5%), and unemployed individuals (1.5%). Due to the constraints of the survey platform, 14% identified their professional status as "other" without further elaboration.

4. RESULTS

The results illustrate significant patterns in the use of digital platforms for political information and their influence on voting behavior. A majority (76%) of respondents reported regularly accessing digital platforms for political updates, with 29.2% doing so daily. Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube emerged as the most frequently used platforms, followed by Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. Political party websites and Telegram were the least utilized sources.

### 4.1. Political engagement and digital behavior

Most respondents (91.5%) emphasized the importance of a political figure's online presence in creating a sense of proximity with voters. Additionally, 66.5% reported following political leaders on social media, although only 34% followed political parties. An overwhelming 95% acknowledged the influence of online political content on their voting decisions. This model of political communication becomes effective for populist candidates as it emphasizes the direct relationship with "the people" and rejects traditional media and the establishment. According to Brandão (2022), in a scenario of political crisis and distrust in traditional institutions, digital platforms can play a crucial role in mobilizing voters, strengthening populist discourses and reconfiguring electoral dynamics. These results corroborate the idea that knowing how to exploit social networks to build a personalized and emotional campaign, characteristic of digital populism, ends up using a connective action strategy, a concept by Bennett and Segerberg (2013, cited in Brandão, 2022) to describe how to mobilize voters without relying on a traditional party structure. When examining the role of a candidate's personal life and opinions shared on social media, 75% agreed that such exposure increases their chances of electoral success. Respondents highlighted that an ongoing social media presence fosters closer connections with voters, with 104 agreeing on its significance for maintaining popularity. However, the influence of comments and posts shared by acquaintances or influencers was less pronounced, with only 45% considering them impactful.

Also, as Brandão (2022) states, political campaigns like Bolsonaro's stand out for their high degree of personalization compared to their opponents. In this case, the content about Bolsonaro and his personal life reinforced the image of a candidate close to the "people" and far from the elites, a common strategy in populist digital campaigns.

4.2. Trust and Credibility

Despite the popularity of digital platforms, trust in political content remains moderate. While 56.5% expressed neutrality regarding trust levels, 19% reported moderate trust, and another 19% voiced distrust. This skepticism aligns with concerns over the spread of misinformation and its potential to distort democratic processes. Figure 1 shows the main contrast, within the results, of Brazil and Portugal's respondents.

Figure 1. *Cross-Country Comparison: Digital Political Marketing Metrics.*
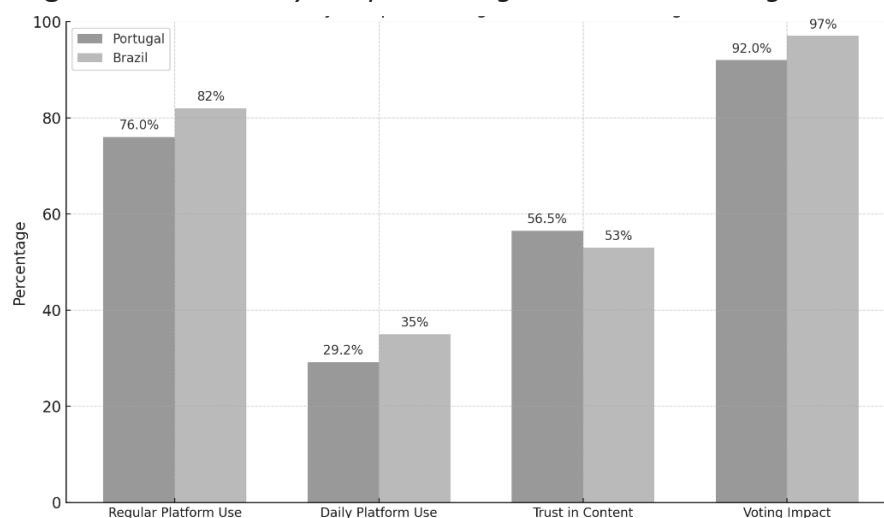
Source: Own elaboration.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study provide strong support for the proposed hypotheses, offering insights into the dynamics of digital political marketing and human branding.
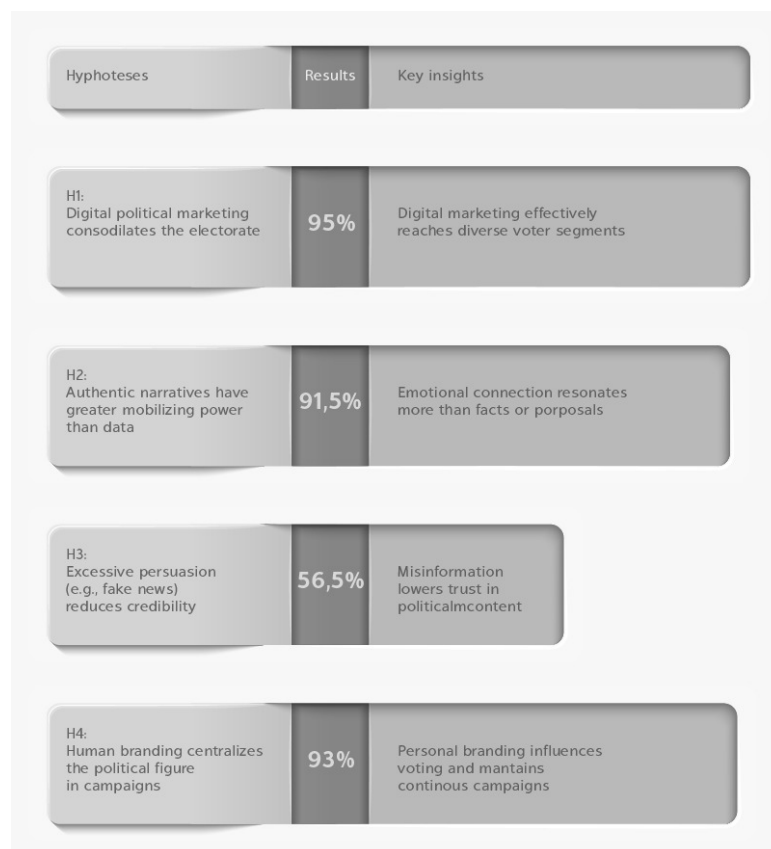
The first hypothesis posited that digital political marketing consolidates the electorate, influences public opinion, and shapes electoral behavior. This is evident in the widespread reliance on digital platforms for political information, with 76% of respondents reporting regular use and 29.2% accessing these platforms daily. Social networks like Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube emerged as the most frequently used, demonstrating the effectiveness of these platforms in reaching diverse voter segments. These findings align with Newman's (1999) argument that strategic targeting of communication channels is crucial for engaging audiences and adapting to shifting political landscapes. By leveraging these platforms, political figures can effectively consolidate their electorate and expand their influence.

The second hypothesis proposed that authentic narratives have greater mobilizing power than mere facts or proposals. The data confirms this, as the majority of respondents recognized the importance of personal exposure and emotional connection. Notably, 95% of respondents stated that online political content influences their voting decisions, and 91.5% highlighted the critical role of a candidate's online presence in creating a sense of proximity with voters. These results echo Lavareda (2002) assertion that emotions and narratives resonate more deeply with voters than statistics, emphasizing the power of storytelling in building trust and mobilizing support.

The third hypothesis suggested that the excessive use of persuasion techniques, such as the dissemination of fake news, undermines the credibility of online political content. While social media remains a primary source of political information, 56.5% of respondents reported only moderate trust in its content, with an additional 19% expressing outright distrust. This skepticism underscores the ethical challenges in political marketing, as highlighted by Humprecht (2018) and Lazer et al. (2018), who warn of the dangers of misinformation in eroding public confidence and distorting democratic discourse.

Finally, the fourth hypothesis argued that human branding places the political figure at the center of campaigns, creating a positive image for both the electoral moment and continuous campaigning. The survey results strongly support this, with respondents emphasizing the influence of a candidate's personal image, history, and online presence on their voting decisions. For instance, 186 respondents affirmed the importance of campaign proposals and personal branding in shaping electoral outcomes. This reinforces Nielsen and Larsen's (2014) perspective on human branding as a tool for building enduring relationships with voters, extending political engagement beyond election periods.

Figure 2. *Summary of Hypotheses' Results and Key Insights.*

Hyphoteses	Results	Key insights
H1: Digital political marketing consodilates the electorate	95%	Digital marketing effectively reaches diverse voter segments
H2: Authentic narratives have greater mobilizing power than data	91,5%	Emotional connection resonates more than facts or porposals
H3: Excessive persuasion (e.g., fake news) reduces credibility	56,5%	Misinformation lowers trust in politicalmcontent
H4: Human branding centralizes the political figure in campaigns	93%	Personal branding influences voting and mantains continous campaigns

Source: Own elaboration.

The study's hypotheses were confirmed through questionnaire responses supported by theoretical literature. A notable finding is the *medium* trust in social media, despite its prevalence as a source for political information. The analysis highlights how human branding centralizes political leaders in campaigns and how the internet has amplified their visibility, making a strong online presence indispensable for modern political strategies.

The study has therefore made it possible, through a combination of theory and applied methodology, to understand how the political figure is perceived by their audience, as well as their strengths and weaknesses and, consequently, the aspects to be improved, which helps to outline the message and positioning of the permanent campaign. Thus, through empirical research, underpinned by theory, it was possible to obtain pertinent insights from which it is important to emphasize that young people and adults (18 - 65 years old) realize the importance and space that social networks have in terms of searching for information and political content. Regardless of their political position, respondents also seem to understand the degree of influence that online political content has on both voting decisions and the perception of the image of political leadership.

Furthermore, to deepen the analysis, it is essential to contrast the role of personal branding in populist campaigns with other political strategies and explore its broader implications for electoral dynamics and democracy. While human branding is a powerful tool in populist campaigns, it differs significantly from other political marketing strategies. Traditional party-centric campaigns emphasize collective party identity, policy platforms, and ideological coherence (Newman, 1999). In contrast, populist branding revolves around a charismatic leader who embodies the movement and often bypasses traditional political structures (Laclau, 2013).

Technocratic leadership, another contrasting approach, focuses on expertise, administrative efficiency, and policy-driven campaigns (Rodrigues, 2020). Here, the leader's personal traits are secondary to their ability to manage complex issues. Unlike populist branding, which thrives on emotional appeal and polarization (Braga & Becher, 2012), technocratic campaigns rely on rational persuasion and institutional credibility. Similarly, issue-based campaigns, such as those centered on environmentalism or social justice, prioritize policy advocacy over personal image. These campaigns, while often led by influential figures, maintain a stronger emphasis on collective activism and structural reforms rather than leader-centered messaging (Madureira, 2022).

Personal branding has reshaped the electoral landscape by shifting power dynamics from political parties to individual candidates. The rise of social media allows political figures to communicate directly with voters, bypassing traditional party structures and mainstream media (Arnaudo, 2017). This shift has led to the "permanent campaign" phenomenon, where politicians engage in continuous self-promotion beyond election cycles (Kumar & Dhamija, 2017). Moreover, personal branding influences voter behavior by fostering emotional connections rather than policy-based decision-making (Lavareda, 2002). Studies indicate that voters are increasingly drawn to candidates who appear relatable and authentic rather than those with the most comprehensive policy proposals (Speed et al., 2015). This trend has significant implications for political discourse, as it prioritizes personality-driven narratives over substantive policy debates (Carneiro & Silva, 2012).

Despite its effectiveness in mobilizing support, personal branding in politics carries notable risks for democratic stability. One major concern is the erosion of institutional legitimacy, as leaders who dominate their party's image may weaken internal party democracy and concentrate power in a single figure (Nielsen & Larsen, 2014). This can lead to the delegitimization of political institutions and undermine checks and balances. Additionally, the over-personalization of politics can foster polarization and reduce political accountability (Russo et al., 2022). When campaigns revolve around individual personas rather than policy discussions, voters may make choices based on emotional affinity rather than critical evaluation of governance capabilities (Braga, 2011). This can result in the persistence of ineffective leadership due to strong personal branding rather than competence.

Furthermore, populist personal branding often employs divisive rhetoric that exacerbates societal cleavages (Brandão, 2022). By positioning "the people" against "the elite," such campaigns may delegitimize opposition and weaken democratic deliberation (Laclau, 2013). In extreme cases, this can lead to democratic backsliding, where leaders leverage their personal appeal to dismantle institutional safeguards and concentrate power (Habgood-Coote, 2018). The discussion of personal branding in political marketing must extend beyond reaffirming its effectiveness in voter engagement. It is crucial to analyze its impact on democratic norms, party structures, and electoral behavior. While personal branding enhances political communication, its overuse — particularly in populist contexts — can undermine democratic governance and promote authoritarian tendencies. Future research should explore regulatory measures to balance the benefits of personal branding with the need to preserve democratic integrity.

Regarding the limitations identified during this study, it is important to highlight the questionnaire's shortcomings, particularly the absence of questions addressing human branding and more targeted questions about fake news. Including these elements could have provided a deeper understanding of the pursuit of reliable information. Furthermore, it would be interesting to use an application with more possibilities for types of questions and answers. Finally, as a suggestion for future research based on the contribution of this study, we would like to highlight the need to delve deeper into the issue of fake news and explore the impacts of disinformation on society and political polarisation on voting decisions, as well as on the image and popularity of political leaders.

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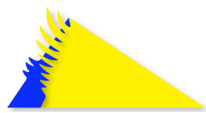aleandro@esec.pt
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