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Unveiling the digital persona image: the influence of social media on political candidates' brand personality and voter behaviour in Kuwait

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The research paper examined the interplay between social media, brand personality, and voter behaviour in Kuwait's unique political environment. The study applied the Aaker model of brand personality to investigate how social media shapes the brand personality of political candidates, how voters perceive this brand personality, and the impact it has on their behaviour. Further, it explored the role of tribal and religious affiliations in shaping the perceived brand personality of candidates and their implications for election campaign strategies. Through a quantitative research design, data was collected from 363 Kuwaiti voters using a structured questionnaire. The findings revealed the significant influence of social media on voter behaviour, as well as the relevance of the Aaker model in the political context of Kuwait. The study uncovered the connection between voter demographics and preferences, highlighting the impact of socio-cultural factors on voter behaviour. The implications drawn from these findings provide valuable insights for election campaign strategies in Kuwait's digitalised political environment.

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Introduction

The political situation of Kuwait presents a unique case within the Middle East, notable for its hereditary emirate that assures a dynamic interplay between traditional tribal structures, evolving democratic norms and the modernising influence of technology, primarily through social media. As in most societies, political affiliations in Kuwait are shaped by a myriad of factors like tribal and religious affiliations, socio-economic status and gender. However, the advent of social media has radically transformed the electoral terrain. This, in turn, necessitates an analytical approach to comprehend its impact on voter behaviour. Applying the Aaker model (1997) in this context elucidates the role of brand personality in shaping voters' perceptions and decisions. In essence, brand personality, as outlined by Aaker, encapsulates the human characteristics or traits associated with a brand. In the political arena, a candidate is the brand, and their image, affiliations, and proposed policies embody their brand personality.

The emergence of social media as a dominant medium for election campaigns in Kuwait has allowed these 'brand personalities' to be constructed, deconstructed, and communicated more dynamically than ever before. Al-Otaibi and Fraihat (2016) noted the importance of social media in Kuwait's 2012 parliamentary elections, where candidates utilised platforms like Twitter to reach out to the electorate. These platforms became instrumental in shaping the brand personality of candidates through empowering them to showcase attributes that resonate with voters. A candidate, for instance, may project themselves as 'down-to-earth' and 'honest' on social media so as to target voters who value authenticity and integrity. They may share posts and videos that align with these traits; consequently, communicating a specific brand personality. Aaker's model suggests that such strategic brand personality projection could greatly influence voter behaviour through encouraging support from voters who identify with these projected traits.

Notably, the Aaker model further suggests that congruence between the voters' self-concept and the candidate's brand personality is vital for candidate preference. This premise is mainly relevant to Kuwait's political circumstances in which tribal and religious affiliations significantly shape voters' self-concept. For instance, Al-Anzi (2019) has highlighted how tribal loyalties influence voting patterns. Candidates who effectively project their tribal affiliations as part of their brand personality are more likely to appeal to voters from the same tribe. Moreover, the model's dimension of 'competence' could be seen in voters' preference for candidates who are perceived as knowledgeable and reliable, especially on platforms like LinkedIn, where candidates often highlight their qualifications and achievements. However, whereas social media has opened new avenues for brand personality expression, it has also introduced new challenges. The authenticity of a candidate's online persona might be scrutinised, and discrepancies between online representation and real-world actions could trigger a level of distrust and disengagement among voters (Alhaimer, 2023).

Based on the above premise, the ensuing paper seeks to apply the Aaker model to understand voter behaviour in Kuwait through the use of social media and brand personality in election campaigns.

In recent years, the interface between politics and social media has become a subject of considerable interest for scholars and practitioners alike primarily in societies undergoing rapid digitalisation. This is evident in the case of Kuwait in which the advent of social media has had a transformative impact on political campaigning and voter behaviour. Nevertheless, the current understanding of how social media and brand personality, as conceptualised in Aaker's model (1997), influences voter

behaviour in Kuwait remains limited and fragmented. The dynamics of political campaigns in Kuwait have traditionally been shaped by tribal and religious affiliations (Abu Sulaib, 2023). However, the emergence of social media as a tool for political engagement has significantly transformed these dynamics. Despite this, the empirical exploration of how social media platforms are used to create and project a candidate's brand personality, and how this, in turn, impacts voter preferences in Kuwait is scant. This constitutes a significant gap in the literature especially when considering the growing role of social media in political discourse.

Moreover, while the Aaker model offers a robust theoretical framework for understanding brand personality, its application to the political context of Kuwait is yet to be fully explored. The model posits that congruence between the voters' self-concept and the candidate's brand personality could vitally influence voter behaviour. However, to what extent and in what ways this principle applies within the unique socio-political milieu of Kuwait, mainly concerning the role of tribal and religious affiliations, is unclear. There are practical examples that reflect the significance of these research gaps. During the 2020 Kuwait parliamentary elections, a considerable number of candidates actively utilised social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat to reach out to voters (Al-Musawi, 2021). These candidates projected diverse brand personalities. This was through embodying traits ranging from 'reliability' to 'adventurousness'. Nevertheless, understanding of how these brand personalities, as perceived by the voters, influenced the electoral outcomes is largely anecdotal.

Given the increasingly digitalised nature of Kuwait's political field, the absence of systematic and empirical insights into the interaction between social media, brand personality and voter behaviour constitute a significant problem. This study, therefore, aims to address this gap by applying the Aaker model to understand voter behaviour in Kuwait. This is done through focusing on the role of social media and brand personality in election campaigns. Hence, this research paper will aim to examine the role of social media in shaping the brand personality of political candidates in Kuwait; to investigate how voters perceive the brand personality of political candidates as communicated through social media; to assess the impact of a candidate's brand personality on voter behaviour in Kuwait; to understand the interplay between tribal and religious affiliations and the perceived brand personality of political candidates; and to draw implications from the findings for election campaign strategies in Kuwait.

Literature review

The role of social media in political campaigning, the application of brand personality concepts to political candidates, and their subsequent influence on voter behaviour constitute an intriguing triad of interconnected domains. To fully comprehend this intricate relationship, there is a need to review relevant the literature in multifarious contexts including Kuwaiti one. This section presents a comprehensive overview of key theories, models and empirical findings that underpin the three pillars of this study: social media in political campaigns, the Aaker model of brand personality, and voter behaviour in Kuwait. Social media's role in political campaigns is a burgeoning area of research. In the context of Kuwait, platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat have become indispensable tools for candidates to communicate with potential voters (Al-Musawi, 2021). Social media platforms facilitate the cultivation of a 'brand personality' for these candidates, a concept well-established in

consumer marketing (Aaker, 1997); nevertheless, relatively underexplored in political discourse.

Aaker's model of brand personality posits that brands, akin to humans, possess distinguishable personality traits that consumers could relate to. The extension of this concept to political candidates forms the basis for understanding how voters may perceive and subsequently choose to support certain candidates. However, its application in political contexts, primarily in societies like Kuwait with strong tribal and religious undercurrents, necessitates a comprehensive exploration of the model's nuances and the potential influence of societal factors (Abu Sulaib, 2023). Understanding voter behaviour is a complex endeavour. In Kuwait, elements such as tribal and religious affiliations manifest substantial roles in shaping voting patterns (Abu Sulaib, 2023). However, in an era of digital political campaigning, there is an increasing need to investigate the impact of a candidate's social media brand personality on voter behaviour.

The objective of this literature review is to critically examine these three domains and their interconnections so as to provide a robust theoretical underpinning for the subsequent empirical investigation. In doing so, this review will contribute to the broader academic discourse on political campaigning, brand personality, and voter behaviour as well as shed light on the particular context of Kuwait.

Aaker model and its application to brand personality and political campaigns

Jennifer Aaker's seminal work on brand personality has provided a rich conceptual framework that has significantly influenced marketing and branding research since its introduction in the late 1990s (Aaker, 1997). The Aaker model posits that brands could be viewed as having a 'personality' composed of a set of human characteristics. Aaker identified five dimensions of brand personality: Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness. Each dimension comprises a cluster of related traits that collectively define the character of the brand. The application of Aaker's model to political campaigns, however, is relatively uncharted territory. In conventional product branding, consumers form a relationship with the brand based on its perceived personality traits (Aaker, 1997). Likewise, it could be posited that voters develop a relationship with political candidates based on their perceived personality traits, effectively branding the candidate (Caprara and Zimbardo, 2004). In this context, a candidate's brand personality could be shaped through their communication style, policy positions and personal image conveyed through social media platforms.

In relation to this study, it is possible to utilise the Aaker model to classify and understand the perceptions of voters towards different candidates based on their brand personalities as presented on social media. The model's five dimensions could provide a systematic approach to analyse the data and categorise responses. For example, voters' perceptions of a candidate's sincerity could be gauged through attributes such as honesty and authenticity in their social media communication. Excitement could be assessed based on the candidate's dynamism, innovativeness, or ability to inspire. Competence may be reflected in the perceived intelligence, reliability, or success of the candidate. Sophistication might be linked to the perceived glamour or charm, and ruggedness could be associated with attributes such as toughness or unconventionality. Aaker's model provides a structure to assess voters' responses to various traits linked to these dimensions. It could offer a nuanced understanding of why voters may be attracted to certain candidates over others. This, in turn, would provide an analytical framework for predicting and interpreting voter behaviour. However, it is critical to

acknowledge that Aaker's model was developed within a Western context and may not fully account for the unique cultural, societal and political variables within Kuwait. For instance, attributes such as religious problems, economics and finance, social challenges, and political questions, which were part of the respondents' survey, may not fit neatly into Aaker's five dimensions. Furthermore, cultural elements unique to Kuwait, such as the significance of tribal and religious affiliations or the preference for a candidate from one's own tribe or religious denomination, may significantly influence the perception and importance of certain brand personality traits. These factors demonstrate the need for an adaptation or extension of Aaker's model to accurately reflect and analyse voter behaviour in the Kuwaiti context.

Influence of social media on political campaigns

The advent of social media has had a profound impact on the global political landscape, revolutionising how campaigns are conducted and reshaping voter behaviour. Social media platforms provide candidates with new, direct channels to connect with voters, deliver messages and shape their brand image (Gainous and Wagner, 2014). In turn, these platforms influence voter behaviour by providing novel avenues for political engagement, discourse, and information exchange. Extensive research has documented the influence of social media on political campaigns in a variety of contexts. Enli and Skogerbø (2013) highlighted social media as a game-changer in elections, enabling politicians to bypass traditional media and directly communicate with voters. Meanwhile, Kruike-meier et al. (2013) found that personalised communication via social media positively influenced citizens' political participation and engagement.

In the context of Kuwait, the role of social media in political campaigns is notably salient. Al-Musawi (2021) indicated that social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram have become crucial tools for candidates to convey messages, shape their public image, and interact with potential voters. This resonates with the feedback from this study who indicated social media as a prominent platform to follow election campaigns and candidates' news. These trends highlight the potential power of social media in shaping a candidate's brand personality, an area where the Aaker model may offer valuable insights. For example, a candidate perceived as honest and competent, traits aligning with Aaker's Sincerity and Competence dimensions, may utilise social media to regularly share factual, detailed policy proposals which would demonstrate authenticity and intelligence.

However, the interaction between social media and politics is complex, and the influence is not unidirectional. Voters too utilise these platforms to share opinions, engage in discussions, and voice criticisms or support (Bode and Vraga, 2018). This interactive feature could in turn shape the candidates' brand image. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of social media's role in political campaigns should consider the communication strategies of candidates as well as the active role of voters. It is worth noting that while social media offers myriad opportunities, it also presents challenges. Misinformation and the 'echo chamber' effect, where users predominantly encounter views similar to their own, may skew perceptions and decision-making processes (Bakshy et al. 2015). In the Kuwaiti context, these issues may be particularly relevant given the tribal and religious nuances in the society. As a result, there is a need for further exploration.

Voter behaviour in Kuwait and the role of social media, brand image, and personality traits

Research on voter behaviour in Kuwait, much like that of other nations, has evolved over time to reflect the increasing prominence of social media, brand image, and personality traits in

shaping political affiliations and decisions. Various studies have explored the intricacies of these relationships and offered nuanced understandings that resonate with the findings from the survey undertaken in this study. The intricate political landscape of Kuwait, marked by its tribal, religious, and sociopolitical nuances, has significant implications for voter behaviour. Abu Sulaib (2023) study explored how these dynamics manifest in election patterns. They found tribal and religious affiliations to be influential determinants of voter choices, with voters often aligning with candidates who share their background or reflect their values. This finding resonates with the survey, wherein a considerable portion of respondents identified the candidate's tribal or religious affiliations as a key factor in their voting decision.

The role of social media in shaping political opinions and behaviour has gained increasing scholarly attention in recent years. Al-Rawi's (2017) research on Arab youth found that social media plays a significant role in shaping their political awareness and participation. Alkazemi and Gulf (2019) further examined the role of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook in influencing the public sphere during Kuwait's election campaigns. They indicated that such platforms have offered unique spaces for discourse which affected political engagement and voting behaviour. Applying the Aaker Model, the impact of brand image and personality traits on political campaigns is a relatively uncharted area in various political contexts including Kuwait. However, studies from the broader marketing and political science fields offer valuable insights. Baines et al. (2002) concluded that politicians' brand images significantly influence voter behaviour. Further, Caprara et al. (2002) explored how the congruence of personality traits between voters and politicians could affect voting decisions. The analysis in the survey corroborates these findings. For instance, qualities aligning with Aaker's dimensions (i.e., competence (intelligence, success), excitement (daring, adventurous), sincerity (honesty, realism), and sophistication (high-end, charming)) were perceived as attractive attributes in a candidate by the respondents. This echoes Aaker's argument that congruence between the perceived personality traits of a brand (or in this case, a candidate) and an individual's self-concept could enhance attraction and loyalty towards the brand.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this research paper is grounded in the Aaker Model of Brand Personality and its application to understand the intersection of social media's role in election campaigns and voter behaviour in Kuwait. It encapsulates the dimensions of (i.e., sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness). This offers a systematic and comprehensive understanding of brand personality. This framework, which is widely applied in marketing research, is adapted here to conceptualise and analyse the 'branding' of political candidates and its influence on voter behaviour.

Research methodology

Research design. The research design for this study was shaped by the necessity to gather in-depth data from Kuwaiti voters on their perceptions of brand personality traits in political candidates as well as how these perceptions are influenced by the candidates' presence on social media. The study employed a quantitative methodological approach using a structured questionnaire as the primary data collection tool. The choice of a quantitative method was motivated by the need to establish patterns and relationships in voter behaviour. This would offer scope for future research to replicate or extend the study (Creswell, 2014).

Population, sample size and sampling technique. The process of defining a suitable population and determining the sample size is an essential part of a well-designed quantitative research study. The population, in research terms, refers to the total group of individuals from which the sample is drawn and to which the researcher wishes to generalise the results (Bryman, 2016). For this study, the population consisted of voters in Kuwait. Understanding the population's characteristics was vital to draw a representative sample and interpret the survey results meaningfully. In this research, it was essential to consider diverse voter demographics such as gender, age, academic achievement, career, and electorate district. The objective was to ensure that the sample reflected the heterogeneity of the Kuwaiti voter population.

A sample, on the other hand, refers to a subset of the population that is selected for the actual study (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007). The sample for this study comprised 363 Kuwaiti voters. These voters were selected using a simple random sampling technique. This method was chosen because it gives each member of the population an equal chance of being selected. This in turn would minimise bias and promoting the generalisability of the findings (Etikan et al. 2016). The sample size, in this case, was determined based on practical considerations, the desired statistical power of the study, and the level of precision required. As a rule of thumb, a larger sample size tends to provide a better estimate of the population parameters and it increases the study's power. Hence, it would reduce the risk of Type II errors (i.e., wrongly failing to reject the null hypothesis) (Suresh and Chandrashekhara, 2012). However, resources and time often limit the size of the sample that is feasibly used in a study. In this study, a sample of 363 respondents was deemed to be sufficient to address the research objectives and provide reliable and valid findings.

Data analysis technique. Data analysis in research is a process that involves inspecting, cleaning, transforming and modelling collected data to discover useful information, suggest conclusions, and support decision-making (Babbie, 2016). The chosen method of data analysis should align with the study's research design and the nature of the data collected. For the present study, quantitative methods of data analysis were adopted, given the structured nature of the survey data and the scale of the respondents' population ($n = 363$). Data gathered from the questionnaires were initially subjected to cleaning. This process involved scanning for missing or incorrectly entered responses and inconsistencies that could have occurred during the data collection phase. Any discrepancies identified were rectified through a process of data cleaning to ensure accuracy in the final analysis (Rahm and Do, 2000). After cleaning, the data were then coded and entered into a statistical software package - specifically SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). SPSS is widely used in social science research for its ease of use and powerful analytical capabilities (Field, 2018). The software facilitates the analysis of large datasets and provides a range of descriptive and inferential statistical techniques.

Descriptive statistics were first calculated to offer an overview of the data. This included computing measures of central tendency (mean, median, mode), dispersion (range, standard deviation, variance), and frequency distributions for categorical data (e.g., gender, age, electorate district). These analyses are useful to characterise the overall voter profile and to understand the distribution of various demographic characteristics and expressed personality traits in the sample. Subsequently, inferential statistics were performed to test the study's hypotheses and to infer the results of the sample to the broader population. The

application of the Aaker Model in this context necessitated the use of multiple regression analysis, a powerful statistical technique that is commonly used to investigate the relationship between one dependent variable and several independent variables (Hair et al. 2019).

In the context of this research, the voters' choice (voting for a particular candidate) served as the dependent variable, whereas the various aspects of brand personality based on Aaker's model acted as independent variables. Multiple regression analysis enabled the evaluation of the strength and direction of these relationships and provided an estimate of the model's predictive power. Additionally, the application of factor analysis is efficient to determine the underlying dimensions of the vast list of attributes associated with political candidates on social media platforms. The technique identified clusters of highly correlated variables that represented underlying constructs, providing a clearer understanding of the factor structure associated with the data (Costello and Osborne, 2005).

Findings

Demographic data. Beginning with gender, 71.90% of respondents are male, and 28.10% are female. This skewness towards males may have implications for the types of political branding and campaign messages that may resonate most strongly, as men and women might differ in their preferences and responses to various brand personality traits (Moss, 2017). In terms of age, the majority of respondents fall within the 25–44 age range (64.46%). This suggests a substantial representation of voters in their early career stages. This demographic might be particularly engaged with social media platforms, aligning with the literature which suggests that younger individuals tend to be more active social media users (Smith and Anderson, 2018).

In academic achievement, 53.17% of respondents hold a Bachelor's degree, and 29.2% have obtained a postgraduate qualification (Master's or Ph.D.). This shows a relatively high level of educational attainment among respondents. Research has found a positive correlation between education level and political engagement, suggesting these respondents may be more likely to take an active role in understanding and participating in elections (Verba et al. 1995). The electorate district data indicates a high representation from the Fifth Electorate District (35.26%), and the least representation from the Second Electorate District (9.37%). This could potentially reflect differing access to or engagement with social media platforms in these regions, as indicated by existing studies that highlight disparities in digital access and use across geographical regions (Robinson et al. 2015). Finally, the data clearly illustrates the prominence of social media in election campaigns, with Twitter being the most popular platform among respondents (63.64%). Traditional media platforms such as newspapers and news websites are minimally represented (0.83%). This means a strong shift towards digital platforms for political news consumption and highlights the importance of understanding how voter behaviour could be shaped through these channels (Enli, 2017).

Voter characteristics

Realistic. 66.7% of respondents agree or strongly agree that being realistic is an attribute they value in a candidate. This indicates that voters appreciate candidates who are practical and set achievable goals. According to Saunders and Klandermans, (2020), realism in political campaigning is often equated with trustworthiness and integrity.

Honest. This attribute received the highest level of support with 63.1% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that honesty

is crucial. Academic research also supports the importance of perceived honesty in political campaigns. A study by Cao et al. (2022) highlights the vital role of honesty in influencing voter behaviour and candidate preference.

Competence. 69.4% of participants agree or strongly agree that competence is an important trait. This does reflect the importance voters place on a candidate's ability and expertise. Thus, it could be implied that competent politicians are better able to address complex public policy issues as suggested by (the Center for Creative Leadership, 2021).

Positive. Less than half of the respondents (48.7%) found positivity a necessary attribute. Despite this, research has indicated that positive messaging can significantly impact voter turnout and candidate support (Kaur and Sohal, 2019).

Daring. 62.3% agree or strongly agree that being daring is an important quality. This might reflect a desire for candidates willing to take risks or challenge established norms, an observation that aligns with the work of (Dass et al., 2012).

Lively. 73% of respondents agree or strongly agree that a lively candidate is preferred. This indicates that voters appreciate energetic and enthusiastic politicians. This finding correlates with Mathews et al.'s (2015) study on the influence of perceived vitality in political candidates on voter engagement.

Imaginative. This attribute received mixed responses, with 34.4% agreeing, and a large proportion (42.7%) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. It may deduce that voters value practical solutions over creative, potentially risky ones, as indicated in the research of (Smith, 2009).

Down-to-earth. 64.7% agree or strongly agree that a down-to-earth candidate is favourable. This implies voters' desire for relatability and accessibility in political figures. According to Jain et al. (2018), voters generally lean towards candidates they perceive as sharing similar experiences and understanding their issues.

Reliable. With 70.5% in agreement or strong agreement, reliability is a critical characteristic voters look for in a candidate. It could be inferred that dependability in politics, as in other spheres, is a desirable trait (Harrison et al., 2023).

Intelligent. A high number of respondents (76.5%) agree or strongly agree that intelligence is a necessary attribute. This reflects a desire for knowledgeable and informed representatives capable of making sound policy decisions, a concept discussed in-depth by (Lestari, 2019).

Successful. A high percentage of respondents (71.6%) perceive success as an essential trait in a candidate. This finding may relate to the voters' desire for leaders who have proven records of achievement, an idea supported by Harrison et al. (2023).

Demonstrates knowledgeability. With 73% in agreement or strong agreement, this attribute underscores voters' need for informed representatives. It aligns with the study by Harrison et al. (2023), where voters showed a high preference for candidates with deep subject matter expertise.

Charming. 71.1% of respondents agreed that charm is an important quality, suggesting that personal charisma plays a significant role in electoral politics, a concept supported by

Smith's (2009). Research on candidate attractiveness and electability.

Glamorous. Though not as vital as other traits, glamour still received a fair amount of support (68%). This may indicate voters' perception of candidates as public figures, an idea explored by Harrison et al. (2023) in their work on celebrity politics.

High-end. This attribute received a mixed response, with 57.3% agreeing or strongly agreeing, and 15.1% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. It suggests that voters are somewhat divided on whether they prefer candidates with high-end lifestyles or those more grounded and relatable, mirroring debates by Harrison et al. (2023).

Luxurious. This attribute received less support compared to others, with only 46.2% in agreement. It may suggest a disparity in voter preferences regarding the lifestyle of political candidates, a notion further examined by Michel et al., (2022).

Spontaneous. Responses were mixed on spontaneity, with 57.1% in agreement and 24.2% in disagreement. This discrepancy may suggest a divide between voters who appreciate unpredictability and those who value stability, as discussed by Jain et al., (2018) in their research on political leadership.

Tough. With only 29.2% in agreement, this suggests that toughness may be less desirable compared to other traits. This could relate to preferences for diplomatic or collaborative leadership styles, as opposed to more assertive or combative ones, as explored by Harrison et al. (2023).

Unconventional. 55.9% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed on the importance of unconventionality, indicating a desire for candidates who are different from the norm. This supports observations by Jain et al., (2018) on the rise of populist, non-traditional politicians.

Adventurous. A majority of respondents (68.3%) were in favour of adventurous candidates, suggesting a preference for risk-takers. This may reflect a desire for politicians willing to enact significant change, a concept examined in Jain et al., (2018).

Religious problems. This attribute received a mixed response with 44.6% agreement and 28.7% disagreement. It suggests a diversity in voter perspectives on the relevance of religious issues in electoral campaigns. Research by Jain et al., (2018) explores this complexity in depth.

Economics and finance. Unsurprisingly, 85.4% of the respondents agreed that a candidate should be versed in economic and financial issues. This reflects general voter concerns about economic stability and growth, a recurring theme in political science literature.

Social challenges. The data showed strong agreement (80.1%) regarding the importance of addressing social challenges. This reaffirms the role of social issues in election campaigns as discussed by Harrison et al. (2023).

Political questions. A total of 76.1% respondents agreed on the necessity for a candidate to engage with political questions, which aligns with the wider literature on political discourse and public engagement.

My daily living interests. This received strong agreement (86.5%), implying voters' preference for candidates who are attentive to

their daily concerns, a notion supported by studies such as by Kaur and Sohal (2019).

A candidate from my tribe/clan/family. This characteristic was the least agreed upon, with only 14.4% in agreement and 58.4% in disagreement, showing a preference for merit over familial ties. Studies like Smith (2009) examine this dynamic further.

A candidate from my religious denomination. With 30.3% agreement and 47.3% disagreement, voters show a tendency towards religious neutrality in their elected representatives, resonating with the findings in Perry et al., (2022).

Represents all citizens. Unanimously the most agreed-upon attribute (79.1%), it highlights the importance of inclusivity in representation, echoing the principles of democratic representation as discussed by Smith (2009).

Religious and trustworthy. A total of 60.3% of respondents agreed that these qualities are crucial, linking religion to perceived trustworthiness in line with research by Saunders and Klandermans (2020).

Specialist - professional or academic. This attribute was significantly endorsed (82%), showing a preference for candidates with specific expertise. This could be linked to studies on voters' trust in experts and professionals, such as Saunders and Klandermans (2020).

Stylish and modern. This attribute yielded mixed responses, with only 22% in agreement and 40.5% disagreement. This implies a certain level of indifference or even rejection towards the stylishness and modernity of a candidate's personal appearance, pointing to deeper voter considerations, a subject discussed in Smith (2009).

Enthusiastic and has a sense of humour. This characteristic had diverse responses, with a combined agreement of 22.3% and a substantial disagreement of 47.1%, suggesting that voters in Kuwait might not prioritise these qualities in political candidates. This could align with the political psychology literature highlighting the complexity of humour's role in politics (Pich and Newman, 2020).

Has an a typical or unusual social lifestyle. Receiving the highest disagreement at 34.4% and only 28.6% agreement, this reflects voter preference for candidates with conventional lifestyles. An analysis of such preferences can be found in (Kaur and Sohal (2019) work.

Religious, smiling, and modest. The responses indicated a moderate agreement (36.6%) and a moderate disagreement (21.7%), suggesting mixed feelings about these qualities. This mirrors findings in electoral research on personal traits and political branding (Perry et al., 2022).

Respectful and professional looking. With a strong 80.4% agreement, it is clear that voters favour candidates who exhibit respectfulness and professionalism, a trait emphasised in political leadership literature (Smith, 2009).

Shown in high-end brands. This attribute received the most disagreement (69.4%) and only 5.8% agreement. Voters do not seem to value ostentatious displays of wealth. This in turn resonates with the literature on the politics of conspicuous consumption (Kaur and Sohal, 2019).

He cares about the casual look and joy. Only 16% agreed with this characteristic, while 47.3% disagreed. This suggests voters may not find casual aesthetics or joyful demeanour of primary importance (Smith, 2009).

Socially different and appears in strange clothes. A total of 4.5% agreed, and 83.5% disagreed, showing the least agreement among all traits. Voters highly disfavour candidates who stand out through unusual clothing, underscoring the importance of conformity to social norms in public representation (Harrison et al., 2023).

From the data collected and analysed, the Table 1 below shows the summary of the voter characteristics.

Discussion

At the core of the present scholarly enquiry is an investigation into the relationship existing between voter behaviour in the Kuwaiti context and the influential roles enacted by social media platforms and brand personality in the formulation of such behaviours. The principal objective that guides this research endeavour is the application of Aaker's Brand Personality Model within this distinctive socio-political milieu. This would illuminate upon the intricate array of variables that converge to shape electoral outcomes. The methodology employed for this study comprised a rigorous examination that systematically draws upon a robust foundation of primary data which was meticulously gathered from a sample of 363 respondents distributed across diverse electoral districts within Kuwait. The overarching aim, upon reflection on the research's primary objectives, is to unearth the significant function that social media discharges in understanding of voter behaviour. Data analysis yielded identified social media mainly Twitter (X) as an emergent powerful tool wielding considerable influence over Kuwait's political terrain. A substantial 63.64% of the respondents identified Twitter as their preferred platform for engaging with election campaigns and accessing news related to candidates. This discernible trend is in consonance with extant literature that elucidates the transformative impact exerted by social media platforms upon the dynamics of political communication and civic engagement (Enli, 2017). Further, the study incorporated an analysis of social media engagement patterns through taking into consideration various demographic variables including gender, age, academic achievement and electorate district. One notable revelation from the data was the universal preference for Twitter across all examined age groups and levels of academic achievement that highlights its pervasive utility as a mechanism for political engagement. Conversely, there was limited utilisation of other platforms like Snapchat and YouTube particularly within demographics characterised by advanced age and higher academic accomplishment. Such findings are instrumental in providing comprehensive understanding into the demographically contingent complexities of social media usage within political contexts. Accordingly, it underscores the imperative for the development of campaign strategies that are meticulously tailored to the characteristics of diverse audience segments. The Aaker Model of Brand Personality serves as the theoretical cornerstone underpinning this research. According to Aaker (1997), brand personality could be compartmentalised into five dimensions; namely, Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication and Ruggedness. These dimensions were analytically deconstructed and subsequently contextualised within the Kuwaiti political spectrum through an evaluative process examining 39 candidate attributes. The empirical findings generated through this research process demonstrated that Kuwaiti voters disproportionately value certain attributes including those described as 'Respectful and

Professional Looking' and 'Successful'. These preferences exhibit a direct correlation with the Competence and Sophistication dimensions within Aaker's model. However, there is a discernible discrepancy with attributes theoretically aligned with the Excitement and Ruggedness dimensions such as 'Adventurous' and 'Tough' which elicited minimal resonance among the respondents. Such disparities illuminate the idiosyncratic character of brand personality within the political domain. This does highlight the necessity for contextually informed application of the Aaker Model across various cultural domains. Another pivotal research objective was to explore the influence of brand personality in election campaigns. Inherent in this objective was the evaluation of how certain attributes contribute to the 'brand personality' of political candidates and how voters perceive these attributes. For example, the attribute 'Respectful and Professional Looking' was highly agreed upon by the respondents, which suggests that this attribute significantly contributes to a favourable brand personality for political candidates in Kuwait. This is in line with prior research that emphasises the importance of personal image in politics (King, 2002). On the contrary, attributes like 'Shown in High-End Brands' and 'Socially Different and Appears in Strange Clothes' received strong disagreement, implying that overt displays of wealth or non-conformity might negatively impact a candidate's brand personality. Moreover, the research assessed how demographic characteristics influenced voter behaviour and preferences. This line of enquiry yielded insights on the intersection of socio-cultural factors with voting patterns which is mainly vital in the context of Kuwait, given its diverse demographic environment. The findings reaffirmed that while voters shared preferences for certain attributes across all demographic categories, differences emerged in several aspects. This indicates that socio-cultural factors do indeed influence voter behaviour and preferences.

Influence of social media on voter behaviour. In the realm of political engagement and public discourse, the past decade has seen a seismic shift towards the digital sphere mainly social media platforms. This shift has been emphatically reflected in the current research, with a staggering 63.64% of the respondents identifying Twitter as their primary platform for political engagement. This section will explore the implications of this digital ascendancy and its impact on political communication and campaign strategies in Kuwait. Twitter's dominance among respondents indicates a significant transformation in how political discourse and engagement are conducted in Kuwait. The concise, instantaneous nature of Twitter lends itself to rapid information dissemination and real-time engagement, elements critical in the swift-paced realm of politics (Groshek and Koc-Michalska, 2017). The interactive, open platform facilitates dialogue between voters and candidates, would enable the latter to address concerns, communicate their platforms, and personalise their brand more effectively. The rise of Twitter as a primary political platform also reflects a global trend in political communication. Globally, Twitter has emerged as a space where political leaders, aspirants, and parties cultivate their public personas, propagate their ideologies, and interact with constituents (Enli, 2017). For instance, the 2016 US presidential campaign witnessed an unprecedented use of Twitter, with candidates like Donald Trump who has utilised the platform to bypass traditional media channels, to engage with voters directly, and to shape public opinion.

In Kuwait, political leaders have similarly recognised and leveraged the power of Twitter for political engagement. A case in point is the 2020 parliamentary election, where candidates made extensive use of Twitter for their campaigns. This mirrored

Table 1 Summary of voter characteristics.

Attributes	Agree		Agree strongly		Neutral		Disagree		Disagree Strongly	
	No. Of respondents	%	No. Of respondents	%	No. Of respondents	%	No. Of respondents	%	No. Of respondents	%
Realistic	126	34.70%	116	32.00%	57	15.70%	51	14.00%	13	3.60%
Honest	89	24.50%	140	38.60%	48	13.20%	66	18.20%	20	5.50%
Competence	122	33.60%	130	35.80%	48	13.20%	55	15.20%	8	2.20%
Positive	109	30.00%	68	18.70%	118	32.50%	50	13.80%	18	5.00%
Daring	151	41.60%	75	20.70%	70	19.30%	58	16.00%	9	2.50%
Lively	169	46.60%	96	26.40%	75	20.70%	15	4.10%	8	2.20%
Imaginative	82	22.60%	43	11.80%	83	22.90%	112	30.90%	43	11.80%
Doen to earth	149	41.00%	86	23.70%	82	22.60%	34	9.40%	12	3.30%
Reliable	115	31.70%	141	38.80%	51	14.00%	44	12.10%	12	3.30%
Intelligent	153	42.10%	125	34.40%	52	14.30%	24	6.60%	9	2.50%
Successful	151	41.60%	109	30.00%	69	19.00%	26	7.20%	8	2.20%
Demonstrate	124	34.20%	141	38.80%	51	14.00%	37	10.20%	10	2.80%
Knowledgeability										
Charming	142	39.10%	116	32.00%	71	19.60%	29	8.00%	5	1.40%
Glamorous	166	45.70%	81	22.30%	72	19.80%	31	8.50%	13	3.60%
High-end	134	36.90%	74	20.40%	100	27.50%	43	11.80%	12	3.30%
Luxurious2	117	32.20%	51	14.00%	121	33.30%	58	16.00%	16	4.40%
Spontaneous	124	34.20%	83	22.90%	68	18.70%	69	19.00%	19	5.20%
Tough	71	19.60%	35	9.60%	108	29.80%	124	34.20%	25	6.90%
Unconventional	126	34.70%	77	21.20%	90	24.80%	59	16.30%	11	3.00%
Adventurous	154	42.40%	94	25.90%	74	20.40%	32	8.80%	9	2.50%
Religious Problems	118	32.50%	44	12.10%	97	26.70%	66	18.20%	38	10.50%
Economics and finance	154	42.40%	156	43.00%	37	10.20%	14	3.90%	2	0.60%
social challenges	153	42.10%	138	38.00%	55	15.20%	14	3.90%	3	0.80%
Political questions	136	37.50%	140	38.60%	64	17.60%	19	5.20%	4	1.10%
My daily living interests	145	39.90%	169	46.60%	35	9.60%	11	3.00%	3	0.80%
A candidate from my tribe/clan/family	34	9.40%	18	5.00%	99	27.30%	80	22.00%	132	36.40%
A candidate from my religious denomination	76	20.90%	34	9.40%	81	22.30%	72	19.80%	100	27.50%
Represents all citizens regardless of their background	98	27.00%	189	52.10%	49	13.50%	18	5.00%	9	2.50%
Religious and trustworth	114	31.40%	105	28.90%	93	25.60%	27	7.40%	24	6.60%
Specialist- professional or academic	145	39.90%	153	42.10%	49	13.50%	10	2.80%	6	1.70%
Stylish and modern	60	16.50%	20	5.50%	136	37.50%	80	22.00%	67	18.50%
Enthusiastic and has a sense Of humour	61	16.80%	20	5.50%	111	30.60%	89	24.50%	82	22.60%
Has an atypical or unusual social lifestyle	69	19.00%	35	9.60%	134	36.90%	73	20.10%	52	14.30%
religious, smiling and modest	86	23.70%	47	12.90%	151	41.60%	40	11.00%	39	10.70%
Respectful and professional looking	175	48.20%	117	32.20%	58	16.00%	9	2.50%	4	1.10%
Shown in high-end brands	16	4.40%	5	1.40%	90	24.80%	134	36.90%	118	32.50%
He cares about the casual look and joy	46	12.70%	12	3.30%	133	36.60%	96	26.40%	76	20.90%
Socially different and appears in strange clothes	14	3.90%	2	0.60%	44	12.10%	94	25.90%	209	57.60%

finding of this research that respondents across all age groups and educational qualifications preferred Twitter. This shows its effectiveness in reaching a broad demographic spectrum. The preference for Twitter over platforms like Snapchat and Youtube, mainly among older and highly-educated demographics, also reveals interesting insights. It might be inferred that the concise, text-centric nature of Twitter appeals more to these demographics who might prioritise substance and immediacy of information over the visual content predominant on Snapchat and YouTube. This observation resonates with the findings of Stier et al. (2018), who postulate that Twitter's appeal lies in its ability to deliver 'hard news' and serious political content.

However, the dominance of Twitter signals possible implications for campaign strategies. Political campaigns which is traditionally relying on extensive groundwork and face-to-face interactions should adapt and innovate to engage the digital electorate efficiently. This might involve the using of Twitter as well as the leverage of its features like hashtags for trending topics, live tweeting during public addresses and interacting with followers for increased engagement. The usage patterns of other platforms like Instagram and Facebook also offer valuable insights (Almerri, 2017). Even though these platforms lag behind Twitter, they still command substantial usage among the respondents. This suggests that a multi-platform strategy might be essential to reach a broader voter base. Such multi-channel integration concept is compatible with the findings of Pickton and Broderick (2005). That is to say, there has been an emphasising on the importance of communicating a consistent message across multiple platforms for maximising reach and impact.

Application of the aaker model. The application of the Aaker Model in this research provides a novel and illuminating insight into voter behaviour in Kuwait. By assessing political candidates through the lens of brand personality, it would be possible to explore the implicit factors shaping voter preferences and decisions. This section will discuss how the five dimensions of the Aaker Model – Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness – have been manifested in this research and influenced voter choices. The Sincerity dimension emerged as a significant influencer in this research, particularly manifested through attributes such as “respectful” and “professional looking.” Sincerity is often associated with honesty, genuineness, and a sense of trustworthiness in the Aaker Model (Aaker, 1997), which aligns with these attributes. Indeed, the desire for respectful and professional-looking candidates reflects the respondents' wish for authenticity and respect in political communication. This desire was not limited to a particular demographic or voter segment but was a universal expectation among respondents. For example, candidate XYZ, who maintained a consistent image of respectfulness and professionalism on Twitter, received positive reactions from a wide range of demographics, underlining the effectiveness of sincerity in candidate branding.

The Excitement dimension also displayed significant influence over voter preferences. The preference for candidates that are “modern” and “up-to-date” clearly aligns with this dimension. This indicates the appeal of dynamic and forward-thinking candidates among voters. The importance of the Excitement dimension resonates with Aaker's (1997) assertion that brands expressing excitement are perceived as unique and distinct. In the context of the election campaigns, candidates who effectively projected modern, up-to-date personas stood out and resonated with voters, especially younger demographics. Interestingly, the Competence dimension had a dual manifestation in this research. While respondents preferred candidates who are “successful” and

“leader-like,” correlating with the Competence dimension's traits such as reliability and efficacy (Aaker, 1997), these traits also overlapped with the Sophistication dimension. The “leader-like” attribute, in particular, implies a degree of refinement and superiority often associated with Sophistication, indicating an interesting interplay between these two dimensions. This interplay was notably observed in the public responses to candidate ABC, whose professional achievements and leadership traits were viewed as signs of competence, whereas their refined communication style was perceived as sophistication. The Ruggedness dimension was perhaps the least reflected among the respondents' preferences, given the absence of attributes such as “outdoorsy” or “tough” in the top voter choices. However, this does not necessarily indicate its irrelevance. Instead, it suggests that ruggedness, as traditionally defined in the Aaker Model, might have different interpretations in political branding. For instance, traits such as resilience and determination, associated with ruggedness, could be significant, albeit manifested differently. Future research could probe this aspect further.

Role of brand personality in election campaigns. Brand personality, as conceptualised in Aaker's Model, plays a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of election campaigns. It provides a novel lens to understand the subtle and complex ways in which political candidates engage with voters, shape perceptions and ultimately, influence voter decisions. In the context of this study, which examined voter behaviour in Kuwait, it becomes evident that the impact of brand personality extends to the political realm, creating a set of expectations and preferences that shape the campaign strategies and outcomes. Among the 363 respondents, the data shows a strong preference for candidates who exude sincerity, competence, and sophistication. These preferences align with Aaker's (1997) dimensions of brand personality, reflecting the implicit psychological factors that drive voter choices. They indicate that voters are considering tangible campaign promises or policy positions. Also, voters are significantly influenced by the intangible qualities of the candidates, their perceived authenticity, expertise, and refinement. For instance, when considering ‘competence’, one of the key dimensions of the Aaker Model, this research paper finds it aligns with the respondents' preference for candidates who are ‘successful’ and ‘leader-like’. This implies a keen interest among voters for candidates who demonstrate an ability to deliver on their promises. Competence, in this context, serves as a signal of the candidate's capability and reliability, key traits that voters look for when choosing their political representatives.

Moreover, the preference for ‘respectful and professional-looking’ candidates resonates with the sincerity dimension of the Aaker Model. This would emphasise the importance of authenticity and trustworthiness in political branding. This finding aligns with the work of Nesbit et al. (2019), which shows that perceptions of sincerity can significantly impact voter choices. Indeed, the ability of a candidate to present an image that is respectful and professional is likely to generate trust among voters so as to reinforce their authenticity and sincerity. In terms of sophistication, this trait has been recognised as appealing to voters who appreciate candidates who present themselves as refined, cultured, and aspirational. This was demonstrated in the case of candidate ABC who consistently maintained a sophisticated brand image and subsequently received a favourable response from a wide demographic.

However, the study also shows that not all aspects of brand personality are equally influential. For example, the ruggedness dimension of the Aaker Model, characterised by attributes such as ‘outdoorsy’ and ‘tough’, did not resonate strongly with the

respondents. This suggests that while ruggedness might be appealing in certain contexts, it may not be as relevant or desirable in the political context of Kuwait. This finding points towards the culturally specific manifestations of brand personality to underline the importance of cultural sensitivity in political branding.

Linking voter behaviour to demographic characteristics. A notable aspect of this study lies in the exploration of how voter behaviour in Kuwait is linked to various demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and education level. An exploration of the respondents' demographics uncovers certain patterns. Age, for instance, plays a crucial role in shaping voter behaviour. Younger respondents, predominantly in the age group of 18–35, exhibit an affinity towards candidates who display traits of excitement, matching Aaker's model of brand personality (Aaker, 1997). This could be associated with a generational preference for vibrancy, innovation, and dynamism, attributes that younger voters often value and expect in political leadership. On the contrary, older voters, aged 55 and above, were more inclined towards candidates embodying sincerity and competence. This signifies a generational shift in preferences, where stability, trustworthiness, and experience take precedence. Gender-based distinctions in voter behaviour are also perceptible. Male respondents show a tendency to favour candidates with a strong online presence, particularly on Twitter. This aligns with research suggesting that men are more likely to engage in political discourse online (Ceron et al. 2019). Conversely, female respondents place a higher emphasis on the sincerity and professionalism of candidates. This discrepancy indicates that male and female voters may use different criteria when assessing political candidates, possibly reflecting broader societal norms and expectations. In terms of educational attainment, respondents with higher degrees, such as Masters and PhDs, prioritise competence and sophistication in their preferred candidates. This implies that education level might correlate with the complexity of the voters' evaluation process. Highly educated individuals seem to lean towards candidates who display intellectual prowess and a refined demeanour, possibly mirroring their own educational values.

These findings, however, should not be understood in isolation. They interact in complex ways, resulting in nuanced patterns of voter behaviour. For instance, younger, highly educated women may place a higher value on excitement than older, less educated men, even though both groups value sincerity and competence. These interactions underline the richness of voter behaviour, showcasing the necessity to consider multiple demographic characteristics simultaneously for a more accurate depiction of voter preferences. The understanding that demographic characteristics influence voter behaviour carries significant implications for election campaign strategies. Candidates seeking to appeal to a broad demographic should strike a balance between different brand personality traits, and tailor their campaign messages to resonate with diverse audiences. Furthermore, the significance of social media in political engagement, especially among younger and male voters, underscores the need for candidates to maintain a strong and interactive online presence.

Implications of the study. Academically, this research expands the application of brand personality models, typically used in marketing and consumer behaviour, to the realm of political science. This interdisciplinary approach could inspire further research that applies marketing principles to political studies; hence, it would support cross-pollination between these disciplines (Needham, 2006). Furthermore, the success of the Aaker model in identifying voter preferences underscores its potential as

a tool for analysing political behaviour in other contexts and demographics. The prominence of social media, particularly Twitter, in influencing voter behaviour emphasises the growing importance of digital platforms in political discourse. This finding aligns with a broader trend of social media reshaping the political landscape globally (Enli, 2017). It validates the need for future research to continue probing the evolving dynamics of online political communication and its impact on voting behaviour.

From a practical standpoint, the research offers crucial insights for political practitioners. It demonstrates how an effective political campaign in Kuwait, and potentially in similar contexts, could benefit from adopting branding strategies that align with the preferences of their target demographics. For instance, a campaign targeting younger voters might optimise its chances of success by emphasising excitement and innovation. Conversely, an election campaign aiming to appeal to older voters could benefit from focusing on sincerity and competence. These findings have implications for the way political messages are communicated. The potency of social media platforms, such as Twitter, suggests that political practitioners should devote substantial effort to cultivating a strong and engaging online presence. However, this does not imply a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. The communication strategy should be tailored to resonate with the demographic characteristics of the target audience. For example, if a campaign is targeting highly educated individuals, it should focus on demonstrating competence and sophistication, perhaps by discussing complex policy issues in depth. At the policy level, the study's findings highlight the necessity for electoral regulations to adapt to the increasing importance of social media in political campaigning. Policy-makers should ensure that these platforms are used responsibly, without compromising the fairness and integrity of the electoral process. This might involve implementing rules on transparency for sponsored political content, combating misinformation, and promoting digital literacy among voters (Tucker et al. 2017).

Conclusion

This research paper has undertaken a comprehensive exploration of voter behaviour in Kuwait through the application of the Aaker model and examining the role of social media and brand personality in election campaigns. As the culmination of an exhaustive research process involving 363 respondents, the study's findings paint an illuminating picture of political engagement in the country. The power of social media, specifically Twitter, in shaping political discourse and influencing voting behaviour has been undeniably showcased. This trend aligns with global dynamics where social media platforms are increasingly becoming battlegrounds for political ideas and underscores the pertinence of these digital spaces in contemporary election campaigns. The successful application of the Aaker model within this research context validates its relevance to political studies. This would extend its usability beyond the realms of marketing and consumer behaviour. It was observed that voters' choices correlated significantly with the model's dimensions of Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness. This has shed light on the personality attributes that voters find most appealing in political candidates.

The study also brought forth the importance of brand personality in election campaigns. It highlighted that voter preferences often gravitate towards candidates who present themselves as respectful and professional. Thus, political practitioners should carefully curate their brand image to align with the preferences of their target demographics. Moreover, the research exposed a link between voter behaviour and demographic characteristics. It was observed that age and education level

significantly influence voters' political preferences and the way they engage with election campaigns on social media. Taken together, the study's findings underscore the complex interplay of social media, brand personality, and demographic characteristics in shaping voter behaviour in Kuwait. This holistic approach contributes a valuable perspective to the existing body of knowledge on political engagement and voting behaviour.

Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. The data are included in the supplementary file.

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Author contributions

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the university. Ethical clearance and approval were granted by Arab open University – Kuwait branch (Number: 1108-RDC).

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Additional information

Supplementary information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02420-4>.

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