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The Motivational Pattern of Attitude Formation within the Functional  
Approach: With reference to first time voters in the University of  
Colombo<sup>67</sup>

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ABSTRACT

While attitude formation and change remains a significant element in the pursuit of marketing, today's political marketers are successfully driving various markets of target voters towards favourable attitude change. The first time voter group is an important target

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market here, and as identified in literature, mass media and peer groups play a major role in changing political attitudes of first time voters. In the researcher's effort to explore the functions fulfilled through the attitude change process for the first time voter group, the findings indicate that first time voters are mostly intent on achieving personal goals by adopting political attitudes, thus satisfying the adjustive function through their expectations of rewards and punishments. However, the value expressive function is also given prominence, due to the need to identify with high status peers, who also act as opinion leaders. The results show that political attitude change also represents the knowledge function, which is linked to an individual's need for personal goal achievement through the perceived credibility of the influencing agent.

### Background

An attitude is a predisposition of an individual to evaluate some symbol or object or aspect of his world in a favourable or unfavourable manner (Katz, 1960). While research on attitude continues to contemplate about why people form attitudes, extant literature signifies that attitude change is only achievable if the reason behind it is known. Accordingly, Hamilton and Mineo (1996) highlight the significance of people forming attitudes for different reasons. In the most general terms it can be said that an attitude is formed by the excitation of a *need* in the individual. This need may arise within the individual or be triggered by a relevant cue in the environment (Jones, n.d.).

Basic theoretical approaches to adopt when studying attitude change were formed through the consensus built in the early 1970s; McGuire's typology identifies these approaches as information-processing, consistency, social judgment and functional (McGuire, 1968). The common perception is that these approaches are complementary rather than competitive, but they differ in their emphasis (Locander & Spivey, 1978), and the functional approach is unique in its attempt to understand the motivational basis of attitudes. While the other approaches put heavy emphasis on a person's belief structure in attitude change, the functional approach views attitude formation and change to be dependant on the motivational pattern supporting a person's belief structure, where different cognitive elements are linked to different motives (Locander & Spivey, 1978). In other words, the functional approach constitutes the existence of a personal need that drives the formation of attitude towards a particular object.

In direct comparison to the other approaches, the functional approach to attitude formation becomes important, because it attempts to assess why a particular attitude is

held, so that the proper attitude change appeal can be made; this is especially important to modern marketers of goods and services who struggle to thrive in the midst of growing competition, where different consumers might like or dislike some object with equal intensity but for completely different reasons.

Politics and marketing is known to have an all-encompassing effect on society, and marketing in politics is becoming an emergent area throughout the current ICT enabled society. In this effort, it becomes all the more important for political marketers to understand how the voting public is socialized in to political attitudes (Hooghe, 2004). This process of socialization, better termed as Political socialization, can be identified as the process through which individuals acquire the information, beliefs, attitudes, and values that help them to understand the workings of a political system, and as part of the process, adopt some of the beliefs, attitudes and values (Dennis, 1968). Hence, political attitude formation is a significant part of the political socialization process, extensively being used by political marketers today.

As identified in extant literature, various needs that drive attitude formation can arise within the individual or be triggered by a relevant cue in the environment (Jones, n.d.). While research identifies several ways in which we acquire attitudes, two important sources that act as cues from the external environment are *peers* (Moschis & Churchill, 1978; Moschis & Moore, 1979; Dean & Croft, 2000; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Makgosa & Mohube, 2007), and the *media* (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Moschis & Moore, 1979; McLeod & McDonald, 1985; O'Shaughnessy, 1990; Smith, 1989; Maarek, 1995; Weaver, 1996; Newman, 1999a, 1999b; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). In using mass media and peer interactions within the political socialization process, literature identifies its end result to be a set of attitudes towards the political system (McCombs & Shaw, as cited in Cowart, 2006). There is an implication for political marketers to design their political campaigns, by using influential socialization agents such as peers and (mass) media to cater to their target electorate. The youth voting population of a country is a significant part of the electorate in shaping the political direction of the country and from this group, the first time voters remain a much sought after group by vote-hungry politicians. This is apparent even in Sri Lanka, where politicians are especially targeting the youth in the country, who represents the total voting population significantly.

Despite evidence found from a nation-wide survey conducted on 'The Youth and the Challenge of Democratization' (Mitra, Enskat, & Frey, 2002), that implies a low level of political interest among the Sri Lankan youth, a contrastingly high level of political

interest was displayed among the youth population for the presidential election held in 2010; interest in politics is considered to be a prerequisite in attitude formation (Mitra, Enskat & Frey, 2002; Bush, Smith & Martin 1999; Al-Rafee & Cronan, 2006; Moschis & Churchill, 1978). As attitude formation is an implication of the existence of an individual need, and since the young voter is constantly exposed to mass media as well as various peer groups, it justifies the need to explore the role peer groups and mass media play in influencing a person's attitudes through his need to achieve individual motives. Hence, based on the above arguments, this study addresses the problem, "how do peers and mass media influence the political attitude formation of first time voters."

The four functions identified by Katz (1960) within the functional approach, viz, utilitarian (adjustive), ego-defensive, value-expressive, and knowledge, will be used as a theoretical lens to explore the research issue.

### Methodology

In considering the primary objectives of the study, an interpretivist paradigm and accordingly a qualitative research methodology has been adopted. This is because it involves an in depth study in to the complex human thinking patterns of individuals, as they form (political) attitudes to satisfy different motives (functions) while interacting with mass media and peer groups. As per the researcher's convenience, the University of Colombo has been used as a research context, and the need to pursue the research problem in an exploratory manner has led to the selection of the case study method as a strategy of inquiry, where the individual undergraduate has been used as a single case study unit. This was because university undergraduates consisted of first time voters who first voted for the recent presidential election 2010, and who were regularly exposed to mass media and peer groups. While a purposive sampling approach was followed in the data gathering process, a total of 21 in-depth interviews were conducted as the primary data collection method. The interviewed respondents consisted of first year and second year university students, from the faculty of Management and Finance, faculty of Law, faculty of Science and faculty of Arts. All respondents came from lower-middle class families, were highly exposed to mass media political campaigns, had a high social network of friends within the university and were familiar with the Sri Lankan political system at a very mediocre level. The thematic analysis method was used to analyze the data gathered, where an iterative coding process was conducted, to identify, analyze and report patterns (themes) across the data set.

## Findings

Katz (1960) identified that the reasons for holding on to or changing attitudes are found in the functions they perform for individuals. These functions, as identified by him are adjustment, ego-defense, value-expression and knowledge.

The findings of the study indicate that first time voters, who are seen to lack political experience and knowledge, usually form political attitudes by the influence of senior students, in order to get social approval and avoid social punishment (disapproval). A peer can be identified as a person of equal standing with another and a peer group consists of people who are equal in such respects as age, education, or social class (Encarta World English Dictionary, 2009). While peer groups seem to be a stronger influencing agent than mass media, it is found that 'high status' peers who have strong connections with influential political parties, are relatively more successful in changing political attitudes of first time voters, due to the dual benefits of giving social approval and the ability to offer more concrete rewards such as employment opportunities through political contacts. This agrees with Katz's identification of the *adjustive function*, where the shaping of new behaviour is achieved through rewards and punishments as they relate to the individual's attitudes and goals.

The *value expressive function* explains that by adopting the attitude of a social group, an individual is able to confirm his self-identity, as the group gives him/her a sense of identity. The findings also indicate a link with this function because, first time voters are seen to be keen on maintaining favourable relationships with senior student groups and joining social circles which will help them to fit in easily with the university culture and system. A link was identified between the need to maintain favourable relationships and the need to identify with senior peer groups in the university, which ultimately resulted in the formation of political attitudes through peer influence.

Within the *knowledge function*, Katz (1960) identifies that an individual seeks knowledge to give meaning to an unorganized and chaotic universe. The expectation of first time voters to improve their political knowledge while interacting with media and peer groups was evident. The value of conversation with regard to peer groups was seen to reduce any political ambiguity regarding the selection of a political candidate. The influencing agent's power in helping an individual achieve his personal goals was perceived through his credibility – that is, his expertness (knowing the truth) and trustworthiness (telling the truth). Having access to political knowledge seemed to convince the individual of the politician's (or political party's) credibility and its

congruency with the individual's personal goals and value system. As identified by Katz (1957), that opinion leaders are more influential than mass media in attitude formation, the findings show that senior student groups act as influential opinion leaders in changing the political attitudes of first time voters. Indeed, the attitude of others towards "opinion leaders" is functionally determined by the need of knowledge (Jones, n.d.).

## Conclusion

The study findings highlight that political attitudes of first time voters were mostly formed and driven on its ability to help them achieve personal goals. That is, individuals were more concerned with the achievement of goals and the long lasting effects of value congruence of their behaviour (adjustive function), rather than the need for self identity (value expressive) and the need for knowledge. Possible reasons for this point toward the pursuit of higher education and thereby higher aspirations for a better future among university students. Confirmation of self identity through value expression is observed specially in instances of exposure to high status peers, who act as influential opinion leaders. The knowledge function too plays an indirect role through its link with the need to achieve personal goals, based on the influencing agent's credibility.

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