Posters of presidential candidates Tharman Shanmugaratnam and Tan Kin Lian next to the website of candidate Ng Kok Song, who had opted not to print posters or banners. Physical outreach efforts – including posters and banners – still matter, say the writers, as they aid candidates in reaching voters who are less active online. ST PHOTO: SHINTARO TAY

Singapore's presidential race and how social media became a key battleground

Social media played an important role in a few surprising ways in this three-horse race.

Carol Soon and Beverly Tan

From clips of the "orh nee children" interview to adorable videos of the crowd favourite feline Max, social media was a key battleground for the three-way fight in the just-concluded presidential election.

Each of the three candidates' social media campaigns, considered alongside the election outcome, highlights the importance of a cohesive campaign strategy that includes social media.

Yet social media is a double-edged sword. The outcome is a stark reminder that large numbers of views and followers on social media might not always translate into nor reflect support at the ballot box.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND PODCASTS

All three candidates expectedly leveraged their social media strategy extensively to gain reach for their campaign, including appearances on podcasts. Their social media campaigns began in earnest much earlier than Nomination Day, with promotional and outreach efforts under way well before candidatures were confirmed.

This is unsurprising. During the general election in 2020, a study conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies found that social media and instant messaging were the two most-used platforms for political engagement. We also found a decline in the proportion of voters tapping traditional media – including television, print and radio – for information once a day compared with GE2015.

All three candidates made individual appearances on podcasts – like the Political Prude podcast, Yah Lah But and The Daily Ketchup – to participate in intimate and in-depth discussions. They also engaged with popular local social-media accounts like SGAG and local celebrities with influential social media accounts like Taufik Batisah, Simonboy and Sonia Chew, who posted about their interactions with the candidates.

These forms of engagement have allowed the three gentlemen to share in a more casual manner details of their background, credentials, campaign messages,

Presidential candidate Tharman Shanmugaratnam and his wife Jane Ittogi posing for a photo at an event held by Hepmil Media Group, which runs local humour site SGAG. PHOTO: THARMAN.SG/INSTAGRAM

Presidential candidate Ng Kok Song pictured in a TikTok video with his cat, Max Lemon Ng, which became a crowd favourite. Mr Ng used videos of Max to get more eyeballs on his page. PHOTO: NGKOKSONG OFFICIAL/TIKTOK

personal lives and opinions on a wide range of issues. Compared with the more formal appearances on mainstream media, social media highlights the in-real-life aspects of a candidate that provide audiences with snippets of who they might be as a person, rather than what they stand for as a figure running for public office. Podcasts have also given Singaporeans a glimpse into the inner lives, aspirations and values of the candidates, with their compelling conversational format.

THARMAN SHANMUGARATNAM: THE PERSON BEHIND THE POLICY WONK

Coming into this race with a strong national-level profile as former senior minister and with

years of helming government coffers when he was the finance minister, Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam's social media campaign focused on projecting a softer image over TikTok and Instagram to reveal his personal life.

Content looking at his close relationship with his wife Jane Ittogi fared particularly well. The eloquence of the couple, their frequent references to the Singaporean way of life and their willingness to get personal drew voters in.

And, in sharing the experiences of Singaporeans he has served over the years, amplified through Instagram stories, pictures and short videos posted by the influencers he engaged with, his team hoped to have his track

record and validation from others speak for themselves. Testimonials from voters crossing paths with him also captured his genuine desire to help Singaporeans and were among his best-performing content.

His campaign logo, the pineapple, a symbol of prosperity resonating with many, was easily shareable as an emoji and as a physical goodie, compared with the other two candidates' more symbolic logos. His "Respect for All" message was a positive unifying call.

Mr Tharman's campaign underscored the importance of resonance over reach and in making every post count. Even though he did not breach one million views on his TikTok videos, his social media posts were filled with supportive comments and pineapple emojis. He won the presidential race with 70.4 per cent of the vote.

NG KOK SONG: THE MOST AGGRESSIVE SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

Mr Ng Kok Song came in behind Mr Tharman with 15.72 per cent of the vote – a respectable showing for a relatively unknown underdog. Recognising the challenge he faced, Mr Ng was clear from the beginning of his campaign that he would focus his efforts online as he invested in growing his following on social media while dispensing with physical posters and banners.

And so he ran the most aggressive online campaign out of the three. Indeed, Mr Ng was the most active of all three presidential hopefuls in engaging podcasters, going on at least eight different podcasts covering a wide variety of audiences. Mr Ng also aptly made use of trends on TikTok, such as the Barbie trend and videos of his cat, Max, to get more eyeballs on his page.

These efforts paid off in gathering a significant following. Although Mr Ng started his social media accounts later in the game than his competition, he amassed more than 108,000 followers on TikTok, boasting the largest following among the candidates.

And yet his social media strategy teaches us a valuable lesson: Views might not translate into votes. Reach does not guarantee conversion.

The large number of eyes on his content, ironically, meant more people were scrutinising his every

move. Despite the virality of his posts, the comments were often negative or expressed support for other candidates. His surprise date video attracted numerous comments on the age gap between him and his fiancee Sybil Lau, with a top comment remarking that the two "looked awkward". Singaporean Redditors were also quick to call out his "kiss the ground" moment in Kangkar as "cringy", while some others called it "wayang".

TAN KIN LIAN: MORE COHERENCE NEEDED

Mr Tan Kin Lian was easily the most controversial candidate in this race. Having lost his deposit in PE2011, he secured a more positive outcome this time, with 13.88 per cent of votes.

Mr Tan took a similar approach as Mr Tharman, opting to use a combination of social media, posters and micro posters. His social media efforts focused on Facebook, where he had amassed a considerable following prior to the start of the campaign, unlike the other two candidates, who expended more effort on TikTok and Instagram.

Yet after entering the presidential race, Mr Tan's posts became a hodgepodge of pictures of his daily life, links to media coverage, and calls for donations, endorsements and volunteers, with no discernible strategy.

Being on the back foot on social media put him at a disadvantage. Throughout his campaign, Mr Tan's old Facebook posts became a hot topic for discussion as online sleuths dug out, compiled and amplified his posts that had racist undertones and objectified women. The hashtag "#tankinlian" had more than 18.9 million views, despite his TikTok videos typically receiving fewer than 10,000 views throughout the hustings. The top videos with this hashtag criticised or made fun of Mr Tan, suggesting his engagement with influencers and journalists did more harm than good for his campaign.

Despite the negative reactions towards him on TikTok, videos featuring Mr Tan garnered quite supportive comments on YouTube, which is known to skew towards an older male audience. This difference suggests that Mr Tan was not as well received by younger voters.

LESSONS FOR FUTURE ELECTIONS

This presidential election provides food for thought on the use of social media for campaigning.

First, honesty and authenticity remain important values. Contradictions in the words and actions of candidates, past and present, can trigger adverse reactions that form lasting impressions.

Although personal accounts and pages allow candidates to curate how they are portrayed online, content generated by others can sway votes, especially when controversial posts and videos from the past are resurfaced to question the character of a person.

Second, candidates must be sensitive to the social causes close to the hearts of young voters, including gender equality and race relations. Passing what might come across as judgmental or discriminatory remarks is bound to make candidates look tone deaf and unrelatable.

Third, candidates should be highly circumspect over their social media footprint and responses to online chatter. Social media has permanence. Past unflattering posts might be recorded by others before they can be deleted.

Candidates should take ownership and apologise when they surface. Justifications through accusations of smear campaigns, and comments seen as racist, misogynistic and homophobic are certain to alienate huge segments of Singapore society.

Overall, the 2023 Presidential Election has shown that social media can be both a powerful tool used to great effect and a handicap crippling a campaign. Physical outreach efforts – involving walkabouts, posters and banners – still matter as they aid candidates in making their case in the flesh and reaching voters less active online.

For the next general election, political parties and candidates must use social media wisely, carefully and strategically, to avoid doing more harm than good to their campaigns.

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