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The Impact of Public Branding: An Experimental Study on the Effects of Branding Policy on Citizen Trust

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Abstract: *Branding has become common in the public sector as brands are increasingly used to influence citizens' associations with public organizations and public services. Using experimental research replicated in three European countries, this article investigates the effect of using the European Union (EU) brand on trust in policies. Experiments were conducted among economics students in Belgium, Poland, and The Netherlands to test the hypothesis that adding EU brand elements to policies positively affects trust in those policies. The results show a consistent positive and significant effect of applying the EU brand to trust in the policies in all countries and for both policies included in the experiment—even in The Netherlands, a country characterized by a negative overall EU sentiment. These findings provide some of the first empirical evidence of the effectiveness of branding for public policy.*

Practitioner Points

- Public brands have the ability to influence citizens; your brand matters!
- The general sentiment toward your organization is not necessarily an indication of your brand potential.
- Communication with citizens could be more organized on the basis of tangible policies or products, not just “big stories” or the general characteristics of your organization.

Public branding has risen in importance and magnitude. It is used as a governance strategy to create images of public services, organizations, people, or policies (e.g., Eshuis and Klijn 2012). For example, numerous cities have used place branding to enhance their attractiveness to tourists and investors, but nowadays public organizations or policies are also being branded (Klijn, Eshuis, and Braun 2012; Van der Torre, Fenger, and Van Twist 2012). An example of the branding of policy is Tony Blair’s “Third Way.” This brand, emphasizing that the problem is not the state or the market but the cooperation between the two, enabled Blair to distinguish his policies from old Labour policies (state oriented) and from conservative policies (market oriented). This brand successfully created associations with voters such as new, distinctive, innovative, and problem solving (Lees-Marshment 2009).

Notwithstanding the upsurge of public branding, there is very little research available that actually tests whether branding as a governance strategy has any impact; rare exceptions are Schneider (2004) and Zenker and Beckmann (2013). This article explores this new territory by measuring the effect of one of the most well-known

public brands, that of the European Union (EU), on trust in the policies of the EU.

Public Branding as a Governance Strategy

Following Eshuis and Klijn, we define a brand as “a symbolic construct that consists of a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of these, created deliberately to identify a phenomenon and differentiate it from similar phenomena by adding particular meaning to it” (2012, 19). This definition, resembling the well-known definition of Aaker (1991) but with less emphasis on sellers, highlights that brands are manifested in certain brand elements such as names, signs, or symbols.

A brand is not the product itself; it is what gives meaning and value to the product and defines its identity (Kapferer 1992). In other words, a brand signals to consumers where a product or service comes from and what makes it identifiable. Public branding is a deliberate governance strategy to

influence citizens’ perceptions. Branding can be used, for example, to influence perceptions of opportunities in a city or the priorities of a political party (Braun 2012; Marsh and Fawcett 2011). As

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a governance strategy, branding is a strategy for communication and image building among target groups. The ultimate goal is to build a brand that enables communication with citizens, facilitates a trusting relationship with citizens, and influences behavior such as voting (political branding) or visits to a city (city branding) in a desired direction (Arvidsson 2006; Hankinson 2004). In the case of public brands aimed at policies, this means, for instance, that the policy is more easily supported or trusted. We elaborate on branding as governance strategy in the section discussing the theoretical framework.

Experimental Research on the Impact of the EU Brand

An important aim of public branding as a governance strategy is to enhance trust in a certain policy or public institution, as trust is crucial for governments' legitimacy and effectiveness (Cooper, Knotts, and Brennan 2008; Hetherington 1998). In this article, we focus on the effect of the EU brand on citizens' trust in policies. Given the decreasing support for the EU in many European countries, the EU has explored branding as a strategy to enhance trust in the EU and its policies (Council of the European Union 2013). The European Commission established the "flag of Europe" as a central brand element of the EU. The European Commission requires EU institutions, partner organizations, and member states to use this symbol consistently when they are communicating EU issues (European Commission 2013a). So far, however, it is uncertain whether branding activities actually result in the desired effect of enhancing trust in EU policies.

The lack of knowledge about the effects of branding exists not only for the EU brand. There is a general lack of studies investigating the causal effects of public branding. Isolating causal effects, however, requires methodological rigor and control, something that is possible in controlled experiments (Bozeman and Scott 1992; Morton and Williams 2010). By conducting controlled experiments in which both branded and nonbranded EU policies are randomly provided to participants and by subsequently measuring trust in the policies among both groups, this study empirically assesses the effect of branding EU policy on trust in those policies.¹ Our research question is straightforward: what is the effect of the EU brand on trust in policies?

To answer this question, this article is structured as follows: The next section deals with the theoretical framework, the hypothesis concerning the effects of EU branding on trust, and the operationalization of the theoretical concepts. The third section describes the research design guiding the experimental part of the research. In the fourth section, the results of the experiment are reported. Finally, the main research question is answered in a concluding section, which also discusses the study, its results, and theoretical implications.

Theoretical Framework

Branding can be regarded as a governance strategy (Braun 2012; Eshuis and Edwards 2013; Marsh and Fawcett 2011). We now discuss in more detail what makes branding a particular kind of governance strategy and how it can effect trust in policy (the dependent variable in this study).

Branding as Governance Strategy: Influencing Individual Perceptions

Branding as a governance strategy differs from other governance strategies, in particular rational and deliberative approaches of governance. Rational governance perspectives emphasize rational design and planning of a logically coherent set of goals and instruments on the basis of scientifically established policy theories (cf. Klijn and Snellen 2009; see also Lindblom and Cohen 1979). The influencing of perceptions takes place on the basis of scientifically established information and planned communication. Deliberative governance focuses on actors developing joint meaning and arriving at commonly supported solutions through argumentation and deliberation. A key assumption is that actors best arrive at joint solutions through exchanging arguments. Thus, deliberative approaches center on arguments and reasonable deliberation (Fischer 2003; Schön and Rein 1994).

Importantly, rational and deliberative perspectives emphasize the rational or reasonable side of policy making. This is different for branding. The primary aim of branding is not the systematic processing of information, the rational weighing of arguments, or the creation of frames to interpret reality; rather, branding aims to influence the affective and emotional (Arvidsson 2006; Batey 2008; Smith 2009).

The effects of the brand itself can be understood using the idea of associative memory (Anderson and Bower 1973). Brands can build up associations that trigger or influence evaluation processes that shape individual perceptions (Eshuis and Klijn 2012). Branding research in the private sector confirms these direct branding effects on customers' perceptions and associations toward products or services (e.g., Aaker 1991; Bruning 1997; Keller 1993). It has been shown that credible brands can create favorable evaluations even in product categories that are new to the brand (brand extension) (Reast 2005). More specifically, the literature on private brands suggests that brands influence trust by providing assurances about quality. Brands can reduce perceived risk as credible and consistent symbols of product quality (Erdem, Swait, and Valenzuela 2006). As Elliott and Yannopoulou put it, brands enable consumers to "understand the offer and face up with the uncertainty and perceived risk associated with buying and consuming a product" (2007, 989). Brands may influence trust in products, as well as trust in a service or service provider (Michaelis et al. 2008). Applied to the public domain, the (re)shaping of perceptions through branding of policies may increase trust in those policies.

Limitations of Public Branding: Controlling the Brand

Although many scholars have argued that brands are powerful vehicles to reach consumers or voters, brands—whether they are public or private—also have limitations. These limitations relate to three characteristics of brands: they are perceptual entities, they are constructed and experienced in an institutional environment (a community or social environment), and they can be contested. Given that brands are symbols that are perceived, consumers and citizens have their own perceptions of the brand. These perceptions can differ from the ideas and images that the brand owner wishes

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to communicate. Moreover, while “using” the brand, consumers can redefine the meaning and identity of the brand (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Ward 2000). In public branding, because of the public nature of brands and the often contested public issues they are related to, brands are difficult to control and more often disputed (Eshuis and Klijn 2012). Consequently, public brands can develop differently than intended by the brand managers, notwithstanding the marketing activities and strategies employed.

It is precisely because of this lack of control that public brands may not have the intended effects (Braun 2012). This makes it especially interesting to examine whether public brands have effects similar to those of private brands. Public brands such as the EU brand may be heavily contested, while this is not the case for most private brands. The EU is faced, for instance, with considerable Euro-skepticism in many European countries (Boomgaarden et al. 2011; Dixon and Fullerton 2014). Therefore, it is important to test the effect of such a public brand. Can a public brand of an institution experiencing so much pressure and criticism be an effective brand?

Trust in Government Policy: The Dependent Variable

Public brands are used to create an enduring relationship with targets groups (voters, groups of citizens in a city) and enhance trust and support among citizens (Lees-Marshment 2009; Needham 2006). Trust is often interpreted as trust in individuals, but trust can also be targeted at organizations (Nooteboom 2002) and policies (Edelenbos and Eshuis 2012). Based on Rousseau et al., we define trust as “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of an actor” (1998, 395) or another object of trust. The object of trust can be an individual, an organization, or, indeed, a policy. Trust in a policy, however, is not something that develops automatically.

This definition delineates what trust is and what it is not, but it is not very informative regarding dimensions of trust. In the literature, trust is often conceptualized as multidimensional (Lewicki, McAllister, and Bies 1998; Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995; Nooteboom 2002). Building on these earlier conceptualizations, three well-known dimensions of trust are *perceived benevolence*, *perceived honesty*, and *perceived competence* (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer 2013). *Benevolence* concerns the intentions of the government behind a policy or whether the policy is really in the interest of citizens (Levi and Stoker 2000). *Honesty* relates to the extent to which governments keep promises and tell the truth and to the integrity of a government organization and its people (McKnight, Choudhury, and Kacmar 2002). *Competence* points to the capability, effectiveness, and professionalism of the government that is crafting the policy or to whether a government is actually able to create and implement a policy that achieves goals (Hetherington 1998). Taken together, these three dimensions provide a comprehensive measure of trust that fits well with the general definition of trust (Rousseau et al. 1998). This measure has been operationalized and validated (Grimmelikhuijsen 2012; Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer 2013) and is used in the conceptual model of this study discussed next.

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Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis

If the existing theoretical knowledge of branding mechanisms and the creation of trust in government are combined, it can be argued that branding can be a strategy to enhance trust in EU policy. A brand element could be the informational cue, triggering an evaluation of trust in EU policies resulting in influenced perceived benevolence, honesty, and competence. This conceptual model is visualized in figure 1.

The hypothesis resulting from this model is that *using the EU brand to brand policies will positively affect people’s trust in those policies*. To be able to test this hypothesis, the concepts in the model have been operationalized in observable indicators. The dependent variable, trust in policy, consists of multiple dimensions (adapted from McKnight, Choudhury, and Kacmar 2002; Grimmelikhuijsen and

Meijer 2013). These dimensions have distinct indicators and values to be measured (table 1).

The independent variable, branding policy, is defined as *adding a brand element as an informational cue to policies to trigger citizens’ perceptions and associations*. In this study, for the hypothesis to be confirmed, the EU brand element should trigger an informational

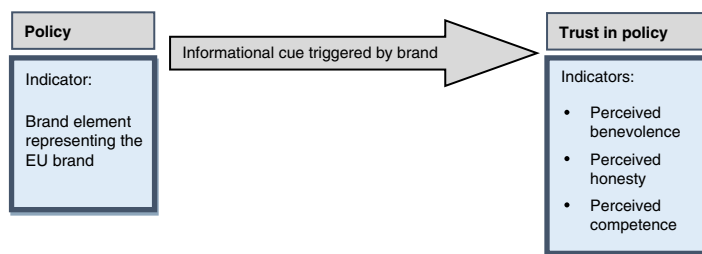


Figure 1 Conceptual Model

Table 1. Operationalization of the Dependent Variable “Trust in Policy”

Dimensions of Trust	Indicators	Values
Perceived benevolence	The policy is in the interest of citizens	Level of agreement: scale 1–10
	The policy shows genuine interest in the well-being of citizens, not only in the interest of the organization that crafted the policy	Level of agreement: scale 1–10
Perceived honesty	The organization that crafted the policy is honest	Level of agreement: scale 1–10
	The organization that crafted the policy keeps its commitments	Level of agreement: scale 1–10
Perceived competence	The policy is capable of reaching the desired goals	Level of agreement: scale 1–10
	The policy is created by professionals	Level of agreement: scale 1–10

Table 2. Operationalization of the Independent Variable “Branding of EU Policy”

Dimension of EU Branding	Indicator	Values
Adding EU brand elements to a policy	Is the EU flag symbol present?	Yes/No
	Naming the policy as EU Commission policy	Yes/No

cue that affects trust in EU policies. The operationalization of the independent variable is presented in table 2.

Research Design and Method

In the experiment, two groups were presented with the same two EU policies, but only one of the groups received both as EU-branded policies. The experiment was conducted in three EU countries to replicate results from individual experiments. This section presents the study design, reliability and validity, and methods.

Experimental Design

Test units and division. The test units in this study are academic economics students in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Poland. Conducting the experiments in three different countries allowed us to test the hypothesis in three different locales, constituting a more demanding test of our hypothesis. More specifically, we tested the hypothesis in three countries with different levels of “EU sentiment” (European Commission 2013b, 8).² EU sentiment in the Netherlands is particularly negative, as became clear in the rejection of the EU constitution in 2005 and the rise of anti-EU political parties. The scores in the Eurobarometer confirm this image. The experiment was also conducted in other EU countries in which EU sentiments are much more positive: one with a long EU history (Belgium) and one that has only been part of the EU since 2004 (Poland). Replicating the experiments in countries that differ on a potentially influential variable will bolster any conclusions based on consistent findings.

Experiments were conducted in classrooms at universities, a trusted environment for the participants. Moreover, this environment allowed for randomization in groups and a high level of control over the circumstances. The students were randomly assigned by the researcher who was present to either the test group or the control group. Because no premeasurement was conducted, this resulted in a post-test-only control group design (Morton and Williams 2010). We chose a post-test-only design because there was no reason to expect preexisting differences between the groups that would influence the results because we randomized the groups. In addition, premeasurement could influence the participants in the experiment.

Treatments and dependent variable. Our dependent variable, trust in EU policy, is measured in both the control group and the test group by measuring trust in EU policy proposals. The test group was subject to a treatment in which EU brand elements (EU flag, name, and logo of the European Commission) were added to the proposals, whereas the control group was not presented with any brand element. The policy proposals used in the experiment are based on actual interventions proposed by the European Commission policy plans but rewritten in such a way that they could be presented in a short text. Because it might be argued that different types of policy instruments are perceived differently by citizens, the two policy proposals are based on opposite types of policy instruments (Peters 2000): the first policy on digital skills is an example of an enabling policy instrument, whereas the second policy on air quality is an example of a coercive policy instrument. We did not have prior expectations about possible differences in trust between the two types of policies. On the one hand, enabling instruments may result in less resistance than coercive instruments. On the other hand, environmental policies, such as policies for

improving air quality, have a longer history in the EU and may be an issue where citizens more easily accept a role of the European Union. Researching two different policies enables us to test our hypotheses on two different dependent variables, enhancing the value of our experiment.

Control variables. Extraneous variables might confound the dependent variable measures in ways that weaken or invalidate the results of the experiment (Malhotra and Birks 2007, 308). Some of these variables may be visible, such as general levels of trust in political institutions and in other human beings, whereas others are not visible, such as participants’ overall mood and cognitive ability. Randomization of assignment to either the test group or the control group is used as a means to prevent possible confounding effects (Morton and Williams 2010).

The questionnaire used in the experiments is available in the appendix in the online version of this article. To prevent language problems from affecting the results, the experiment was originally created in English but was stated in the mother tongue of the students: Dutch for the Netherlands and Belgium and Polish for Poland. Fluent speakers provided the translations, which were checked by native students and academic teachers.

Validity and Reliability

Validity. The internal validity of experimental research is considered high because of the researcher’s level of control over the data-generating process. Data are generated by manipulating the independent variable (or treatment) among the participants when the dependent variable is being measured while controlling for other possible interfering variables (Malhotra and Birks 2007; Morton and Williams 2010). Replication of experiments in different countries, randomized assignment of participants, and the use of an existing operationalization for the measurement of the dependent variable enhance the internal validity of this study. We have chosen a design that can easily be replicated in multiple countries and tests an existing public brand (the EU brand) because we do not know very much about the effects of public brands or their effect on trust in policies.

The external validity of experimental research is typically considered to be low because of the artificial environment in which experiments take place and the lack of representative participant pools. In this study, participants were all university students, enrolled in a study of economics, instead of average EU citizens. We know from the Eurobarometer data that higher-educated and younger citizens are generally more positive about the EU, its achievements, and the benefits the EU has brought them (European Commission 2013b). This poses limitations on the external validity of this study; it cannot be guaranteed that the findings are valid for the entire EU population. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to conduct experiments among students. First, as there is no such thing as the “typical EU citizen,” there is also no particular target population for the research. Thus, it is practically almost impossible to select a representative sample of the “typical EU citizen.” In cases such as this, the use of students is justified (Morton and Williams 2010, 351). Second, the current state of the research agenda on this subject is that there is hardly any knowledge on the causal effects of public brands. Because the hypothesis in this study has not previously been researched, it

makes sense to test it among students first. Results following this study could allow for more elaborate and more expensive research. Third—and this is a positive methodological implication of using a student sample—using a relatively homogeneous groups such as student groups allows for replication of the research among similar groups in different countries, which increases comparability of the experiment across time and space. This comparability helps to gauge robustness of results and thus increase external validity (Morton and Williams 2010).

The student sample fits our research goal of exploring the effect in different countries. During the setup of the experiment, we assessed multiple dimensions of external validity, and we chose to use students (limited external validity) to increase our external validity along the dimension of different countries, which is an important dimension in the EU.

Reliability. Scales measuring trust in the policy were theoretically determined (adapted from Grimmelikhuijsen 2012; McKnight, Choudhury, and Kacmar 2002). Scales measuring “trust in national political institutions” and “trust in international political institutions” result from factor analysis of the nine items (question 7 in the questionnaire), yielding these two separate factors. Cronbach’s alpha scores for the scales created (table 3) are all above .7 or above .8, allowing further statistical analysis.

Method

To determine whether the experimental treatment affects trust in policy, which is measured for two different policies, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), allowing assessment of the experimental effect on multiple related dependent variables, is applied. Subsequently, separate analysis of variance tests (ANOVA) are applied on both dependent variables (the two policies). The rationale for conducting MANOVA first, instead of just conducting separate ANOVA tests, is to prevent Type I error inflation in the latter.

International political institutions enjoy more trust among respondents in each country than national political institutions, and scores on variables measuring the general tendency to trust others are also similar across the countries.

Table 3. Reliability of Constructed Scales: Cronbach’s Alpha Scores per Scale and Per Country

Scale	Belgium	Poland	Netherlands	Total Data
Trust in digital skills policy	.842	.890	.887	.873
Trust in air quality policy	.876	.849	.876	.861

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Belgium	Poland	Netherlands	Total Data
Number of participants	66	89	58	213
Test/control	33/33	43/46	29/29	105/108
Man/woman	29/37	39/50	40/18	108/105
Age (σ)	20.36 (1.432)	21.70 (1.95)	21.05 (1.76)	21.15 (1.84)
Trust in digital skills policy (σ)	6.40 (1.08)	6.03 (1.47)	5.63 (1.22)	6.04 (1.32)
Trust in air quality policy (σ)	6.73 (1.27)	6.23 (1.37)	6.15 (1.10)	6.37 (1.28)
Trust national political institution (σ)	5.42 (1.16)	3.58 (1.19)	5.82 (1.13)	4.76 (1.54)
Trust international political institutions (σ)	6.99 (1.32)	5.68 (1.90)	6.28 (1.46)	6.25 (1.71)
I usually trust people (σ)	6.74 (1.75)	6.93 (2.19)	6.45 (1.72)	6.74 (1.94)
I give people the benefit of the doubt (σ)	6.83 (1.83)	6.06 (2.18)	6.72 (1.34)	6.48 (1.90)

The test chosen in the multivariate testing is Pillai’s trace because of the equal group size within countries (Bray and Maxwell 1985). Box’s test of equality of covariance matrices is applied to test for the assumption of similar covariance matrices for the dependent variables for all treatment groups and should yield no significant result ($p > .05$).

Levene’s test is applied to test for equality of variances for each dependent variable and should yield no significant result ($p > .05$).

Not all variables used in this analysis are perfectly normally distributed. Therefore, as an additional measure, a nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test is applied to verify results from the parametric tests (Kruskal 1952).

Results

In this section, the results of the experiments are presented for each country in MANOVA and ANOVA analyses.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics, also presenting some of the main characteristics of the respondents (see the questionnaire in the appendix in the online version of this article), resulting from the three experiments are presented in table 4. In many aspects, these descriptive statistics paint a similar picture of respondents in the three countries. In each country, the policy concerning air quality and pollution standards is trusted more than the policy concerning digital skills. International political institutions enjoy more trust among respondents in each country than national political institutions, and scores on variables measuring the general tendency to trust others are also similar across the countries. One interesting difference is that Polish respondents generally place lower trust in political institutions than respondents in the Netherlands and Belgium.

Effect of EU Branding on Trust in Policy

Results for Belgium. The experimental results in Belgium show a significant difference between the control group and the treatment group. The MANOVA analysis yields a Pillai’s trace F value of 6.637 ($p = .002$), with a Box’s test of equality of covariance matrices of 2.434 ($p = .503$). Thus, there are significant differences in trust in the policies between the two groups. The experimental treatment

Table 5. Results of the ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis Tests among Participants in Belgium, with Experimental Treatment as Independent Variable and Trust in Two EU Policies as Dependent Variables

	Digital Skills Policy	Air Quality Policy
Mean control group (σ)	5.98 (0.987)	6.31 (1.058)
Mean experimental group (σ)	6.84 (1.037)	7.17 (1.334)
ANOVA	11.700***	8.389***
Levene's test	0.058 n.s.	0.495 n.s.
Kruskal-Wallis	10.811***	8.171***

*** $p < .01$; n.s. = not significant.

Table 6. Results of the ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis Tests among Participants in Poland, with Experimental Treatment as Independent Variable and Trust in Two EU Policies as Dependent Variables

	Digital Skills Policy	Air Quality Policy
Mean control group (σ)	5.49 (1.501)	5.77 (1.230)
Mean experimental group (σ)	6.61 (1.191)	6.75 (1.327)
ANOVA	15.253***	13.077***
Levene's test	2.695 n.s.	0.007 n.s.
Kruskal-Wallis	13.746***	13.649***

*** $p < .01$; n.s. = not significant.

Table 7. Results of the ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis Tests among Participants in the Netherlands, with Experimental Treatment as Independent Variable and Trust in Two EU Policies as Dependent Variables

	Digital Skills Policy	Air Quality Policy
Mean control group (σ)	5.26 (1.125)	5.897 (1.140)
Mean experimental group (σ)	6.00 (1.210)	6.41 (1.012)
F value ANOVA	5.750**	3.263*
Levene's test	0.144 n.s.	0.334 n.s.
Kruskal-Wallis	7.185***	5.363**

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$; n.s. = not significant.

seems to cause a different score on the dependent variable, trust in EU policy. Next, ANOVA analyses are conducted for trust in both policies separately.

Table 5 shows that the experimental effect of branding is confirmed for both types of policy. Trust in policies with an EU brand element is approximately 0.8 point higher than the trust in unbranded policies among these respondents. The ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis tests all yield results significant at the $p < .01$ level, confirming the observation that the stimulus causes significantly higher trust in both policies.

Results for Poland. The MANOVA test conducted with data from the experiment in Poland yields a Pillai's trace F value of 9.715 ($p = .000$), and a Box's test of equality of covariance matrices of 6.136 ($p = .112$). Among participants in Poland, a similar significant difference in trust exists as in Belgium. The ANOVA tests for both policies confirm this.

Table 6 shows that the trust in policies with and without EU branding differs more than among Belgian participants. In the case of digital skills policy, the difference is more than a point; in the case of air quality policy, the difference is approximately one point. The

ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis tests yield results significant at the $p < .01$ level, again confirming the experimental effect of the stimulus on trust in the policies.

Results for the Netherlands. The results for the experiment in the Netherlands, a more negative-minded EU country, are more salient; adding an EU brand element might trigger negative associations held in general about the EU. The MANOVA test for the experiment in the Netherlands yields a Pillai's trace F value of 3.373 ($p = .042$), with a Box's test of equality of covariance matrices of 3.917 ($p = .288$). This shows a significant difference between the experimental and control group on the dependent variables. The separate ANOVA tests give more insight into the effect of the experimental treatment on both policies.

The results in table 7 show that a similar effect of the experimental treatment exists among participants in the Netherlands as among participants in Belgium and Poland, although the results are less significant than the previous results. The differences in means between the groups are also slightly smaller than in the other two countries. The ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis tests yield results significant at all three p -levels. The significant ($p < .05$) Kruskal-Wallis test for the air quality policy backs up the less significant ($p < .10$) ANOVA test for that policy. Despite differences in significance levels between the three experiments, these results are consistent with those in the other two countries.

This means that the overall conclusion for all three countries is the same in our experiment: adding the EU brand significantly enhances the trust in the presented policies.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the effect that policy branding has on trust in a particular policy. The research question guiding this study was, what is the effect of the EU brand on trust in policies? The hypothesis tested was that using the EU brand to brand policies will positively affect people's trust in those policies. Through experiments among 213 economics students in Belgium, Poland, and the Netherlands in which two groups received the same two EU policies (linked to the EU brand in one group and without any brand in the other group), the independent effect of EU branding on trust in policy was determined.

The experiments show consistent results. In all three countries, participants presented with EU-branded policies show significantly more trust in both the digital skills policy and the air quality policy. In Belgium, students presented with EU-branded policies show approximately 0.8 point more trust (measured on a 10-point scale) than students presented with the same policies without EU brand elements. In Poland, the effect is even stronger, with a difference of 1.0 to 1.1 points. In the Netherlands, a country characterized by a particularly negative EU sentiment, a similar

effect is visible. Although the difference between the two groups in the Netherlands is slightly smaller than in the other two countries, the experimental group shows 0.6 to 0.8 point more trust than the control group. This result is interesting because it shows positive

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effects of using a public brand which has hardly been done before. It is also interesting because such a positive effect would probably not be expected given the popular contestation of the legitimacy and effectiveness of the EU.

Discussion: Theoretical and Practical Implications

The results of this study have several theoretical and practical implications. First, the effect of brands, theoretically and empirically already established in commercial contexts, is also present in a public context. Although several authors have previously suggested the relevance of brands for public contexts (Eshuis and Klijn 2012; Marsh and Fawcett 2011), empirical evidence for these claims has been lacking so far. This research provides an empirical confirmation of such claims and therefore is an important signal for public administration research to take the issue of public brands and public branding seriously. If public brands work, which our findings indicate, we should not leave this area to marketing researchers because we also have to address other crucial empirical and normative questions: Why do public brands work, in what way do they differ from private brands? What are the ethical limitations of working with public brands? Our findings emphasize the importance of opening up this new area of research.

In addition, our research findings also seem to imply that “trust in policy” is different from “overall sentiment toward a governmental institution.” Despite anti-EU sentiments in the Netherlands, branding EU policy in that country in our student sample still increases trust in policy. This implies that trust—conceived of as evaluating a policy as benevolent, honest, and competent—might differ from the overall attitude toward an institution. One can oppose the underlying ideal and development of the EU project and institutions, while still being able to trust a specific EU policy.³

The research findings may also have practical consequences and relevance. Current debates about the EU are often characterized by “big stories” about how “the EU” is supposedly good or bad for people. Using polls about the EU or claiming that the EU lacks democratic legitimacy because, for instance, so few people vote in the EU elections (Dixon and Fullerton 2014), rather sweeping statements are made both in practice and in theory about lack of support for the EU and its policies. But our findings show that we should be more careful in extending general opinions about the EU to support for concrete policies. The support for particular EU policies may well be higher than we can expect from general polls and voting behavior. If we focus on tangible policies, the picture may be quite different. One of the reasons may be that general discussions about “the EU” tend to focus on the general political level of the EU (the EU Parliament and European Commission), thus overlooking the aspect of the EU as a large organization with competences to develop separate policies to address certain societal problems. In terms of policy relevance, confirming our results in a more elaborate study might indicate that a wiser strategy for EU representatives would be to focus communication with citizens on more specific policies, instead of on the institution as a whole. Brands could be one of the instruments in this governance strategy, as they provide a tool to communicate performance. But, of course, this again raises the question of under which conditions it is legitimate and effective to use public brands, a discussion that is important to address in further public and scientific deliberation.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. Although it is interesting to establish the effect of the EU brand in the three countries, the number of countries is too limited to draw conclusions for the EU as a whole. We also studied only two types of policies. The differences we found between those policies may hold for other policy fields (see De Fine Licht 2014), but we cannot be sure yet. Replicating the study in more countries and with other types of policies would allow for wider conclusions.

Another limitation is the uncertainty about the lasting effect of the EU brand over time. To gain more insight into this, other experiments would be required, for example, along the lines of Marvel (2015), who built a longitudinal element into his experiments to research whether an information treatment would persist over time.

Furthermore, in this study, the EU brand was used as an institutional brand; we added the well-known institutional brand of the EU to a specific policy to brand that policy. Of course, it is also possible to brand the content of a policy, for example, as an “innovative policy” (see Eshuis and Klijn 2012), but that would require a different experiment.

A final limitation is the use of students as participants. It is difficult to draw general conclusions based on a nonrepresentative sample of students (see Sears 1986). The research setup, however, is consistent with the main goal of this study, namely, not to generalize findings to the general population but rather to analyze whether branding theory and mechanisms are applicable to the area of public policy. Moreover, the selection of different types of countries for the experiment did, within the limitations of the study, improve its external validity.

Future Research

This study and its findings show that gaining more in-depth insight into public branding is important. Several elements of public branding are understudied at the moment, and future research could add to the existing knowledge by addressing the following topics.

First of all, it is important to study the effects of a larger variety of public brands and to explain possible differences between brands. This means analyzing a wider variety of institutional brands as well as the distinction between institutional branding and policy branding that was touched on in the previous section. By widening the empirical research on public branding, more robust statements about its effects and opportunities can be made.

A second direction is to examine the specific associations that brands evoke with citizens and what changes in behavior these associations actually establish. If public branding is to be employed as a governance strategy, would it then be able to influence actual behavior of citizens?

Finally, the specific characteristics of public brands need more academic attention. Being *public* brands, such brands may be more contested and “counterbranded” than private brands because the former are located in the public realm. Public brands may easily be connected to societal and political struggles, therefore generating

more (uncontrolled) media attention than is the case for most private brands. The public nature also brings more ethical questions of legitimacy and desirability of public branding to the discussion table if public branding is to become one of the many governance strategies for public organizations: how to strike a balance between ethical communication and pure propaganda? This short outlook on possible future research shows that we are only at the dawn of an exciting public branding research agenda.

Notes

1. We would like to thank Magdalena Florek for her assistance with this experiment in Poland.
2. In the Spring 2012 Eurobarometer, 60 percent of the respondents in Poland and 58 percent of the respondents in Belgium indicated that they feel attached to the European Union, the highest scores after Luxembourg. In the Netherlands, only 35 percent of the respondents indicated attachment to the EU, with only two member states scoring lower.
3. Our results could be related to the fact that the EU is regarded as a more reliable source than is expected on the basis of the overall popularity surveys. People could attribute characteristics to the EU such as expertise that provide credibility (for theories of resource credibility, see Buhlmann and Gisler 2006).

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Supporting Information

A supplemental appendix can be found in the online version of this article at [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1540-6210](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1540-6210).