

# Online Media Use During 2013 Japanese Upper-House Election: A Content Analysis of Comments on Candidates' Facebook Pages

By DOU Xue\*

## Introduction

Online media has become a popular communication tool during election campaigns over the last decade. A prime example is the 2008 U.S. presidential election, when Barack Obama used social media to build a grassroots base of more than 5 million supporters. Many claimed that his use of social media was one of the major reasons behind his victory. Besides that example in U.S. politics, online media, especially social media, was used during election campaigning periods in other countries as well, including various European nations, Taiwan, and Korea, just to name a few.

In Japan, online campaigning has been prohibited for a number of years according to election law. However, faced with the increasing demand for online campaigning and successful examples in other countries, the Diet revised the law in April of 2013. This revision opened up the possibility of using online media during election campaign periods from the Upper-House election, which was to be held in July of 2013. This attracted a lot of attention from Japanese news media, which argued that the adoption of online media would result in many positive outcomes, including the increase of political discussion among citizens, boosting young voters' interest in political participation, enabling candidates to easily connect with their supporters, and promoting dialogues between the two parties. Media outlets supported social media in politics by analyzing and explaining successful examples from other countries, such as the U.S. and Korea.

Since online campaigning is likely to become much more prevalent in Japan, it is important to evaluate the initial event, discuss any issues that arose, and discover opportunities for improvement in the future. To that end, this study analyzes how both candidates and voters used online media during the most recent Japanese Upper-House election campaign period. More specifically, this study focuses on

\*Assistant Professor at Institute for Media and Communications Research, Keio University, Tokyo, Japan.  
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candidates' Facebook pages and examines whether Facebook genuinely served as an arena for political discussions and a place for dialogue between candidates and voters. Additionally, the study also explores some variables that influence how voters react and respond to online media. These analyses will lead to suggestions and discussions of how to use online media for promoting political dialogues in Japan in the future.

## Online Campaigning and Political Participation

Although online media has been studied in the area of political communications since the late of 1990s (e.g., Bimber 2003), it started receiving greatly increased attention as a useful communication tool for election campaigns in the mid-2000s. In the 2004 U.S. presidential election, several candidates made the strategic move of using blogs in an effort to generate donations from supporters. This use of online media was further expanded in the 2006 mid-term Congressional elections and the 2008 U.S. presidential election. By that point, most of the candidates were using social media, including Facebook and YouTube, for gaining support, fundraising, and attracting younger voters. Barack Obama's use of social media in the 2008 election drew the attention of the world and stimulated a wide variety of studies related to online campaigning.

A major argument surrounding this topic is that the adoption of online media during an election period may promote voters' political involvement and therefore enhance democracy. This is partly because online media allow individuals to connect with others in a convenient and accessible manner, thus making it easier for them to gain political information, express political thoughts, and discuss political issues. To take the 2012 U.S. presidential election as an example, many voters actively used online media to spread information and subsequently won over undecided voters. Such grassroots activities were made possible because of the convenience of online media for reaching others.

The results from previous studies already indicated certain positive effects of online campaigning. For example, in their study of Facebook groups supporting John McCain and Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential campaign, Fernandes, Giurcanu, Bowers, and Neely (2010) found that young people were actively staying aware of campaign activities and making comments on Facebook groups. These sorts of behaviors were found to likely foster political dialogue and civic engagement. Similarly, Kushin and Yamamoto (2010) surveyed college students about their use of online media in the 2008 election. The results indicated that online discussions via social media, such as sharing and making comments, increased their political self-efficacy and political involvement.

The power of online media in enhancing individuals' political involvement was also a major argument for the Japanese election this time around. More specifically,

it was expected that the adoption of online media during the election period would gain the attention of the younger generation and bring them back to the political process. Several studies were already conducted to examine this issue from the beginning of the election campaign period. Contrary to the initial expectation, the studies signified overall that online media might not serve as a critical tool for exchanging election-related information for most voters. A survey study revealed that approximately 40% of people preferred going online to acquire election-related information, but the majority of the online sources were online news sites (Ito, 2013). However, for those who were exposed to online media, they seemed to use online media to express their political thoughts and engage in political discussions. For example, a study of Mainichi Newspapers and Nishida examined “tweets” using data mining method. The results of their study indicated that the number of tweets that included key words of certain political issues (i.e., nuclear, TPP) increased significantly during the election period, and those tweets that urged individuals to vote increased as well (The Mainichi Newspapers 2013).

Given the discussion above, this study initially examines the overall trends of comments on candidates’ Facebook pages. Facebook has become one of the most popular social networking sites in Japan over the last several years, and the number of users reached 22 million in July of 2013 (Nikkei 2013). Despite its popularity, there have been very few research studies investigating the use of Facebook for online campaigning this time. Therefore, the examination of Facebook comments might add new insights to existing studies.

RQ1: What kinds of comments were made on candidates’ Facebook pages?

## **Interactions Between Candidates and Voters**

In addition to promoting citizens’ political involvement, the advantage of online media can also be discussed from the candidates’ point of view. Scholars in strategic communication and public relations claim that online media is an optimal tool for candidates to gain trust and support. One reason is that the interactive nature of online media allows candidates to establish a dialogue with voters. According to the theory of dialogic communication, an ethical, high-quality dialogue between the candidates and voters can enhance relationships between the two parties, and thus help candidates gain long-term support and engagement from voters (Kent and Taylor 1998; Sweetser and Lariscy 2008).

Additionally, the multimedia features of online media can also help candidates attract voters. Unlike traditional media, such as newspapers, information can be presented in multiple ways with online media, including text, audio, and video. This type of multimedia information presentation becomes even easier with newer social media platforms, such as Facebook. In previous studies, it was found that when information was presented through multiple modes (i.e., text, audio, and animation),

it would induce better information recognition (Sundar 2000) and user engagement (Xu and Sundar 2014). Therefore, the adoption of online media can potentially attract voters and increase their engagement with relevant content.

In the case of Japanese election this time, some studies looked at how candidates used online media to connect with voters. However, the Mainichi Newspapers and Nishida's (2013) study found that the dialogic potential of online media was not well utilized over Twitter. Most of the tweeted words from the candidates' sides were "public speech", followed by "station" or "on the street", suggesting that candidates mainly used Twitter for announcing their campaign schedules, rather than for creating a dialogue with voters.

The above result may be partly influenced by the way individuals use Twitter in Japan. According to Japanese Social Media White Paper (2012), Twitter is mainly used for disseminating and gathering information, while Facebook is used for communicating with others. It can be assumed that candidates may intentionally utilize Twitter for announcements and switch to Facebook when they want to establish a dialogue with voters. Therefore, this study examines whether candidates performed dialogic communication with voters over their Facebook pages with a research question below.

RQ2: To what degree did candidates replied to voters over their Facebook pages?

As mentioned above, information presentation style can influence user engagement. Therefore, this study proposes the hypotheses below.

Hypothesis 1: Compared to messages that only contain text, user engagement would be higher for the messages that contain pictures (HP1-a) and videos (HP1-b).

Furthermore, the level of user engagement may also influence what users would write on their comments. For example, if individuals are willing to spend more time on a candidates' Facebook page or take more action on the page, they may be more motivated to write something meaningful, such as discussing relevant political issues. This study examines this possibility by proposing the research question below.

RQ3: Do information presentation styles (i.e., text, picture, and audio) affect what users write in their comments?

## Method

In order to answer the research questions above, this study employed quantitative content analysis to explore the comments on candidates' Facebook pages. There were a total of 433 candidates throughout Japan at this time. Instead of

examining all of the candidates, this study focused on those in the Tokyo area as online media were used most frequently in Tokyo. Of the 20 candidates, 13 used Facebook page. The detailed sampling methods are explained below.

#### *Data Collection*

The data of 13 candidates' Facebook page were accessed on one day before the election (July 21st). The range of dates for gathering comments was from July 7th to July 20th as candidates were only allowed to use online media for election purposes during this period. The author later accessed the data and randomly extracted candidates' message and comments posted by individuals who visited candidates' Facebook pages using the procedure below.

First, each candidate was assigned a unique number from 1 to 13. For candidates with an odd number, our research team extracted the candidate's messages posted on the odd days (i.e. July 7th, 9th, 11th, etc.) and collected the comments posted as replies to these messages. The same method was used for a candidate assigned an even number on the even dates (July 8th, 10th, 12th, etc.). As a result, the author gathered a total of 392 candidates' messages posted by candidates and 1899 visitors' comments.

#### *Coding Categories for Visitors' Comments and Candidates' Messages*

Each comment was coded according to its "author," "expected receiver," "type of the comment," "presence of political issues," and "valence of the comment". Coders also collected additional information such as how many 'likes' a particular comment received and whether the comment was posted from a mobile device or not. The details of each category are explained below.

a) Author of the comment: The author of the comment was coded into one of two categories; candidates or visitors. Coders checked the name located on the upper-left hand of the comment in order to determine the author.

b) Expected receiver: Coders were asked to identify whether the comments were directed to candidates or others.

c) Type of comment: The type of comment was allocated six categories, including: "support and encouragement," "suggestions," "questions," "feedback," "reports of current status or agenda," and "messages to others." Coders were asked to first check for the presence or absence of these seven themes in each comment. Furthermore, for all of the themes except "support and encouragement," the coder was asked to identify whether each comment was election-related or non-election related. If the comments were not applicable to any of the categories above, coders were asked to label them as "others."

d) Political issues discussed in the comment: Each comment was also coded according to whether or not it mentioned political issues. Examples of political issues are: nuclear and energy policy, policy about recovery from disasters, parenting

and career possibilities for women, foreign affairs and national security, finance and economy, tax reform, and issues of employment.

e) Valence: Coders were asked to identify the valence of the comments as positive, natural, or negative.

For candidates' messages, the coding was done according to the "type of message," "presence of political issues," and "style of information presentation." In addition, coders also recorded how many comments, likes, and shares that each message acquired. These numbers of comments, likes, and shares were used as a measurement of visitors' Facebook page engagement in the later analyses.

a) Type of message: Coders identified the type of message by defining whether each message was election-related or private. Election-related messages included announcements and reports of election-related events and requests for supports; while private messages consisted of announcements and reports about the candidates' private lives (e.g. 'It is my birthday today!' or 'I really liked this snack when I was young'). Coders were asked to decide between the two by gauging which was more applicable to describe the overall theme of the message. However, they were also allowed to choose 'Both' if the message contained both types of reference to the same degree.

b) Political issues discussed in the message: Similarly, each message was also coded depending on whether it mentioned political issues.

c) Style of information presentation: Style of information presentation was identified by examining the presence of pictures and videos in the messages.

Categories in each topic were developed by referring to the coding scheme adopted in previous studies (e.g., Sweetser and Lariscy 2008). Only displayed content was considered in this coding.

### *Coding Procedures*

Coding was undertaken by five Japanese native speakers. The author was not included in this group. Prior to the coding, all of the coders participated in a one-and-a-half hours' training session. During this session, the author explained each variable on the coding sheet and provided some real examples. Coders then received the comments assigned to them, and coded each comment individually.

For checking the inter-coder reliability, a random set of items was selected and coded by all coders. The reliability was then calculated using pairwise percent agreement, and the results across the categories was approximately 89%.

## **Results**

In order to answer the RQ1 and RQ2, this study checked the percentages of occurrence of each level in each category. Of the 1937 comments, 1899 comments

(98%) were posted by visitors. Among of the 1899 comments, 96% of them were directed to candidates, and 54.1% of them contained statement of showing supports and encouragements to candidates. Only 37% of the visitors' comments mentioned something specific about election. Among these election related comments, the most frequently posted comment type was "thoughts about the election" (19.4%), followed by "how they got involved or will get involved in election" (13.8%), "suggestions" (3.9%), and "questions" (2.5%). Further, 9% of all comments mentioned some types of political issues. In terms of the tone of the comments, the majority of the comments (88%) were positive, and only 2.7% of the comments were negative. In terms of the dialogic communications, 9 out of 13 candidates posted at least one reply to their Facebook page visitors. The average number of the replied comment per candidate was 0.34 and with a range from 0 to 11.

Hypothesis 1 concerned whether the style of information presentation influenced visitors' engagements with the Facebook pages. As mentioned above, visitors' Facebook page engagement was operationalized as the total number of comments, likes, and shares that a particular message received. After scrutinizing the distribution of these three variables, the study found four possible outliers. One was belong to the number of likes. The item scored 3924 while the average was 220.00. The second and the third largest items of this variable were 2192 and 2194. The other three possible outliers belonged to the number of shares. The values of these items were 606, 435, and 329, while the average was 16.37. The next largest three items were 234, 194, and 185. As these items deviated remarkably from other observations, they were excluded from the independent-samples t-tests below.

Before running the independent-samples t-test, Levene's test for equality of variances was conducted to test the assumption of homogeneity of variance. As a result, violations were found for all of the three analyses. Owing to this violated assumption, t statistics not assuming homogeneity of variance was computed. The results showed that the use of pictures had a significant effect on the number of comments and likes. Specifically, messages with pictures received significantly more likes,  $t(237.43) = -5.53, p < .001$ ; but less comments than messages that only contained text,  $t(77.63) = 3.59, p < .001$  (see Table 1). Moreover, the use of videos also significantly affected the number of likes,  $t(75.61) = -3.68, p < .001$ , and shares,  $t(329) = -3.27, p < .001$ . The comparison of means revealed that messages with videos generated more likes and comments than messages that only contained text (see Table 2). Therefore, hypotheses 1 was partially supported.

Moreover, a series of chi-square test was performed to examine RQ3 that asked the effects of information presentation styles on the types of visitors' comments. The results showed significant effects for the use of pictures. Compared to these messages that only used text, messages with pictures were less likely to receive election related comments ( $\chi^2 = 12.54, p < .001$ ) and political issues contained comments ( $\chi^2 = 4.47, p < .05$ ) (see Table 3 and 4). None significant results were

found for the effects of the use of videos.

**Table 1: The results of independent-samples t-tests for the effects of information presentation styles (Text Only vs. With Pictures) on visitors' responses to messages.**

	Information Presentation Styles		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	Text Only (N = 59)	With Pictures (N = 272)		
Comments	237.90 (16.60)	173.69 (6.64)	3.59*	77.63
Likes	91.24 (14.83)	218.78 (17.69)	-5.53*	237.43
Shares	6.20 (3.60)	11.24 (1.55)	-1.39	329

Note: \*  $p < .001$ . Standard Errors appear in parentheses below means. Due to the violation of Levene's test for equality of variances, *t* statistics not assuming homogeneity of variance were computed for the number of comments and likes.

**Table 2: The results of independent-samples t-tests for the effects of information presentation styles (Text Only vs. With Videos) on visitors' responses to messages.**

	Information Presentation Styles		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	Text Only (N = 59)	With Videos (N = 57)		
Comments	237.90 (16.60)	261.37 (10.07)	-1.21	77.63
Likes	91.24 (14.83)	231.16 (34.96)	-3.68**	75.61
Shares	6.20 (3.60)	25.56 (5.05)	-3.27*	329

Note: \*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .001$ . Standard Errors appear in parentheses below means. Due to the violation of Levene's test for equality of variances, *t* statistics not assuming homogeneity of variance were computed for the number of comments and likes.

**Table 3: Crosstabulation of information presentation styles (Text Only vs. With Pictures) and the types of visitors' comments (Not Election-Related vs. Election Related).**

Types of Visitors' Comments	Information Presentation Styles		$\chi^2$
	Text Only	With Pictures	
Not Election-Related	133 (3.5)	898 (3.5)	12.54*
Election-Related	91.24 (3.5)	466 (-3.5)	

Note: \*  $p < .001$ . Adjusted standardized residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.



**Table 4 : Crosstabulation of information presentation styles (Text Only vs. With Pictures) and the types of visitors' comments (Without Political Issues vs. With Political Issues).**

Types of Visitors' Comments	Information Presentation Styles		$\chi^2$
	Text Only	With Pictures	
Without Political Issues	218 (-2.1)	1263 (2.1)	4.47*
With Political Issues	28 (2.1)	101 (-2.5)	

Note: \*  $p < .05$ . Adjusted standardized residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.

### Exploratory Analysis

In addition to the analyses above, additional analyses were performed to investigate if there were any other variables that determined the type of visitors' comments and their level of candidates' Facebook page engagement. First, a series of chi-square test was performed to examine the relationships between the type of candidates' messages and the type of visitors' comments. As can be seen from Table 5, when candidate posted messages that were election related, the replied comments from other visitors were more likely to be election related,  $\chi^2 = 18.32, p < .001$ .

Similar results were found when candidates discussed political issues on their messages, and the effects were much stronger this time (election related comments,  $\chi^2 = 41.83, p < .001$ ; mentioning political issues,  $\chi^2 = 99.56, p < .001$ ) (see Table 6 and 7). Further, the presence of political issues in candidates' messages also the valence of the comments. To be specific, when candidates mentioned some sort of political issues on their messages, replied comments were there more likely to be negative,  $\chi^2 = 5.98, p = .050$ .

**Table 5: Crosstabulation of the types of candidates' messages (Private Related vs. Election Related) and the types of visitors' comments (Not Election-Related vs. Election-Related).**

Types of Visitors' Comments	Types of Candidates' Messages		$\chi^2$
	Private-Related	Election-Related	
Not Election-Related	6.7 (4.3)	1129 (-4.3)	18.32*
Election-Related	11 (-4.3)	692 (4.3)	

Note: \*  $p < .001$ . Adjusted standardized residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.

**Table 6: Crosstabulation of the types of candidates' messages (Without Political Issues vs. With Political Issues) and types of visitors' comments (Not Election-Related vs. Election Related).**

Types of Visitors' Comments	Types of Candidates' Messages		$\chi^2$
	Without Political Issues	With Political Issues	
Not Election-Related	1014 (6.5)	182 (-6.5)	41.83*
Election-Related	510 (-6.5)	193 (-6.5)	

Note: \*  $p < .001$ . Adjusted standardized residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.

**Table 7: Crosstabulation of the types of candidates' messages (Without Political Issues vs. With Political Issues) and types of visitors' comments (Without Political Issues vs. With Political Issues).**

Types of Visitors' Comments	Types of Candidates' Messages		$\chi^2$
	Without Political Issues	With Political Issues	
Without Political Issues	1447 (10.3)	297 (-10.3)	99.56*
With Political Issues	77 (-10.3)	78 (10.3)	

Note: \*  $p < .001$ . Adjusted standardized residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.

In addition, a series of independent-samples t-test was performed for investigating how did the type of candidates' messages influence voters' Facebook page engagement. However, Levene's test for equality of variances was found to be violated for some of the analyses. Therefore, t statistics not assuming homogeneity of variance were computed for these analyses. The results indicated that election related messages were significantly more likely to get comments than private-related messages (see Table 8). In addition, the comparison of the means between the two groups showed that, on average, election related messages were more likely to receive shares, while private-related comments were more likely to get likes. Further, when candidates' messages included political issues, these messages are significantly more likely to receive comments (see Table 9). Although they were not significant, messages with political issues had higher means for the number of likes and shares compared to messages without political issues.

**Table 8: The results of independent sample t-tests for the effects of message type (Private Related vs. Election Related) on visitors' responses to the messages.**

	Message Type		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	Private-Related (N = 13)	Election-Related (N = 375)		
Comments	68.62 (14.36)	200.76 (5.82)	-8.53*	16.25
Likes	282.54 (163.72)	198.39 (13.16)	.51	12.17
Shares	6.85 (3.60)	12.78 (1.47)	-.75	386

Note: \*  $p < .001$ . Standard Errors appear in parentheses below means. Due to the violation of Levene's test for equality of variances, *t* statistics not assuming homogeneity of variance were computed for the number of comments and likes.

**Table 9: The results of independent sample t-tests for the effects of messages type (Without Political Issues vs. With Political Issues) on visitors' responses to the messages.**

	Message Type		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	Without Political Issues (N = 340)	With Political Issues (N = 48)		
Comments	193.70 (6.37)	214.98 (11.63)	-1.61	78.47
Likes	193.92 (14.67)	252.88 (40.02)	-1.41	386
Shares	10.27 (24.86)	28.98 (5.98)	-3.05*	51.89

Note: \*  $p < .01$ . Standard Errors appear in parentheses below means. Due to the violation of Levene's test for equality of variances, *t* statistics not assuming homogeneity of variance were computed for the number of comments and shares.

Interestingly, the results from a series of chi-square revealed the effects of mobile media use on visitors' comment types (see Table 10 and 11). Specifically, comments were less likely to be election related,  $\chi^2 = 5.74, p < .05$ , and less likely to mention political issues,  $\chi^2 = 6.21, p < .05$ , when they were posted via mobile media compared to non-mobile media (i.e., PC). In addition, the use of mobile media also had a significant effect on the tone of the message, with less negative messages in mobile media condition compared to non-mobile media condition,  $\chi^2 = 6.71, p < .05$ ) (see Table 12).

**Table 10: Crosstabulation of the commenting from mobile devices and the types of visitors' comments (Not Election-Related vs. Election-Related).**

Types of Visitors' Comments	Commenting from Mobile Devices		$\chi^2$
	No	Yes	
Not Election-Related	617 (-2.4)	579 (2.4)	5.57*
Election-Related	402 (2.4)	301 (-2.4)	

Note: \*  $p < .05$ . Adjusted standardized residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.

**Table 11: Crosstabulation of the commenting from mobile devices and the types of visitors' comments (Without Political Issues vs. With Political Issues).**

Types of Visitors' Comments	Commenting from Mobile Devices		$\chi^2$
	No	Yes	
Without Political Issues	921 (-2.5)	823 (2.5)	6.21*
With Political Issues	98 (2.5)	57 (-2.5)	

Note: \*  $p < .05$ . Adjusted standardized residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.

**Table 12: Crosstabulation of the commenting from mobile devices and types of visitors' comments (Without Political Issues vs. With Political Issues).**

Valence of the Comments	Commenting from Mobile Devices		$\chi^2$
	No	Yes	
Positive	897 (-.9)	786 (.9)	6.71*
Neutral	85 (-.5)	79 (.5)	
Negative	37 (2.6)	15 (-2.6)	

Note: \*  $p < .05$ . Adjusted standardized residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.

## Discussion

This study aimed to understand the role of online media in the 2013 Japanese Upper-House election by analyzing the content of comments posted on candidates' Facebook pages during the election campaign period. The results of this study revealed that visitors to the candidates' Facebook pages mainly posted comments for showing their support and the tone of these comments were positive most of the time. Meanwhile, comments that contained actual discussion of political issues were

rarely found. In addition, candidates barely replied to the comments that posted by visitors, signifying the lower level of dialogic communication between candidates and voters. Further analysis revealed that the visitors' involvement with candidates' Facebook pages (i.e., commenting, liking, and sharing) and the content of the comments were determined by several factors, including what candidates mentioned in their posts, whether candidates used multimedia platforms, and whether visitors made the comments via mobile devices. This section interprets these findings and draws implications for advancing our practice of online campaigning.

One of the main findings from this study is that the content of visitors' comments was directly connected to what candidates wrote on their posts. When candidates discussed political issues in their messages, comments tended to be more election-related and contained discussions of political issues. These results suggest that voters' political involvement can be promoted if candidates were willing to initiate meaningful political discussions over Facebook. Meanwhile, these results may also be influenced by the characteristics of Facebook's interface. Compared to Twitter, Facebook's interface more closely resembles a discussion group. This discussion group style environment might make individuals want to fit in the group. As a result, visitors unconsciously make adjustments to what they should write based on what the owner of the page wrote in the first place.

As expected, the style of information presentation had an effect on visitors' engagement with the candidates' Facebook pages. When candidates included pictures in their posts, visitors were more likely to "like" the posts. Interestingly enough, in addition to visitor engagement, the use of pictures also influenced the content of the visitors' comments. Candidates' posts with pictures received comments that had less election-related content and discussion of political issues. In the case when candidates used videos in their posts, there were more comments, likes, and shares. However, no effect was found from the use of video on the content of the comments. What this tells us is that while pictures are useful to induce a quick response from users (i.e., press "like" buttons), videos can generate stronger and potentially more valuable engagement such as commenting and sharing. Additionally, since pictures are linked to visitors' spontaneous involvement, the arguments made in the comments tend to be shallow in nature.

In addition, the modality used by visitors to make comments also influenced what they would write on their comments. Visitors' comments tended to be less election-related and had less political issue discussions when the comments were made from mobile devices. Furthermore, the tone of the comments was also more positive if users wrote comments from mobile media. These results may be caused by the fact that individuals who use mobile media to comment tend to be from younger generations. Since young people are less motivated to write something political, the comments posted via mobile media become less election-related. On the other hand, the results may also be caused by the characteristics of mobile media

itself. Individuals often use mobile phones while moving from place to place or while involved in other tasks. As their cognitive resources are limited in such situations, they are less likely to think through what they want to write. Also, the small screen and keypad of mobile media platforms make it harder for users to write long sentences. All of these may have acted as obstacles that led visitors to write comments that were superficial and shallow. This result also suggests that we may need to pay more attention to the effect of mobile media platforms on our consumption and creation of media content.

#### *How can we make the best use of social media?*

What more can be said about using Facebook for future election campaigning in Japan? One of the biggest barriers that prevented political discussions over Facebook was users' hesitation to write something negative on that platform. Of all the comments examined for this study, only 2.7% of them were negative towards the candidates. More interestingly, the research team actually encountered a comment that went against other commentators by saying, "I don't understand why some people criticized the candidates here. Isn't Facebook a place to have fun with others? Please use Facebook with correct manner." Although we cannot tell the whole story from this one comment, it does suggest that in the mind of some Japanese users, Facebook is a place to establish favorable relationships with others and have fun, rather than be negative or critical. Therefore, in order to promote political discussions over Facebook, we must create an atmosphere where arguments and discussions are welcomed. Perhaps the owners of the Facebook pages, such as candidates or other initiators, can specify certain rules for encouraging discussions at the top of the page.

In addition, the owners also need to initiate discussions and stimulate dialogue, rather than waiting for them to occur from the users' side. From the beginning of the election campaign period, Japanese news media seemed to be surrounded by an "interactivity myth" that the voters would engage in interactive communication with candidates as long as candidates used social media. However, Yamakoshi (2013) argued that the use of interactive media does not necessarily mean the immediate creation of interactive communication. In fact, most of the candidates examined in this study rarely replied to their Facebook page visitors. To make meaningful interactions happen, candidates need to take actions that can motivate discussions among voters and increase their engagement.

However, it should be noted that promoting political discussions are not the major reasons that candidates use online media. More importantly, they seem to be concerned about whether online media can help them promote positive images of themselves. For example, one article revealed that Japanese candidates were getting advice from PR companies to not post too many messages that discuss political issues over social media in order to prevent negative reactions (The Huffington Post,

2013). Such suggestions may be legitimate, since the results of this study also indicated that mentioning political issues generated more negative responses from visitors. What this tells us is that we need to consider candidates' motives and their side of story when we discuss better uses of online media election campaigning in the future.

## 7: Limitations

This study has several limitations that need to be discussed. Firstly, this study only focused on candidates that competed within the district of Tokyo, which is the biggest city in Japan. These candidates might use Facebook differently from other candidates, since they have different levels of expectation in terms of viewership and responses to their Facebook pages. Similarly, the characteristics of voters in Tokyo also differ from other cities, resulting in a discrepancy between what they would potentially comment on a Facebook page. Future studies should also examine candidates from other areas of Japan.

Additionally, some independent-samples t-tests were performed under the conditions where one group had much smaller sample sizes than another. Furthermore, the three variables of the visitors' engagement with Facebook page in this study (i.e., the number of comments, likes, and shares) had standard deviations that are larger than the mean. These could all influence the performance of t-tests and may result in faulty interpretation. In order to prevent such outcomes, this study also reported the means of each variable and used them for data interpretation. In general, real-world data, like the information used in this study, can easily be skewed and unbalanced. Therefore, some of these issues are not preventable. However, future studies should try to solve these issues by collecting more data and transforming variables before the analysis.

Thirdly, this study did not consider situational problems that may influence the results of the study. One of them is a series of restrictions about what candidates and voters can do or cannot do in terms of online campaigning. For instance, voters can post campaign-oriented or supporting messages (e.g., *Please vote for him!*) through their Twitter or Facebook platforms, but they are not allowed to send private messages to others via online media, which includes these social media platforms. Critics pointed out that these complicated rules turned off many voters from using online media in this election period. Furthermore, online campaigning was only allowed during the election period, which is only about two weeks in length. Given such a short period of time, candidates and voters might be less motivated to engage in meaningful interactions with others, resulting in fewer dialogues occurring.

Lastly, this study focused on Facebook, which is just one of the many types of online media platforms that political candidates have begun using. Due to the fact that every online media platform has its own unique characteristics that could

influence the way users utilize them, the results of this study may not be able to reveal much about how users might utilize other online media platforms. The author of this study recommends that readers also refer to other studies of this topic in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of how online media was used during the election campaign period and how it might be used in the future.

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