INVESTIGATING POLITICAL BRAND IMAGE AND REPUTATION WITH QUALITATIVE PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES

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INTRODUCTION

Corporate brands can be seen as an amalgamation of three related yet distinct elements namely internal identity, external image and external reputation (Balmer and Greyser 2003; Harris and de Chernatony 2001; Spry 2014). Existing research has tended to focus on internal identity and external image with very few studies devoted to the exploration of external reputation and how the concept relates to external image. A strong, clear consistent reputation has the potential to offer a competitive advantage and is considered an organisation's most valuable asset (Dowling 1993; Firestein 2006; Spry 2014). Therefore understanding a corporate brand's reputation is surely crucial in determining consistency with short-term image and coherency with identity and assessing its overall authenticity. This paper will examine the interrelatedness of corporate reputation and image within the context of political branding. However, this also raises the question of how to investigate external brand reputation. A number of authors (Fombrun and van Riel; 2004; Davies *et al*, 2001) draw on metaphors for reputation such as Davies *et al* (2001) who use the metaphor "magnet" as reputation helps attract different types of stakeholders. To add to the body of knowledge, this paper seeks to generate insight into the UK Conservative Party's brand reputation prior the 2015 UK General Election, building on the work of Pich *et al* (2015) who used qualitative projective techniques to understand the Conservative Party's brand's image before the 2010 UK General Election. The paper will offer insight into the political brand's current reputation and reveal how the external image has influenced its development over the five year electoral cycle. The findings have implications not only for political parties but also for politicians, candidates and other political entities as this study offers a framework that not only supports the understanding of political brand reputation but outlines how the brand image has contributed to the way in which it has developed over the last 5 years. The paper will review and refine the concept of brand reputation and illustrate how to investigate the external orientation of a corporate brand. This study will demonstrate that qualitative projective techniques can be a useful tool to explore more than a brand's image but also a brand's long-term reputation.

BACKGROUND

Corporate brands can be operationalised into three related yet distinct elements namely internal identity, external image and external reputation (Balmer and Greyson 2003; Harris and de Chernatony 2001; Spry 2014). Further, internal identity and external image are considered the 'building blocks' of reputation (Roper and Fill 2012). Internal *identity* maintains that brands are created, developed and enhanced by internal stakeholders, which is subsequently projected to the external environment (Kapferer 2008). In contrast, brand *image* often conceptualised as the associations, perceptions and imagery linked to the brand by the external stakeholder (Nandan 2005). Brand reputation on the other hand remains an often confusing and contradictory concept across the discipline especially defining its relationship with internal identity and external image (Fetscherin and Usunier 2012; Gotsi and Wilson 2001; Gutman and Miaoulis 2003). Further, the construct of reputation is complex, which in turn makes it difficult to operationalise and understand (Abratt and Kleyn 2012; Davie *et al*. 2004). Despite the debate, many authors concur with the notion that reputation creates a competitive advantage and provides organisations with a key asset comparably to its competitors (Abratt and Kleyn 2012; Brown 2006; Dowler 1993; Firestein 2006; Spry 2014). Nevertheless, there is a stream of thinking within corporate branding that conceptualises reputation as the long term external view of a brand manifested

in the form of associations, perceptions and attitudes which develop from external brand image (Fetscherin and Usunier 2012; Harris and de Chernatony 2001). This suggests that both image and reputation can be seen as external viewpoints of the brand with identity clearly grounded as the internal viewpoint. Further, image is seen as the short term, current or a snap-shot understanding of the brand, whereas reputation is the longstanding interpretation of the brand. However, this raises the proposition that in order to discover a brand's reputation; a brand's image must be understood. This includes the attributed values such as honesty, responsibility and integrity which are conjured up in a person's mind and should be explored before investigating the long term view (Balmer and Greyson 2003; Dowling 2001; Harris and de Chernatony 2001; Spry 2014). Therefore, research devoted to the exploration of corporate brand reputation seems to be missing from the existing literature with a distinct focus on identity and image rather than reputation. Particularly this is the case in political branding research.

Corporate political brands are multifaceted constructs which are often difficult to unbundle and understand (Lees-Marshment 2009; Lock and Harris 1996; Phipps *et al.* 2010). Just like the wider corporate branding literature, there is a duality to political brands in the sense that they can be understood or approached from an internal or external perspective (Milewicz and Milewicz 2014; Phipps *et al.* 2010). There has been some progress made in political branding research dedicated to the assessment of an internal orientation or an external orientation (Busby and Cronshaw 2015; Cwalina and Falkowski 2014; de Landtsheer and Vries 2015; Milewicz and Milewicz 2014; Smith and Spotswood 2013; French and Smith 2010; Peng and Hackley 2009; Phipps *et al.* 2010; Pich and Armannsdottir 2015; Schneider 2004). For example, an internal or external standpoint has considered the application of culture (Smith and Speed 2011), development of new political brands (Busby and Cronshaw 2015; Nord and Stromback 2009), identity (Pich *et al.* 2014), brand image (Guzman and Sierra 2009; Pich and Dean 2015; Smith 2001), equity (French and Smith 2010), Phipps *et al.* 2010; Smith and Spotswood 2013), personality (Smith 2009), or the psychological profiling of politicians (de Landtsheer and de Vries 2015). However, there are limited studies within political branding that appear to focus on long term *reputation*. This highlights a distinct gap in the body of knowledge and represents an opportunity to address the limited understanding of political brand reputation. Further, this gap links to the paucity of longitudinal and comparative studies within political branding (Baines *et al* 2011; Ioannides 2010; Needham and Smith 2015; Smith and Speed 2011). However, in order to investigate long term reputation, we must return to political brand image.

Pich *et al* (2015) explored the external brand image of the UK Conservative Party before the 2010 UK General Election from the perspective of young adults aged 18-24 years with the aid of qualitative projective techniques. Pich *et al*. (2015) 'unbundled' the corporate political brand image by conceptualising the entity into three components for example the party leader, party and party policy (Butler *et al*. 2011; Smith and French 2011; Pich *et al*. 2015). The findings concluded that the UK Conservative Party brand image under his leadership was complex, multifaceted and often contentious, which was inconsistent with the existing literature on successful political brands (Needham 2006). Further, the UK Conservative Party had not managed to completely dispel the party of the rich and stereotypical perceptions and associations (Ashcroft 2010; Helm 2010) and failed to demonstrate the desired inclusive image. This was inconsistent with David Cameron's strategy to 'refresh and reshape' the political brand on his election as Party leader in December 2005 (Ashcroft 2010; Ashcroft 2005). Despite this, Pich *et al*. (2015) highlighted that David Cameron and the UK Conservative Party had come some way in decontaminating the 'Tory brand' image. Nevertheless, many questions and uncertainties (Needham 2006) remained. Thus the brand image of the UK Conservative Party required attention. Pich *et al*. (2015) concluded that their study added to the limited studies in brand image research and joined the calls for further analysis in this area (Guzman and Sierra 2009; Smith 2001). With the work of Pich *et al*. (2015) in mind, this raises a series of questions such as 'has David Cameron's Conservative Party managed to reposition their brand image since the 2010 UK General Election and develop a coherent reputation in the mind of voters? Further, can projective techniques be used to understand the brand reputation of the UK Conservative Party prior the 2015 UK General Election? Therefore, by building and replicating the work of Pich *et al*. (2015) it will address a distinct gap in the body of knowledge. This research will not only reveal the current brand image of the political

brand but also provide the opportunity to compare and contrast the findings, which in turn will provide insight into the long term brand reputation of David Cameron's Conservative Party.

METHODOLOGY

As this research built on the work of Pich *et al* (2015), this study adopts the same research approach of focus group discussions combined with qualitative projective techniques. Focus groups are conventionally used by qualitative researchers as a context in which to frame group discussions. Projective techniques can be incorporated into focus group discussions with little difficulty and have the ability to generate in-depth understanding of associations, attitudes, feelings and perceptions (Baines and Chansarkar 2002; Bloor *et al*. 2001; Flick 1998; Krueger 1998; Kvale 1996; Malhotra and Birks 2003). Young citizens 18-24 years (external stakeholders) were selected as part of this study as this segment was considered the most disengaged of all the electoral segments and actively targeted by the UK Conservative Party (Ashcroft 2005; Charles 2009; Dermody *et al*. 2010). Focus group discussions were conducted with external stakeholders aged 18-24 years as this age group was actively targeted by the UK Conservative Party (Ashcroft 2010; Ashcroft 2005). Data was collected between 1st December 2014 and 6th May 2015. Participants were encouraged to annotate drawings and provide greater explanation. Participants were motivated to elaborate on illustrations through the practice of echoic probing (Branthwaite 2002; Day 1989). The findings were thematically analysed with the support of the Butler-Kisber (2010) thematic analytical framework which provided a robust and in-depth analytical process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pich *et al*. (2015) highlighted some detoxification of the 'Tory brand' prior to the 2010 UK General Election. However, Pich *et al*. (2015) also revealed that many questions and uncertainties remained associated with the political brand. Thus the brand image of the UK Conservative Party required attention. The findings reveal that the UK Conservative Party brand has made some progress and seems to have evolved and developed since the 2010 UK General Election. The political brand now possesses a clearer and more favourable image, which in turn highlights some consistency with its long term reputation. The projective techniques revealed that external stakeholders had some understanding of what to expect if the Party was re-elected in 2015 in contrast to uncertainty highlighted in Pich *et al*. (2015). For example, the political brand provided more insight to voters of what to expect compared with Ed Miliband's Labour Party and other competitors in terms of the economy, immigration, benefits system and the European Union. However, more detail, and greater clarity was still missing from the Conservative brand.

The Party continued to be associated with stereotypical 'Party of the rich and privileged' imagery and perceptions linked to its heritage. For example, when participants were instructed to '*illustrate the Conservative Party if it were food*' many participants including Conservative and floating voters depicted expensive, luxurious and traditional items like 'a la' cart' produce and 'caviar' and 'lobster'. Similarly, when instructed to '*illustrate the Conservative Party if it were a sport*' participants expressed associations such as 'polo', 'hunting' and 'fencing'. Therefore, despite the attempts by David Cameron's Conservative Party to reposition the image of the political brand, the long term reputation remains coherent with the findings identified in Pich *et al*. (2015). Nevertheless, the Party was seen as more 'economically competent' and 'responsible' compared with political rivals including the Party's coalition partner; the Liberal Democrats. The findings highlighted a consistent reflection of who the Party represented with the work of Pich *et al*. (2015). The Party was considered to represent middle-upper class individuals, big business, 'posh and rich' people. This suggests the Party had not managed to reposition itself entirely in the mind of the participant. David Cameron continued to be divisive in the mind of external stakeholders. However, the Conservative leader was seen to be a strong politician and more appealing than political competitors especially Labour's Ed Miliband. Further, Conservative sub-brands continued to be more appealing than the Party and had the potential to appeal to a wider non-traditional Conservative audience. In terms of policy, apart from perceptions linked to improving the economy, more clarity and understanding was called for. Conservative policy, message and values continued to be interchangeably expressed.

The interpretation and analysis of findings is ongoing and will expand in detail and discussion in due course. Subsequently, there is a duality to the UK Conservative Party's brand reputation. On one hand the political brand's reputation highlights some consistency and offers greater clarity compared with its brand image at the 2010 UK General Election. This in turn suggests that the political brand had a competitive advantage over its political competitors prior the 2015 UK General Election. On the other hand, a number of uncertainties, questions and traditional perceptions remain associated with the political brand. The uncertainties and associated imagery are incoherent with how the political brand aimed to be positioned in the mind of the voter during 2015. Therefore the UK Conservative Party should consider its long term brand reputation as it prepares for future elections.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

This paper demonstrates that projective techniques can be used to understand not only the brand image but also the brand reputation of the UK Conservative Party prior the 2015 UK General Election. Further, this study offers insight into the political brand's reputation and highlights how its external image has developed since 2010 as a result. For example, the UK Conservative brand reputation represents additional 'detoxification' in the mind of external stakeholders as it has reacquired the disposition that the Party is 'economically responsible and trustworthy' compared to political competitors. However, ambiguity and traditional imagery remain indebted to its long term characterisation. Therefore further 'detoxification' is required to ensure coherency between internal identity, external image and ultimately external reputation. This paper also reviewed and refined the concept of brand reputation and can now argue that reputation and image are both external orientations of the brand. Further, reputation is seen as the longstanding interpretation, and image is seen as the short term or current understanding of the brand. This reaffirms the idea that both image and reputation are related yet distinct concepts and in order to uncover a brand's reputation; a brand's image must be understood before deducing the long term view (Balmer and Greyson 2003; Harris and de Chernatony 2001; Spry 2014).

The findings have implications not only for political parties but also for politicians, candidates and other political entities. Organisations will be able to use this paper as a guide to generate a deeper understanding of their brands from an external orientation overtime. This will highlight coherencies between short-image and long-term reputation and offer organisations the opportunity to address discrepancies and utilise positive associations as a competitive advantage. This research also makes a theoretical contribution to the body of knowledge within the realms of political branding and in the wider context of corporate branding.

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