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## **The Branding of Candidates and Parties: The U.S. News Media and the Legitimization of a New Political Term**

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*Political marketing research indicates that brands and branding are a robust aspect of politics. However, little is known of the broader cultural appreciation of political branding. Through a content analysis of major U.S. newspapers over a 40-year period, we provide evidence that the U.S. news media is increasingly aware of political branding. Moreover, we present a typology of media treatment that indicates that the national media in the U.S. increasingly perceive brands and branding in the public sphere as an innate, multifaceted, and effective part of modern politics.*

*KEYWORDS branding, media and politics, political branding, political brands, political marketing*

Political marketing applies marketing theories and concepts to political phenomena (Newman 1994; O’Cass 1996). The expansion of professional political consultants (Panagopoulos 2006) and political marketing scholarship contributes to the number and nature of marketing principles that are applied in the political sphere (Davies and Newman 2006; Henneberg 2004; Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy 2007). Of these principles, none may be more curious and more worthy of attention than the practice of political branding (Lock and Harris 1996; Needham 2006; Schneider 2004).

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Political branding builds on the principle assertion that political parties, candidates, and causes can be managed as products (Kotler and Kotler 1999; Shama 1976), and political marketing scholars increasingly agree that these political entities can be managed and studied as brands (Guzman and Sierra 2009; Smith 2009; Smith and French 2009; French and Smith 2010; Spiller and Bergner 2011). For example, French and Smith (2010: 460) state that “the concept of political parties as brands is now commonplace and part of a general dispersion of branding.”

While scholars acknowledge political branding, we have limited knowledge of the broader societal acceptance and understanding of political branding. Scholars describe political brands as multifaceted constructs and pointedly debate the true impact of political branding on the political process and on society (Cosgrove 2007; Needham 2005, 2006; Reeves, de Chernatony, and Carrigan 2006; Spiller and Bergner 2011). Political elites and scholars clearly appreciate the political brand construct’s rapidly evolving nature, but are similar sentiments found elsewhere in the political marketplace? If similar sentiments are found, to what extent are they evident?

We address these research questions and discuss their answers’ impact on political marketing. We compare the evolution and legitimization of the political brand construct in scholarly literature and in 40 years of political brand-related news reports in four major U.S. newspapers. Understanding the construct’s evolution through these lenses is theoretically and practically valuable.

While the general awareness of branding in society and the practice of political marketing may naturally increase over time (Scammell 2007; French and Smith 2010; Spiller and Bergner 2011), what does the increasing awareness of political brands mean for researchers and practitioners? As awareness of political brands and branding evolves beyond the purview of researchers and political elites, understanding and managing political brands becomes more complex. For example, Spiller and Bergner (2011) state that the purpose of their book, *Branding the Candidate*, is to “uncover the modern marketing tactics . . . make you a sharper political consumer . . . [and] prepare you for the next onslaught of political marketing campaigns” (Spiller and Bergner 2011: 8). The modern tactics they discuss relate to brands and branding. They discuss how political brands relate to greater complexity and sophistication in political marketing practices, and they encourage the electorate to prepare to react. How might the electorate react as they become more conscious of branding in the political sphere?

The modern state of branding in the private sphere provides insight to this question. As consumers access greater amounts of information about brands and the companies behind the brands, they expect greater continuity between the two (Holt 2002a). Growing awareness and knowledge of branding in society “is now forcing companies to build lines of obligation that link brand and company” (Holt 2002a: 88). In other words, the value of a brand is

linked to how entities respond to society's evolving acknowledgement and understanding of their branding efforts. While branding attempts to shape society's perceptions of an entity (Holt 2002b), awareness of this attempt directly impacts the complexity of branding (Holt 2002a).

In marketing literature, this reality spurs additional scholarly research into anti-branding (Krishnamurthy and Kucuk 2009) and brand communities (Keller and Lehmann 2006; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). In private practice, firms recognize that they are no longer the only power brokers in their marketplace who acknowledge and understand the potential influence of brands and branding. As such, they work harder to manage consumer-to-consumer brand-related communications. Investigating society's conscious understanding of and participation in branding is accepted as valuable in the private sphere, and we assert that it is equally valuable in the public sphere.

To capture society's understanding of political branding, we must consider the media. Political products are managed in a dynamic system of exchanges among politicians, political parties, consultants, voters, media, and political action groups (Newman 1994). The media can be seen as the retail space upon which political brands are managed. Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy (2007: 21) point out that "so central is media coverage of political marketing phenomenon that media itself is often the principal target, that is, the main 'consumer' of political marketing activities." A critical gap in extant literature is the limited portrayal of how, or even whether, the U.S. media portrays political branding as a legitimate part of politics.

Political science and communication researchers clearly state the media's central role with regard to information delivery in democratic societies (Graber 1989, 1997; Lang and Lang 1981; Spiller and Bergner 2011). The news media provide context for a citizen's interpretation of political issues, play a role in the public's evaluation of political elites, and are directly involved in setting the political agenda insofar as helping to determine what issues are most in need of serious debate (Cohen 1963; Mendelsohn 1993; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997; Iyengar et al. 1984; Iyengar 1987; Iyengar and Simon 1993; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Lemert 1981; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Zaller 1996; Zucker 1978). The news media, particularly during election time, not only report political events but become part of the political process. Moreover, technological advances continuously expand the ease with which media content is created and disseminated.

Whether and how the media portrays political brands and branding can raise society's awareness of political branding strategies and tactics and further legitimize the practice in society. Thus, the media directly impacts the complexity of branding (Holt 2002a).

We organize the remainder of this paper into four major sections. The first section summarizes the evolving scholarly research on political brands, and it defines the major concepts in political brand literature. The second section describes the methodology for collecting and analyzing data and is

followed by the third section, which presents the results and analysis of the U.S. media's evolving use of political brand-related terminology over a 40-year period from 1970 to 2010. We close with our conclusions, implications for future research, and limitations of this research.

Overall, we elucidate the general dispersion and evolving nature of political brands and provide insights to the future of political branding. Our research indicates that the U.S. media portray brands and branding in the public sphere as an innate, multifaceted part of modern politics. Mostly, the media present political branding as being effective for political parties and candidates, with very few media reports voicing discontent for political branding. Our sample of 40 years of data suggests that U.S. media increasingly use political brand-related terminology, and its use is evolving to represent multiple facets of the branding construct. We track the growth of three specific facets of branding: brand image, brand identity, and anti-branding. While our analysis does not allow conclusions regarding the specific causes of our results or whether the evolving use of the terminology is intentional, we are able to identify trends in use and to detail the nature of the evolving use of brand terminology in the media.

### THE EMERGENCE OF POLITICAL BRANDING IN SCHOLARLY RESEARCH

Several scholars provide valuable reviews and frameworks regarding the complex nature and value of brands and branding (e.g., Aaker 1991; de Chernatony and Riley 1998; Holt 2002b; Keller 2002; Keller and Lehman 2006; Alsem and Kosteljik 2008). Here, we present the common elements of the brand construct in political marketing research and highlight their multifaceted, interrelated nature. We connect the emergence of political branding in literature to the development of political marketing as a distinct field and to political marketing orientation as an additional area of research. This section explicates specific brand-related conceptual definitions that we use as the basis for collecting and analyzing data regarding the U.S. media's use of brand terminology in political contexts.

Essentially, a brand is a dynamic interplay of strategically oriented managerial elements and consumer-oriented elements. A brand is a multidimensional construct (Aaker 1992; de Chernatony and Riley 1998; Keller and Lehmann 2006). Brands have tangible elements, like names and symbols (Aaker 1991) and intangible elements, such as experiences, history, and heritage (Keller and Lehman 2006). Branding refers to the brand-related activities that shape consumer's perceptions (Holt 2002b). A brand's image is the sum of "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (Keller 1993: 3).

Entities attempt to strategically manage the tangible elements and intangible elements that create and support their brand. As the focal entity tries to

nurture its brand, competitors and other outsiders may also take specific actions to impact target consumers' perceptions the brand (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Holt 2002a; Kay 2006; Krishnamurthy and Kucuk 2009). These actions can be negative, as is the case with negative advertisements by competitors (Sorescu and Gelb 2000; Lloyd 2006, 2008), or positive, as is the case with social influences among members in communities of brand admirers (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). These actions represent the managerial side of the construct.

As brands are collectively managed in society, individuals assign meaning to a brand, and the brand establishes the ability to influence individual behaviors. A positive brand can deliver gains to the particular entity it represents, and a negative brand can attenuate an entity's performance (Keller 1993). The eventual thoughts and feelings each individual attributes to an entity and how the individual responds to these thoughts and feelings represent the consumer side of the construct. Thus, brands are complex constructs, co-created and co-managed by many actors (Holt 2002a, 2002b). We now turn to the role of brands in political marketing literature and the evolution of the brand construct in scholarly literature.

#### CONNECTING POLITICAL MARKETING AND POLITICAL MARKET ORIENTATION TO POLITICAL BRANDING

Political marketing models generally identify marketing's value in the political sphere by showing strategic synergies in connecting candidates, campaigns, communications, parties, and constituent organizations within the dynamics of the overall political landscape (e.g., Lees-Marshment 2001; Newman and Sheth 1987; Newman 1994; O'Cass 1996; Ormrod 2007). While political marketing models can vary according to their intended purpose, they share conceptual characteristics. For instance, Butler and Collins (1999) posit that political marketing essentially contains structural characteristics and process characteristics. Structural characteristics are the products, organizations, and markets, and process characteristics are the value-defining, value-developing, and value-delivering elements of political marketing (Butler and Collins 1999). Political brands are structural in nature and political branding is procedural in nature.

In marketing literature, Holt (2002b) describes branding as an activity that seeks to shape perceptions. From a politician's or political party's perspective the strategic planning and management of a political brand is inherently a market-oriented practice. Conceptually, a political market orientation encourages organizations to consider and respond to explicit and latent needs of multiple stakeholder groups while managing the structural and procedural elements of their strategic plans and practices (e.g., Ormrod 2005; Lees-Marshment 2001; O'Cass 1996, 2001). Differences across specific models

are significant (Ormrod 2007), but these models generally assert that political planning is most effective when it incorporates the perspectives of voters, media, party members, competitors, and independent political action groups. To the extent that politicians' and political parties' planning processes consider multiple political power brokers' perceptions, they are concerned with political branding.

Of course, the brand and branding constructs are broader than just the strategic and tactical activities of the focal entity (i.e., the politician or the party). Brands "reflect the complete experience that customers have" (Keller and Lehmann 2006: 740), thus political brands are co-created by everything that voters experience in the political sphere. Political parties, politicians, political competitors, other voters, political action groups, and media all potentially impact a given entity's brand. This is the conceptual nature of brands and branding.

As the political brand construct evolves, its study and management require identifying entities that are branded, understanding the many facets of political brands, and delineating the true impact of brands on political systems. Table 1 summarizes the evolution of these topics as depicted in political branding literature published in peer-reviewed academic journals between 1986 and 2010. It provides an overview of political branding's emergence and focuses on articles whose primary concern is brand-related. Table 1 excludes articles that mention branding only as an element in a broader investigation of political marketing phenomena (e.g., O'Shaughnessy and Henneberg 2007), journal articles published after 2010, and the depth of quality scholarly work published in books and other edited volumes or presented at conferences and published in conference proceedings. Still, the simplified overview exemplifies the evolving nature and depth of scholarly considerations of political brands. As shown, scholars begin to investigate political brands with increased intensity at the beginning of the 21st century. Through 2010 scholars continue to investigate what facets of the construct are most applicable to the political sphere, and they deliberate the true value of political branding in political systems. Additionally, scholars increasingly connect the strategic managerial-oriented elements of brands with the consumer-oriented elements.

### Branding Specific Political Entities

Politicians are the focal entity in early economic models of political brands (Lott 1986, 1991). For example, Lott sees powerful politician brands as ways to limit opposition in political campaigns (Lott 1986) and lower the cost of campaigning (Lott 1991). These early models reflect economic scholars' initial acceptance of the transferability of brand theory to political contexts.

Lock and Harris (1996) present the political party as the core branded political entity, a view shared in earlier marketing literature (Shama 1976).

**TABLE 1** Perspectives on Branding and Its Value in Politics as Represented in Extant Published Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles\*

Author	Focal political brand entity(s) studied	Focal brand-related facet(s) studied	Stated impacts of brands and branding on political systems
Lott (1986)	• Politician	• Brand image	• Positive aspects
Lott (1991)	• Politician	• Brand image	• Positive aspects
Lock and Harris (1996)	• Party	• Brand image	• Neutral
Harris and Lock (2001)	• Party	• Brand identity	• Positive aspects
	• Politician		
Smith (2001)	• Politician	• Brand image	• Positive aspects
	• Party	• Brand identity	
	• Party	• Brand identity	
White and de Chernatony (2002)	• Politician	• Brand image	• Positive aspects
Schneider (2004)	• Party	• Brand identity	• Negative aspects
	• Party	• Brand identity	• Positive aspects
Needham (2005)	• Politician	• Brand identity	• Negative aspects
	• Politician		• Negative aspects
Needham (2006)	• Party	• Brand identity	• Negative aspects
	• Party		• Negative aspects
Reeves, de Chernatony, and Carrigan (2006)	• Politician	• Brand identity	• Positive aspects
Scammell (2007)	• Party	• Brand image	• Negative aspects
	• Party	• Brand identity	• Negative aspects
Ietcu-Fairclough (2008)	• Politician	• Brand identity	• Positive aspects
Smith (2009)	• Party	• Brand personality	• Positive aspects
	• Politician		• Negative aspects
Guzman and Sierra (2009)	• Politician	• Brand image	• Positive aspects
		• Brand personality	
Smith and French (2009)	• Party	• Brand image	• Positive aspects
French and Smith (2010)	• Party	• Brand image	• Positive aspects
		• Brand equity	
Phipps, Brace-Govan, and Jevons (2010)	• Politician	• Brand image	• Positive aspects
	• Party	• Brand identity	
		• Brand equity	
Davies and Mian (2010)	• Politician	• Brand personality	• Neutral
	• Party		

\*As of March 2011. Additional papers, including a special edition of the *Journal of Political Marketing* on political branding, were in progress prior to this paper's publication. Additionally, several impactful and interesting books, conference papers and presentations, and dissertations cover political branding.

From this perspective, parties manage a core political brand, politicians are products under this brand, and particular issues and policies are exchanged in the political marketplace (Lock and Harris 1996; O'Shaughnessy and Henneberg 2007; Shama 1976; Smith and French 2009). Lock and Harris (1996) outline the largely intangible and closely bundled nature of the party-politician relationship. Their observations and others that follow (e.g., Smith and French 2009) explicate the unique challenges of studying and managing political brands. Over time, scholars increasingly tend to view both political parties and politicians as branded political entities.

While scholars may consider politicians and parties as brands, the essence of Lock and Harris' (1996) message remains true. As Table 1 reflects, scholars recognize the interdependent nature of party brands and politician brands (e.g., Needham 2006; Phipps, Brace-Govan, and Jevons 2010; Davies and Mian 2010). Though not always explicit, political marketing literature recognizes the *brand architecture* concept, that is, the "organizing structure of the brand portfolio that specifies brand roles and the nature of relationships between brands" (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000: 8). Needham (2006: 185) exemplifies this in saying, "Parties need to make choices about whether leader-based brands represent the best hope of electoral success in a media environment which personalizes and simplifies politics."

### Studying Multiple Brand-Related Facets

The brand construct's multidimensional and complex nature creates notable connections among the multiple strategically and consumer-oriented facets of brands and branding (Aaker 1992; de Chernatony and Riley 1998; Keller and Lehmann 2006). In political contexts, extant literature identifies several important facets, though there are certainly more to be studied in the future. Specifically, *brand identity*, *brand image*, *anti-branding*, *brand personality*, and *brand equity* all receive attention in the literature. Here, we present these facets' definitions. These definitions are the basis for identifying which political branding facets are apparent in U.S. media.

#### BRAND IDENTITY

An entity's brand identity represents internal actors' views of who the entity is and who it wants to be, and it exists simultaneously with external actors thoughts and feelings of the entity (Schneider 2004). A brand identity provides strategic, positive direction as to "how managers and employees make a brand unique" (Harris and de Chernatony 2001: 442) and is strongly recommended to be a guiding principle of a company's own actions directed toward a target group (de Chernatony and Riley 1998; Alsem and Kosteljik 2008; Harris and de Chernatony 2001; Nandan 2005). In our analysis, a media story is labeled as reporting on political brand identity when it uses



brand-related terminology in the context of covering strategic intentions and actions of people in relation to the positive management of the entity being branded.

Schneider (2004) provides an in-depth review of the inside-out, outside-in theoretical underpinnings of brand identity and its value to political marketing literature. In our data analysis, we adopt the predominate approach to studying brand identity as a strategically oriented managerial brand facet that is most commonly utilized to study the internal management of an entity's brand (e.g., de Chernatony and Riley 1998; Alsem and Kosteljik 2008; Harris and de Chernatony 2001; Nandan 2005). Our operationalization of brand identity simplifies the concept's theoretical nature and allows the opportunity to analyze the extent to which media reporting reflects the concept's key aspects.

In political marketing literature, brand identity is not always explicitly stated as a focal construct, but it is implicit in many works. For example, Scammell (2007) discusses the strategic steps that Blair and the Labour party take to rebrand the leader. Similarly, Ietcu-Fairclough (2008) says that a key innovation in the 2004 Romanian presidential race was the strategic application of branding by a political candidate. Specifically, Ietcu-Fairclough (2008: 373) relays a consultant's belief that "Băsescu was the first Romanian politician to be treated as a 'brand.'" She argues that Băsescu's success resulted from his strategic behaviors, manner of talking, and ability to embody the values of his intended brand. These examples reflect how politicians and parties identify a desired identity for a political brand and subsequently take specific actions to make that political brand unique and salient to voters. This is the essence of the brand identity construct (Harris and de Chernatony 2001).

#### ANTI-BRANDING

Conceptually, anti-branding refers to intentional attempts to nurture and communicate negative impressions, thoughts, and feelings for an entity, often, though not necessarily, by actors who exist outside of that entity (Holt 2002a; Kay 2006; Krishnamurthy and Kucuk 2009). In marketing literature, anti-branding research considers customer and activist groups' efforts to diminish the favorability of a brand (e.g., Holt 2002a; Kay 2006; Krishnamurthy and Kucuk 2009), negative comparative advertising (e.g., Sorescu and Gelb 2000), and disgruntled employees' brand sabotage behaviors (e.g., Hartline and Ferrell 1996; Wallace and de Chernatony 2009). In our analysis, a news story is labeled as reporting on anti-branding when it mentions brand-related terminology in the context of intentional actions that seek to negatively impact the perceptions that a target group has about a political entity.

In the political sphere, anti-branding is most closely linked to negative political advertising research (e.g., Merritt 1984; Lloyd 2006, 2008), and the

term anti-branding is not always identified in such contexts. For example, Lloyd (2008: 301–302) explicitly identifies that her research “focuses upon one particular area of political marketing; that of political branding and, most particularly, the idea of ‘negative branding.’” Here, we utilize anti-branding terminology instead of negative branding to encourage broader conceptual consideration of this facet of branding. Furthermore, just as anti-branding is not the term commonly used in political research, we do not expect the term anti-branding to be explicit in the media. We are interested in identifying whether and to what extent strategic attempts to negatively impact the perceptions of a candidate or party are tied to brand-related terminology.

We adopt anti-branding terminology in this research because the concept reaches beyond negative advertising and it has value for future political marketing research. For example, anti-branding can help explain the organization of communities that support the deterioration of a brand (Krishnamurthy and Kucuk 2009) and represent broader cultural movements (Holt 2002a), and it is increasingly recognized as a distinct, valuable brand facet (Kay 2006; Holt 2002a).

#### BRAND IMAGE

As previously stated, brand image refers to the “perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory” (Keller 1993: 3). In its essence, brand image is a multidimensional consumer-oriented construct that seeks to capture the cognitive and emotional relationships that individuals attribute to a brand (Keller 1993; Keller and Lehmann 2006). One dimension of brand image that is present in political marketing literature is *brand personality*. Brand personality is “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker 1997: 347). In a political context, it refers to human characteristics that voters relate to a party or politician (Smith 2009; Davies and Mian 2010). We do not analyze the U.S. media’s portrayal of political brand personality. Instead, we capture the overall representation of brand image. In our analysis, a media story discusses brand image when it uses brand-related terminology in the context of reporting a targeted audience’s (e.g., voters or donors) perceptions of a political entity or reactions to perceptions.

Examples of the multidimensional study of brand image in political contexts are investigations of English voters’ mental models of the Labour and Conservative party’s brand image (French and Smith 2010), Smith’s (2009) study of brand personalities in British politics, and Davies and Mian’s (2010) study of the multiple dimensions of party and political leader images. These studies communicate the complexity and value of brand images in political contexts.

Political marketing research also highlights the value of understanding brand image from a strategic perspective. Davies and Mian (2010) aptly

connect the media and political brand image, highlighting that the media influences the perceptions about a politician or party that can be held in a voter's memory. Smith (2001) also proposes factors that influence voters' brand images of leaders and parties. These examples highlight the interconnectivity and complexity of all brand construct facets. In branding, public and private entities must "balance supplier activities with consumers' perceptions" (de Chernatony and Riley 1998: 421)

#### BRAND EQUITY

Brand equity is the ultimate goal of branding. Brand equity is the value accrued by the impact a brand has on customers', competitors', or partners' actions (Keller and Lehmann 2006). In the private sphere, brands are considered to be one of the most valuable assets a firm possesses (Keller and Lehman 2006). For example, *Businessweek* (2010) calculates the 2007 value of the Coca-Cola brand to be \$65 billion and the value of each of the top 100 brands in their list is at least \$3 billion each. In the private sphere, the value of a brand is rooted in its ability to reduce marketing costs, increase consumers' willingness to pay, lead to positive word of mouth, and drive overall loyalty to the entity being branded (Keller and Lehman 2006).

In the political sphere, voter-based brand equity is the sum of positive actions that voters take on the respective entity's behalf as a result of the brand image of a politician or party (Phipps et al. 2010). Methodologies for studying and measuring political brand equity are evolving and the concept deserves greater attention (French and Smith 2010). The media's portrayal of political brand equity is not analyzed in the current research, but we do analyze whether the media portrays positive or negative aspects and consequences of branding in political contexts.

#### Identifying Positive and Negative Aspects of Political Branding

Scholars recognize a duality in political branding, where the practice can be effective for candidates yet have negative consequences for the political system or society (Needham 2005, 2006; Reeves et al. 2006). Scholars question whether political branding truly has an overall positive impact in the political sphere. Many scholars have expressed concern regarding its elite, top-down nature (e.g., Cosgrove 2007). Others raise issue with its potential to foster politics of confrontation over negotiation, its potential to weaken the institutional power of parties, and its tendency to stifle responses to difficult choices (Needham 2005, 2006). Additionally, Reeves et al. (2006) argue that it may contribute to shortsighted governance and be harmful in the long run.

In the current research, we want to identify the U.S. media's dominant underlying tendencies and presumptions regarding political brands. Do they reflect a presumption that branding has a positive impact or a negative

impact in politics or do they reflect a neutral portrayal of political branding's impact? To identify such normative assessments, we evaluate whether each article's implicit or explicit description of political brands focused on positive or negative consequences or whether it remains neutral. If an article focuses on political brands or branding *helping* politicians, the political system, or society, the normative assessment is coded as a positive impact. If an article focuses on political brands or branding *hurting* politicians, the political system, or society, then it was coded as a negative impact. If no clear negative or positive impact was expressed or implied in an article, then it was coded as neutral. Thus, our normative assessment variable is coded as a positive impact, negative impact, or neutral. We discuss examples of various normative assessments in the media in the results and analysis section.

In sum, political branding has a definite emerging role in the literature, and it appears to be identifiable in practice. Scholars apply the branding construct to candidates and parties, increasingly acknowledge the multifaceted nature of branding, and debate the true value of political branding. To complement this picture of the emergence of political branding, we now present evidence of its emergence in major U.S. media.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

### Sampling Methodology

We trace major U.S. national newspapers' usage of political brand terminology over a 40-year period from January 1, 1970, to April 8, 2010. We draw our sample of news articles from four of the top 10 U.S. newspapers as measured by daily circulation (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2011) at the time of our analysis: *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Chicago Sun-Times*. The papers are a suitable representation of the U.S. media because they existed during the entire length of our observation period, they are widely circulated and thus potentially influential, they are geographically distinct, and they can plausibly be expected to report on major local and national U.S. news events.

To identify our sample of news articles we use LexisNexis Academic to locate national news articles (including editorials) that demonstrate political use of the terms "brand" or "branding" between January 1, 1970, and April 8, 2010. We limited the search for articles to those that used the terms "brand" or "branding" within 10 words of other key political terms in articles whose subject was of a political nature (e.g., subject "politics" or "political advertising"). The specific search criteria are as follows:

((branding or brand) w/10 ("political party" or "political parties" or "political candidate" or "political candidates" or "candidates" or "candidate" or "campaign" or "campaigns")) and SUBJECT(politic\*)

In the four newspapers sampled, this search yields 424 distinct articles fitting the criteria. However, a sizable number of these articles failed to capture the correct usage of the term. We culled this initial sample by removing an article if the brand terminology was not used in a political context (e.g., used as a last name), if it was used as an adjective (e.g., brand-new), or if it was used as a synonym for the term “type” (e.g., brand of politics) *without* some additional relevant clarification on the nature of the usage of the term somewhere else within the story. This process resulted in a net total of 209 acceptable articles fitting the defined criteria, with the earliest articles published in 1978.

### Coding Methodology

Using this sample of 209 articles, we code for four evaluative variables: the person using brand terminology, the political entity referenced, the primary facet of political brands represented, and the article’s dominant normative assessment of the impact of political brands. Each article has a unique identity coded for each of these variables. We analyze our data on an annual basis using these unique identities. To achieve this, we aggregate the total number of articles that met the respective criteria in each calendar year to obtain annual counts for each identity under each variable.

**TABLE 2** Total Number of Explicit Political Brand References to Various Political Entities from the U.S. News Media (1970–2010)

Political entity	Reference count	Percentage of total references
<b>Party</b>		
Democrats	10	
Republicans	20	
Other Party	6	
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>17%</b>
<b>President or Presidential Candidate</b>		
Barack Obama	9	
John McCain	5	
Hillary Clinton	2	
George W. Bush	3	
Al Gore	2	
Bill Clinton	4	
Michael Dukakis	3	
Other U.S. President or Presidential Candidate	7	
National Leader Outside of the U.S.	11	
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>22%</b>
<b>Other Political Candidate</b>		
Congressperson	41	
Judge, Mayor, or Unspecified “Candidate”	35	
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>36%</b>
<b>Generalized Political Reference</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>25%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>100%</b>

To identify the person using brand terminology, we code the person as the journalist unless the terminology is placed within a quotation attributed to a specific individual. In all cases, the terminology was used either by a political figure (e.g., politician, consultant, or spokesperson) or the journalist.

To identify the political entity being referenced, we rely on the story's context. We use a unique identifier for each entity that was referenced, with the intent of being as specific as possible. Table 2 shows the complete list of entities that we identify along with the total number of brand-related references for each entity.

**TABLE 3** Select General Political Brand-Related News Articles from the U.S. News Media (1970–2010)

Article date (Source)	General political brand reference
July 21, 2007 ( <i>Chicago Sun Times</i> ) Tom Bevan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Context</u>: A columnist writes an article describing, “Why Clinton vs. Obama seems like iPods vs. Windows.”</li> <li>• <u>Article Excerpt</u>: Having spent more than a decade in the world of advertising, I suppose it’s only natural I tend to <b>view political candidates and their campaigns as brands</b>. Brands can be broken down into two components:</li> </ul>
October 30, 2004 ( <i>New York Times</i> ) Timothy Egan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Context</u>: As polling indicates which U.S. states are still “undecided” in the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, the candidates begin to campaign more heavily in those states.</li> <li>• <u>Article Excerpt</u>: As the electoral map dried up in the South for Democrats, they turned to the long-forgotten interior [of the U.S.]. But both campaigns have discovered <b>that political brand loyalty is a hard thing to find here</b> [in the interior western U.S.].</li> <li>• “I’m a Democrat who voted for George Bush last time, and I’m voting John Kerry this time just because things don’t feel right and maybe change is the only way out,” said Amanda Mordem.</li> </ul>
February 4, 1990 ( <i>Washington Post</i> ) David Broder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Context</u>: An editorial writer is writing about the impact that “brand names” have in politics as a factor for high reelection rates of incumbents and the challenges of running against a person with little personal experience but the name of an experienced incumbent family member.</li> <li>• <u>Article Excerpt</u>: But no question <b>that in this brand-name era</b>, well-established political names are valuable assets. The Browns of Ohio, the Robertses of Oregon and similar clans . . .</li> </ul>
November 1, 1978 ( <i>Washington Post</i> ) Lou Cannon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Context</u>: There is one week left in the 1978 California Gubernatorial race, and the writer is commenting on the campaign of Democratic incumbent, Jerry Brown, and his recent treatment of the challenger, Republican nominee, Evelle Younger.</li> <li>• <u>Article Excerpt</u>: The central issue of the campaign, says Brown, is “the integrity of Evelle Younger,” <b>whom he calls “Brand X.”</b></li> </ul>

**TABLE 4** Select Brand Identity–Related News Articles from the U.S. News Media (1970–2010)

Article date (Source)	Political brand reference
November 4, 2008 ( <i>Washington Post</i> ) Paul Kane	<p><b>Brand Identity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Context</u>: In the 2008 U.S. congressional campaigns, a member of the National Republican Congressional Committee explains what candidates must do to have the best chance at winning election.</li> <li>• <u>Article Excerpt</u>: Republicans said their incumbents could win if they succeed in establishing an identity independent of President Bush, Sen. John McCain, and congressional GOP leaders. “Republican candidates that have <b>established their own personal brand</b> and have framed their races around a personal choice will survive this,” said Ken Spain, spokesman for the [NRCC].</li> </ul>
April 22, 2008 ( <i>Chicago Sun Times</i> ) Lynn Sweet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Context</u>: Barack Obama has to deal with a difficult campaign against Hillary Clinton in the 2008 U.S. presidential race.</li> <li>• <u>Article Excerpt</u>: “They made a very serious choice that will have long-standing consequences to <b>put their brand at stake</b> in order to try to deliver this knockout blow . . .” said Clinton strategist Geoff Garin. . . . Said Obama communications chief, Robert Gibbs, “We <b>don’t take brand advice</b> from the Clinton campaign.”</li> </ul>
May 28, 1988 ( <i>New York Times</i> ) Randall Rothenberg	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Context</u>: Owner of a large advertising agency is discussing how he wants to help as a volunteer in the 1988 presidential campaign.</li> <li>• <u>Article Excerpt</u>: Now Mr. Mingo [a volunteer for the Mike Dukakis 1988 presidential campaign] wants to <b>increase Mr. Dukakis’s “brand awareness”</b> among blacks. “One of the places this campaign needs help is in the minority area,” Mr. Mingo said. “What happens after Jesse [Jackson]? What happens after California? That’s where I can help.”</li> </ul>
August 23, 1983 ( <i>New York Times</i> ) E. [sic]	<p><b>Anti-Branding</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Context</u>: Democratic Party having a runoff campaign to elect either Evelyn Gandy or Bill Allain, the state attorney general, as the 1984 Democratic gubernatorial candidate in Mississippi.</li> <li>• <u>Article Excerpt</u>: The next day she [Evelyn Gandy] came on strong, <b>branding Mr. Allain a one-issue candidate</b> who had alienated the Legislature. He, in turn, linked her to the “old guard” responsible for Mississippi’s ranking last among the states . . .</li> </ul>
February 4, 2001 ( <i>Chicago Sun Times</i> ) Peter Goodspeed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Context</u>: Incumbent Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak has waning support and is trailing in polls against his challenger, Ariel Sharon.</li> <li>• <u>Article Excerpt</u>: As a result, Barak’s election campaign has been reduced to presenting him as a peacemaker <b>while branding Sharon as a risk-taking warmonger</b>.</li> </ul>

To identify the specific facet of branding being represented, we refer to the conceptual definitions presented in the previous section and evaluate the overall context of the article. Based on these definitions, we assign nominal values representing the facets of brand identity, brand image, and anti-branding. For articles not clearly matching any of these conceptual

**TABLE 5** Select Brand Image–Related News Articles from the U.S. News Media (1970–2010)

Article date (Source)	Political brand image reference
January 24, 2010 ( <i>Washington Post</i> ) Chris Cillizza	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Context</u>: Republican Senator-Elect Scott Brown won a U.S. congressional seat formerly occupied by late Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy.</li> <li>• <u>Article Excerpt</u>: [Myth 4] “<b>The Obama brand is dead:</b> Yes, the president made a last-minute campaign stop in Boston for Coakley [the losing Democratic candidate]. And no, it didn’t change the direction of the race. But...Obama remains a potent political force among the Democratic base; internal polling...showed that his presence had helped energize the most loyal Democrats about a race that had generated little enthusiasm until then.”</li> </ul>
January 8, 2010 ( <i>Washington Post</i> ) Paul Kane and Chris Cillizza	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Context</u>: Republican Party has difficulty recruiting candidates to run as Republicans in the 2010 U.S. Congressional race.</li> <li>• <u>Article Excerpt</u>: “Polls show <b>that [the Republican] brand image</b> is damaged and that its campaign committees are lagging far behind their Democratic counterparts in the race for cash. In some Senate contests—Kentucky and California, for example—establishment-backed Republicans face primary challenges. . . . Those primary fights reflect a broader disconnect between party leaders in Washington and the Tea Party grass-roots activists . . .”</li> </ul>
June 13, 2004 ( <i>New York Times</i> ) Terry Golway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Context</u>: With a governor’s election coming in 2005, the Republican Party has to nominate a candidate, soon, to run against incumbent Democratic Governor James McGreevey.</li> <li>• <u>Article Excerpt</u>: . . . some Republicans <b>are turning to a familiar brand</b> rather than a lesser-known hopeful . . . it is the name of Mr. Kean—with his seemingly earnest demeanor and high-profile voice on ethics issues—that keeps emerging . . .</li> </ul>
January 15, 1988 ( <i>Washington Post</i> ) Haynes Johnson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Context</u>: The journalist is commenting on an issue of how to deal with financial troubles facing public services in the lead-up to the 1988 U.S. presidential election.</li> <li>• <u>Article Excerpt</u>: Raise, softly, the delicate subject of “revenues.” Naturally, everyone talks about “leadership.” They’re all for it. Each <b>candidate</b> possesses <b>the indispensable brand for which the nation yearns</b> and charisma and character, too.</li> </ul>



definitions, we code them as a general branding reference. Table 3, Table 4, and Table 5 provide examples of news articles portraying each facet. Brand personality and brand equity are not included in our analysis because their conceptual definition is not easily transferrable to a content analysis of political-based media articles. Preliminary attempts to code for these facets lacked sufficient inter-coder reliability (Neuendorf 2002).

To identify the U.S. media's normative assessments of the overall positive or negative impact of political brands, we evaluate whether each article's implicit or explicit description of political brands or branding focused on positive or negative consequences or if it remained neutral. If an article focuses on political brands or branding *helping* politicians, the political system, or society, it is coded as a positive impact. If an article focuses on political brands or branding *hurting* politicians, the political system, or society, then it is coded as a negative impact. If no clear negative or positive impact was expressed or implied in an article, then it is coded as neutral. Thus, our normative assessment variable is coded as positive impact, negative impact, or neutral. The coding scheme addresses whether U.S. media reports reflect a presumption that brands and branding have a positive impact or a negative impact in politics or whether they reflect a neutral portrayal of political brands' impact. We discuss examples of various normative assessments in the media in the results and analysis section.

A trained researcher familiar with the conceptual definitions of all the variables under investigation initially coded each article. Then, a second trained researcher was given the same set of definitions and coding instructions and independently coded a random sample of 25% of the cases ( $n = 52$ ) in the data set. Inter-coder reliability agreement coefficients are between 85% and 98% for each variable included in the final analysis. This is well above the 80% threshold expected in most situations (Neuendorf 2002).

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

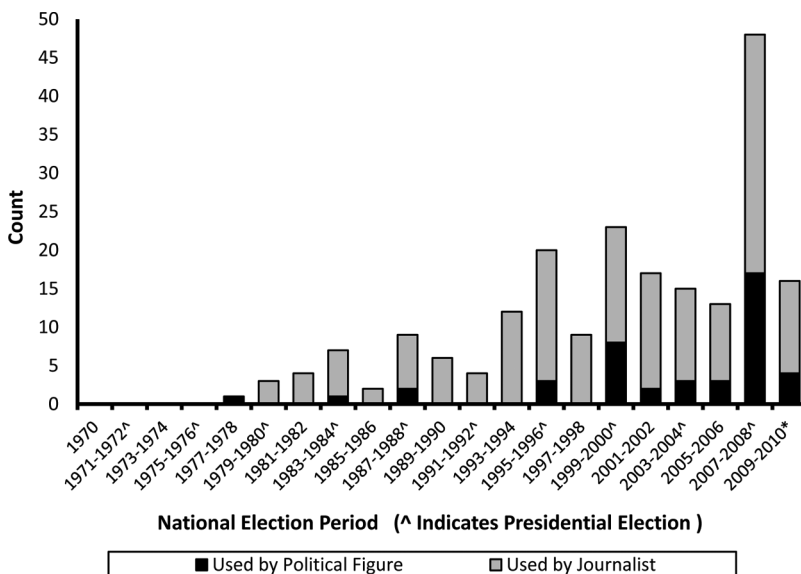
### Increasing Use of Political Brand Terminology in the U.S. Media

Do the U.S. media present political brands and political branding as a legitimate part of the political landscape? Our data, drawn from a modest sample of 209 instances of brand-related terminology usage across four major U.S. newspapers between 1970 and 2010, suggest that the answer is yes. Brands are a recognized and increasingly accepted part of American politics. Considering the notable restrictions in the number of media outlets analyzed and the search criteria chosen, we propose that this result indicates a meaningful degree of legitimization of political brands and political branding in the U.S. media and that the true figure for the entire media environment is likely much higher. Our results are drawn from a representative sampling frame of media that exists throughout the entire 40-year observation period.

Our results should encourage future research addressing similar research questions using a broader sample of electronic and international media.

To place the results of our sampling procedure in a broader context, consider the following post hoc alternative search for political brand-related articles using different outlets and criteria. An online search of Google News, restricted to the time period from January 1, 2000, to April 8, 2010, for the exact phrase “Republican brand” (using the advanced search feature, with exact search terms, excluding quotation marks, within news sources located in the “United States”) yields about 1,020 results. The same search method used to find news including the exact phrase “political brand” yields 236 results. In the current research we have a well-defined sampling frame and search criteria. Clearly, expanding the sampling frame and search criteria increases the number of relevant articles. However, we propose that while the magnitude changes, the broader trends which we identify remain the same.

Figure 1 shows the U.S. media’s increasing use of political brand terminology over time and whether journalists or political figures use the terminology more frequently. With regard to the general trend in the terminology’s use, in our sample it enters the major U.S. print media in a political context in the late 1970s. It is interesting to note that this correlates with the increase in scholarly attention to the terminology in political contexts (e.g., Shama 1976, Nimmo 1975). Use of political branding terminology accelerated during and after the 1994 midterm elections, with a noticeable



**FIGURE 1** Journalists’ and political figures’ frequency of use of “brand” or “branding” in political contexts in major U.S. newspapers (1970–2010): Data for 2010 reflects newspaper publications through April 8.

spike in its usage also occurring during the lead up to the 2008 presidential elections. While journalists appear to be the predominant users of political branding language in the media, political figures begin to use the term on a limited, though more regular, basis in the media starting in 2000. Political branding does not appear to be a journalistic or linguistic fad.

These general trends suggest that the U.S. media increasingly acknowledge political branding as an innate part of modern political systems. Even outside of presidential elections, evidence suggests that journalists appear comfortable applying the concept to political contexts even when it is not explicitly used by political elites. Also, the U.S. media use political brand terminology in reference to many political entities. As shown in Table 2, branding concepts are connected to parties, presidents and presidential candidates, members of Congress and congressional candidates, judges and city mayors, and even foreign political entities. The broad application of political branding terminology in the media further suggests that our results are not driven by a single campaign. The trend toward increased usage may be the result of many circumstances, but the findings within this data indicate a growing consciousness of brands in U.S. politics.

Our findings raise an interesting question: What explains the media's usage trends of political brand-related terminology? If presidential elections are the significant indicator of the press increasingly discussing political brands, then perhaps the trends we find are related to increasing expenditures in political marketing and increases in overall political coverage. If each passing national election cycle influences the rising trend in brand-related political coverage, then perhaps the media are seeing brand-related strategies and tactics more frequently and thus becoming more sensitized to it. If it is merely the passing of time that influences political brand reporting in the media, then perhaps the media are sensing a tendency toward greater political marketing due to permanent campaigning (Blumenthal 1982; Needham 2005), or perhaps it is simply because of the larger exposure of branding in society (Scammell 2007; French and Smith 2010).

Using our data, we provide the results of exploratory OLS regression analyses in Table 6 to shed some light on this question. Because the terminology did not appear in our sample until 1978 and because we only have partial year data for 2010, we analyze 30 annual observations (1980 to 2009). We regress total annual use of political brand terminology in our sample onto the occurrence of particular U.S. national election events, time as represented by decades, and time as represented by the passing of additional national U.S. elections. Though we identify evidence that the U.S. media references global political events with brand terminology, we do not model the many global political events that may influence the U.S. media's use of political brand terminology. Because we do not control for these events explicitly, our results should be viewed with some caution. While we recognize this limitation, we still view the exploratory analysis results as informative for future research.

**TABLE 6** Regression Analyses of the Relationships Among Time, National Elections, and Types of National Elections on the Use of “Brand” or “Branding” in a Political Context in Major U.S. Newspapers (1980–2010)

<b>Dependent variable:</b> Annual number of times U.S. media use “Brand” or “Branding” in a political context	<b>Model 1: Beta (<i>p</i> Value)</b>	<b>Model 2: Beta (<i>p</i> Value)</b>
Intercept	−0.215 (.915)	−3.604 (.106)
Presidential Election Year	5.875* (.019)	6.841* (.005)
Presidential Election Year (lag)	3.203 (.201)	2.875 (.217)
Midterm Election Year	2.061 (.406)	2.698 (.247)
Additional National Election <sup>a</sup>		0.966* (.000)
1990s <sup>b</sup>	2.961 (.174)	
2000s <sup>b</sup>	9.600* (.000)	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.547	0.581
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.452	0.514
<i>F</i> -stat	5.785	8.682
<i>F</i> -stat <i>p</i> value	.001*	.000*

\*Statistically significant at  $p < .05$  level.

<sup>a</sup>Additional national election period since the 1980 U.S. presidential election, such that for 1980 the value = 0, for 1981 the value = 1, for 1982 and 1983 the value = 2, and for 2008 and 2009 the value = 14. Thus, the  $\beta$  represents the average annual increase in the use of political brand terminology in U.S. media with each additional national election.

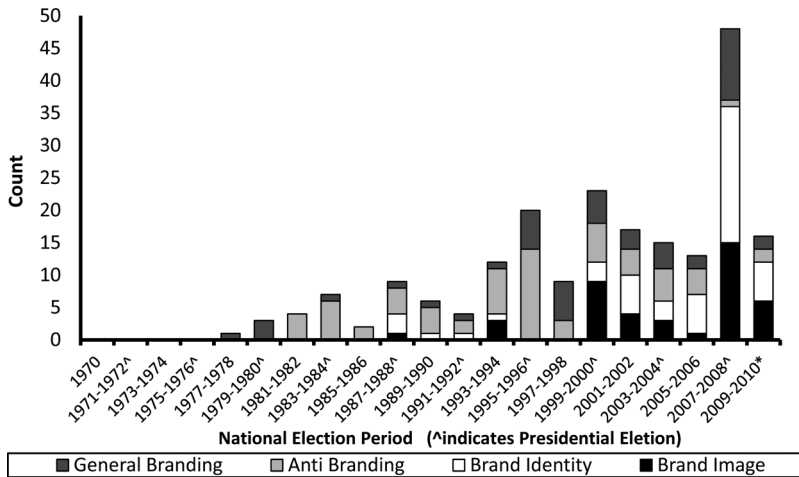
<sup>b</sup>1990s and 2000s are measured as a dummy variable, such that if the observation is in the respective time period, this variable = 1. Thus, the  $\beta$  represents the average annual increase in the use of political brand terminology in U.S. media for that decade relative to its initial usage in the 1970s.

We encourage additional studies on the influences of national and global political events on national political marketing media coverage to address this issue.

Our exploratory analysis results indicate that, upon controlling for national election events and time-related variables, increases in the usage of brand-related terminology are more prevalent during years with national presidential election events ( $\beta_{\text{model 1}} = 5.875$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $\beta_{\text{model 2}} = 6.744$ ,  $p < .05$ ) than in years following presidential elections. However, the same is not true for the impact of national midterm congressional election events. Furthermore, the analysis indicates that modeling time based on additional national elections explains more variance in our data ( $R^2_{\text{Model2}} = 0.581$ ) than does modeling time as the passing of decades ( $R^2_{\text{Model1}} = 0.547$ ). In short, we find that the usage of political brand terminology in the U.S. media increases during years with national presidential elections and over time with each additional national election, whether it is a presidential election or a midterm congressional election.

### Discussing Multiple Brand-Related Facets

If political branding is increasingly recognized beyond scholars and political elites, are the perspectives on political branding similar to those presented in



**FIGURE 2** Frequency with which major U.S. newspapers reflect specific brand-related concepts using “brand” or “branding” terminology (1970–2010): Data for 2010 reflects newspaper publications through April 8.

literature? Our results indicate that U.S. media reports reflect the brand construct’s multifaceted nature, and from 1978 to 2010 their reporting of political brands and branding evolves. In Figure 2, we show the evolution of brand-related reporting as represented in the U.S. media. Table 3, Table 4, and Table 5 provide excerpts from articles that exemplify each of these facets of political brands.

Journalists and political figures do not always employ the academic terms “brand image,” “brand identity,” or “anti-branding.” However, their descriptions of political branding represent these constructs’ conceptual nature. For nearly 30 years, brand terminology in U.S. media was predominately limited to anti-branding concepts found in reports of political attacks through commercials or speeches. Through the 1980s, brand terminology was limited in frequency and scope. One could argue that while we can reflectively recognize the use of brand terminology as reporting on anti-branding techniques, the journalists likely had limited if any understanding of the true conceptual nature of the terminology. Then, starting with the highly contested 2000 presidential race between George W. Bush and Al Gore, the media demonstrated greater cognizance of the positive facets of brand management in political contexts. The U.S. media not only use brand terminology more frequently over that time than in previous decades but their usage becomes multifaceted and conceptually more nuanced as well.

GENERAL BRANDING

The examples of general brand usage (see Table 3) indicate that the media today view political branding as a more mature construct than when they first

started using the term. For instance, in our sample the first use of brand terminology was in a generic sense, with California gubernatorial candidate Jerry Brown referring to his opponent as “Brand X.” Over time, reports of political branding became more extensive and nuanced, to include references to brand loyalty as well as a general acceptance of the normative aspect of viewing political entities as brands. This data suggests that usage of the general terms “brand” and “branding” now tends to be consciously applied in a proper context by U.S. media.

#### ANTI-BRANDING

Anti-branding received most attention in the media during the 1980s and 1990s. More specifically, when the media used brand terminology during that time, they were, perhaps unconsciously, referring to anti-branding political actions. Examples of this are shown in Table 5. The data reflect opponent-driven negative brand identity practices in politics, with phrases such as, “The next day she [Evelyn Gandy] came on strong, branding Mr. Allain a one-issue candidate who had alienated the Legislature.” Similarly, a news story identifies Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, pursuing a strategy to create an identity for his opponent, as “a risk-taking warmonger.” In these examples, the journalist uses the term “branding” in a generic sense, but it reflects the comfort of the media to use the terminology in relation to actions that can clearly be connected to anti-branding. As we compare this type of use to the media’s more nuanced use of the term over time, it indicates the broader legitimization of the construct in popular media and beyond scholars and political elites.

#### BRAND IDENTITY

Some media stories comment on the intentional management of political entities as brands as early as the 1988 campaign between George Bush and Mike Dukakis. However, from 2000 onward, the U.S. media regularly acknowledge actions consistent with the brand identity construct. Table 4 provides examples of these brand identity-related news stories. The early mention of an advertiser who wants to “increase Mr. Dukakis’s ‘brand awareness’” reflects a managerial desire to make a brand unique (Harris and de Chernatony 2001). During coverage of the 2008 presidential race, strategists openly discussed brand identity management in the media. Noting the trouble of the Republican brand, a party strategist stated that “Republican candidates that have established their own personal brand [will overcome the trouble of the party’s brand image].” Regarding the primary race that year between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, Obama’s communications chief told a reporter, “We don’t take brand advice from the Clinton campaign.” In neither case does the news story attempt to qualify or clarify the political

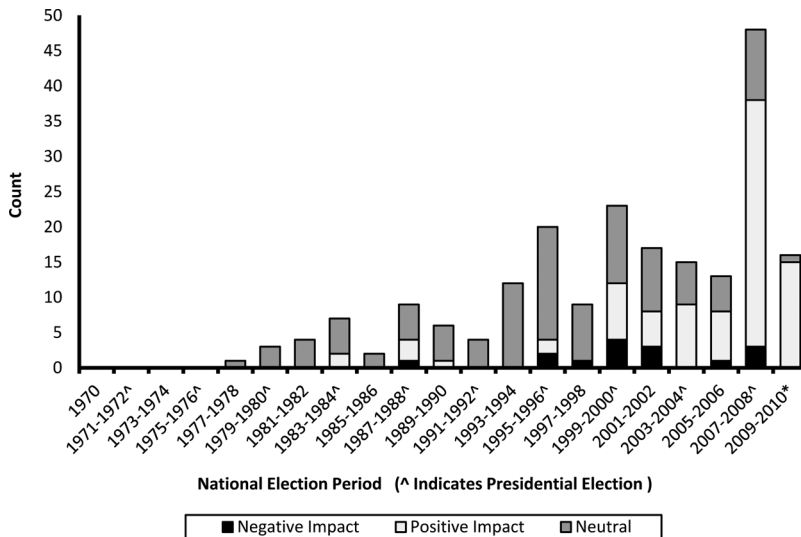
figure’s statements. Clearly, by 2008 the U.S. media possess a genuine acceptance of the legitimacy of political brand management and appear to believe that readers also do.

BRAND IMAGE

The 2000 presidential race also appears to be the time when the media accept the nature of political brand image. Moreover, by 2010 some journalists fancy themselves political brand experts. For example, as shown in Table 5, one journalist repudiates concerns that “the Obama brand is dead.” The article attempts to present a complete argument about the expected ability of President Obama’s brand image to be extended to a local candidate and attempts to argue that the emotive response to the president’s brand image is evidence of its continued effectiveness, even without the expected result. Additionally, quotes such as “Polls show that the Republican brand image is damaged” are a clear indication that the U.S. media acknowledge political brand image as a consumer-oriented, multidimensional concept.

Commenting on the Impact of Political Branding

Given the evidence of the expanding use and appreciation of political branding in the U.S. media, is there a sense of concern or judgment regarding its value? We find that the debate over the impact of political branding exists in the U.S. media just as it does in scholarly literature. Beginning in the 1970s, brand-related terminology was used in the media to convey a story. As Figure 3 reflects,



**FIGURE 3** Perceived impact of political branding as depicted in major U.S. newspapers (1970–2010); Data for 2010 reflects newspaper publications through April 8.

explicit or implicit commentary on the impact of political branding was relatively neutral for the most part until the lead up to the 2000 U.S. presidential election. As an example of the negative impact of political branding, one journalist bemoans an attempt to make the election about a generic party brand rather than about individual candidates. This mirrors the concerns by scholars that political branding can lead to shortsightedness and reduce willingness to address tough decisions (Needham 2005, 2006; Reeves et al. 2006). Another journalist expresses concerns for the election process if brand-name candidates have a potential advantage over lesser-known opponents. Such positions follow the theoretical argument put forward by Lott (1986), but view the conclusion through a negative societal lens rather than through a positive economic lens.

Still, the majority of articles that offer a perspective on the value of political branding portray the positive aspects of branding. The most frequent supportive voice is that which lauds the ability of political branding to help candidates and parties win elections. Overall, our results and analysis suggest that the U.S. media increasingly report political branding as effective for candidates and parties, and they offer only limited, though valid, concerns over political branding's negative consequences on political systems.

While we analyze the overall normative portrayal of the impact of brands in the political sphere, future research could address more nuanced measurement of the media's opinion of political brands. Given the debate that political branding may be good for a political actor but bad for the political environment, more distinctive variables might more effectively assess the nature of branding's perceived influence on politics and society.

## CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Brands are a legitimate element of political environments. This paper contributes to the growing body of political branding research in two ways. First, it provides a comprehensive empirical assessment of political branding practices in the U.S. through a systematic assessment of U.S. print news media over a 40-year period. Second it relates the evolving recognition of political brands in the U.S. media to the evolving recognition of political brands by scholars. Brands are co-created by political entities, constituencies, the media, and societal events. The media are consumers of political marketing activities (Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy 2007) and they can effectively shape the context in which other constituencies interpret political activity. As constituencies access greater amounts of information about political brands and the entities behind the brands, we can anticipate that they will expect greater continuity between the two (Holt 2002a). Some scholars already point out that such continuity does not exist and encourage voters to be more attentive to the true nature of political branding (Spiller and Bergner 2011). We posit that our data and analysis reveal that the conceptual



and practical understanding of political branding needs to quickly adapt to this new reality.

Multiple factors could account for the trends our data. For instance, the natural increase in political coverage over time and during election cycles could account for some trends. As overall political coverage increases, so may the proportion brand-related reporting. Of course, these natural surges in coverage are constrained by newspapers' size limitations as well as daily news cycle deadlines. While we assert that our data implicitly controls for this explanation, it remains a potential factor. We hope future research will explore the extent to which permanent campaigning (Blumenthal 1982; Needham 2005), the overall exposure of branding in society (Scammell 2007; French and Smith 2010), and advances in the media's understanding of political branding influence the spread of this and other marketing phenomena in society beyond scholars and political elites.

Additionally, while our selected newspaper sample represents the large, geographically dispersed, long-respected media institutions in key news markets, our research does not explicitly account for the explosion of online media that began near 2000 and continues to grow. It is reasonable to utilize major newspapers to sample the media in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, as we have done, but it is possible that the perspectives found in online media sources from 2000 forward are much more diverse and prevalent than what our sample represents. It is also important to note that we apply theoretical constructs to represent what journalists and political figures say in the media. We cannot, however, say that the precise construct definition is in their mind when they are speaking.

Our research provides interesting implications for future political branding studies and practice. First, additional exploration is warranted into whether the brand community construct (Keller and Lehmann 2006; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) adds value in political contexts. "A brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structural set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001: 412). As political discussion blossoms beyond the major media to include citizen-to-citizen communications through blogs and social media, it will be critical for political parties and politicians to be proactively involved in managing citizen-to-citizen communications. In relation to political science research, brand communities are most closely related to grass roots political participation and communication literature (e.g., Rozell and Wilcox 1997). Connecting this literature with advances that marketing scholars are making in studying brand communities in the private sphere may be fruitful.

We also suggest broader consideration of anti-branding trends in marketing literature. One can plausibly anticipate that political entities may face increased pressure to more clearly link their political brand to their political actions (Holt 2002a). As constituents master online mass communication tools and as political branding is popularly recognized, constituents may

become more cynical of political brands and more adept at organizing around them with positive or negative intentions (Holt 2002a; Kay 2006; Krishnamurthy and Kucuk 2009). This may help us understand and predict political events such as the 2010 Tea Party movement and the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movements in the U.S.

Third, our literature review highlights that most political brand research focuses on politicians and parties. Future research might also explore whether the branding construct can be broadened to political causes and ideas (Kotler and Levy 1969). In that regard, the direct branding of political ideas can be a valuable area of research and build upon previous findings regarding U.S. parties and ideologies (Cosgrove 2007).

Finally, our research highlights two areas where political branding research requires greater clarity. First, this study and others (Davies and Mian 2010; Smith 2009) suggest that measuring and identifying political brand personality can be a challenge. For the value of this construct in a political context to be explicated, improved measures are critical. A second area that deserves clarity is defining the positive and negative aspects of political branding. Political branding exists in the thoughts and words of politicians, scholars, and society. Is branding limited to existing as a tool to gain electoral victories as the U.S. media predominately suggest? Is there empirical evidence that branding is as detrimental to political systems as many scholars theorize (Cosgrove 2007; Needham 2005, 2006; Reeves et al. 2006)?

In conclusion, the majority of political branding literature is generally populated with studies in European political contexts whose focus is political elites. Our research compliments this greater body of literature by adding evidence of a media-based perspective from the U.S. While recognizing the limits to this type of study is important, this work does suggest possibilities for future research and highlights a greater need for more empirical testing and theory building with regard to political branding.

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