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Political Branding: Subterfuge or the New Mode of Governance?

Abstract

Objective: This paper aims to determine whether scholars writing on the subject of political branding and political brands consider political branding to be an artifice or an evolved strategic outlook useful – and necessary – in our current political context.

Research Design & Methods: This is a theoretical paper. The critical review of the literature on political branding research, encompassing articles published between 2016 and 2023, was conducted; seven full-text publications from the EBSCO database were critically analysed.

Findings: My conclusion suggests that the vast majority of scholars writing on the subject of political branding view political branding as a strategic device – both a framework and communication vehicle – useful and necessary in our contemporary political context.

Implications/Recommendations: This paper makes a managerial contribution to the political branding body of knowledge. The analysis of the writings of numerous scholars within the area of political branding indicates that the development of strong and appealing political brands helps political parties and political leaders in effective communication with voters-consumers. Political branding emerges as a necessary tool that should be used by political strategists to ensure that the relationships between politicians/political parties and voters-consumers are deepened and relevant, and the visions and messages communicated by the political actors are cohesive, clearly articulated, concentrated, and well-understood by the voters-consumers.

Contribution/Value Added: This paper is original in showcasing the dominant and overarching approaches and ideas among scholars writing on the subject of political branding.

Article classification: theoretical/review paper

Keywords: political branding, political brand(s), voters-consumers, political marketing

JEL classification: M00, M3, and M38

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Introduction

There is no doubt that political branding has become an essential element of every political campaign in developed and developing democracies across the world. Following the principles of strategic brand management, it can be inferred that the ultimate objective of political branding is to forge a meaningful connection between a political party/politician and the voters-consumers (Panigyrakis & Altinay, 2017, p. 681). The simple formula for winning in electoral politics is fairly uncomplicated – the political contender requires more votes than his/her rival(s). The overarching challenge, however, revolves around the ability of the political message to cut through the media clutter and connect with voters-consumers. Creating a distinct and evocative brand identity seems to be critical to electoral success in today's crowded political marketplace. Political parties – and politicians – are increasingly using the principles of strategic brand management to create political brands; "brands which are not about consumption but about identity. Churches might have similar resonance, and – at least for men – so do sports teams, especially football teams" (Curry, 2015, p. 48). Successful political branding campaigns can "break through the rancor of election season and affect change" (Smith, 2020).

It is a common fact that today's culture is saturated with information, and the amount of information available to every person continues to grow at an ever-increasing rate. The rise of smartphones has created a new generation of consumers attached to high-speed connection to the Internet and all that comes with it. Voters-consumers are now always online, immersing themselves in social media, streaming videos, playing games, and engaging in voyeuristic intemperances. In such a crowded marketplace, it becomes particularly difficult to stand out from the competition. As Kiram Voleti posits, "As the political landscape continues to evolve, it is more important than ever for politicians to understand how to communicate their message and establish a strong brand identity effectively" (Voleti, 2020).

Politics today has become unusually polarising. As Amanda Bowman asserts, "Nearly every race is filled with candidates from multiple parties, and it's tough for candidates to stand out" (Bowman, 2023). Political branding is currently used by a growing number of political actors, vying for electoral success and subsequent privilege to govern and lead. According to Manuel Adolphsen, "Politicians and political communication professionals have come to frequently rely on insights and personnel from the discipline of brand management to improve their external presentation. Political branding seems to be *en vogue* and is pursued as a deliberate strategy by political actors" (Adolphsen, 2009, p. 1). And Chad Milewicz and Mark Milewicz contend – in their elaborate study on the use of political branding by the American politicians – "Political marketing research indicates that brands and branding are a robust aspect of politics… scholars describe political brands as multifaceted constructs and pointedly debate the true impact of political branding on the political process and on society. Political elites and scholars clearly appreciate the political brand construct's rapidly evolving nature…" (Milewicz & Milewicz, 2014, p. 233).

It appears that political branding, as a process by which political actors attempt to define their identities, policies, and even the state of the nations (Torres-Spelliscy, 2022), is here to stay. But how do scholars view political branding? Do they view it as an artifice? A Machiavellian subterfuge aimed at duping gullible voters-consumers? Or do they view it as a necessity? A force for good? A new mode of governance? This paper addresses this question by presenting a critical analysis of the select literature on political branding research, encompassing articles published between 2016 and 2023; seven full-text publications from the EBSCO database were critically

analysed. I adopted several criteria, which I believe are appropriate and sufficient to identify scholarly peer-reviewed literature and select papers for subsequent analysis. The criteria I decided to adopt are as follows: papers written in English, papers located in the EBSCO digital database, papers published between 2016 and 2023, papers containing the keywords "political branding", "political brand(s)". The research yielded 134 literature items. I decided to include only full-text papers exploring the characteristics of the subject area under investigation, namely political branding. After an initial assessment of 134 papers, 16 papers were selected. Additional assessment resulted in the elimination of 9 papers due to the fact that they were written by the same authors, and the ideas offered in them were repeated. I gauged the relevance of the sample of papers by reading the abstract, titles, and keywords of all the articles. If the abstract confirmed relevance to the review, I reviewed the full-text articles in open access.

Literature review

In their comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the political environment in the developed democracies – "The rise of brandidates? A cultural perspective on political candidate brands in postmodern consumer democracies" – Nadia Kaneva and Austin Klemmer introduced a neologism that elegantly captures the essence of political branding: *brandidate.* According to the scholars, "First, brandidates speak to consumers on consumers' terms by honing their messages through research and delivering them in entertaining and interactive formats. Second, brandidates humanise and personalise politics by drawing on their personal stories to create brand narratives that simulate an authentic, yet idealised, leader. Third, brandidates perform emotional labour to meet the affective needs of voter-consumers and, in this way, they link political choice to voter self-expression" (Kaneva & Klemmer, 2016, pp. 299–300). This comprehensive, and yet concise, description of branded political candidates (brandidate = brand + candidate), clearly implies that every political communication that wades into private life, ethnic identity, and beliefs, values, and convictions is, by default, entering the domain of identity and emotion. Political affiliation, as Jason Brooks observes, "encompasses many of the things people care about most (e.g., family, safety, money, fairness, etc.) and it is that which we care about most that arouses our emotions. So we tend to pay attention – consciously or less so – to where others stand in relation to ourselves on the issues that we care about, naturally forming groups around such affiliations. Such affiliations form a key part of our social identity" (Brooks, 2017). Kaneva and Klemmer (2016) clearly recognise that the cultural significance of branded political candidates is squarely located within the context of the contemporary "consumer democracy". Consumer democracy is a complex concept that requires explanation. According to Margaret Scammell, consumer democracy "suggests that politics are sold like commercial products, and that citizens judge, and are invited to judge, politics as commercial products" (Scammell, 2014, p. 1–12). Kaneva and Klemmer posit that the source of the increasing importance of the principles of strategic brand management in politics can be found in "two interrelated cultural trends in postmodern consumer societies …promotionalisation and mediatisation" (2016, p. 302). Promotionalisation in politics refers to how politics is managed as a business of publicity and sensationalism in the broader social and cultural contexts of a routine promotionalism. Mediatisation, as explained by Kaneva and Klemmer (2016), revolves around the increasingly important role of media technologies, formats, and logics in contemporary life. The authors explain the logic behind the increasing importance of political branding by stating that "it is virtually impossible to separate life from the mechanisms

of promotional and media culture […]. These trends are also manifest in the blending of politics with celebrity culture and the increasing prevalence of media spectacle in political life. Hollywood celebrities take up political causes at the same time that politicians entertain media audiences and flirt with Hollywood glamour" (Kaneva & Klemmer, 2016, p. 302). It is worth noting that the promotionalisation and mediatisation phenomena are inextricably linked with the so-called celebritisation of politics. Grace Gageby captures the essence of this phenomenon in the following words: "The proliferation of social media and its increasingly fleeting, bite-sized forms is often at a detriment to substantial debate. Theodor Adorno coined the theory of the 'culture industry', claiming that as popular culture becomes increasingly trivial and sensationalist, we begin to encounter a pseudo-reality rather than reality itself, as we are constantly bombarded with increasingly homogenous subject matter which infiltrates evert sphere of daily life; political debates are game shows, with conversation reduced to a series of prepared one-liners. […] This celebritisation of politics is two-fold: politicians act like celebrities, and celebrities are expected to act as political polemicists. […] The overlap of celebrity culture and politics also results in campaigns being dominated by personalities, rather than operating in a community-led way" (Gageby, 2020). The celebritisation of politics, society, and culture is a process well-recognised and wildly acknowledged by scholars within the academic milieu. As Olivier Driessens posits, "Celebrity has become a defining characteristic of our mediatized societies. It is ever-present in news and entertainment media – boosted by formats such as reality TV – in advertising and activism, and it has deeply affected several social fields, especially the political, but also the gastronomic and even religious fields, for celebrity has become a valued resource to be used in power struggles. Celebrity status, it is argued, renders one discursive power or a voice unable to be neglected, and it is supposed to function as a general token of success. Such is the proliferation of celebrity culture that several authors have discussed its importance for social cohesion and identity formation; or, as Ellis Cashmore phrases it: Like it or loathe it, celebrity culture is with us: it surrounds us and even invades us. It shapes our thought and conduct, style, and manner. It affects and is affected by not just hardcore fans but entire populations" (Driessens, 2013, p. 3-4). The celebritisation of politics leads political actors to adapt strategies, demeanours, and attitudes similar – or even identical – to those adapted by celebrities. According to Johnathan Bradford Long, "In order to gain votes from citizens who only casually follow politics, candidates want people to identity with their personalities and lifestyles as similar to their own, just as …celebrity culture attempts to do. […] celebrity and politician can combine through a 'personality campaign' where politicians eschew party affiliations in favour of politics of stylish individuality and personalized trust, where speeches, events, and debates are home to 'fun' anecdotes and 'soap opera' drama" (Bradford Long, 2009, p. 5).

Kaneva and Klemmer (2016) conclude their deliberations with an unequivocal statement that: "[W]e view the enmeshment of politics with promotional and media culture as an undeniable facet of postmodern political life". It becomes clear that the authors view the use of political branding in politics as a consequence of the evolving postmodern world order. They view political branding as neither something inherently bad – or manipulative – nor as a force for good. Political branding is viewed by the scholars as simply another stage in the metamorphosis of political communication. In this respect, the authors are in agreement with numerous political science scholars – e.g. Jay Blumer and Dennis Kavanagh – who assert that the evolution of political communication in the 21st century can be characterised by narrowcasting, which refers to "direct communication to key groups or segments within the electorate" (Tasente, 2020, p. 80), and the so-called permanent

campaign, which revolves around the idea that political actors – both politicians and political parties – are always in campaign mode, even when they are not. According to Tănase Tasențe, "This stage of development has been differentiated from the other stages [of political communication] by borrowing more aspects of commercial communication, such as political marketing, strategic management, and in the context, the voter-audience was likened …to a 'political consumer'" (Tasențe, 2020, p. 80).

Another illuminating perspective on the use of political branding is presented by Akhmad Farhan, Nor Asiah Omar, Taslima Jannat, and Muhamad Azrin Nazri. In their enthralling analysis titled "The Impact of Political Brand Relationship Quality and Brand Engagement on Voters' Citizenship Behaviour: Evidence from Indonesia", the scholars are outspoken in their support for the use of political branding in electoral politics. According to the scholars, "Brand management strategies increase political parties' competitive advantage by making their political products distinct, attractive, and appealing. They also provide knowledge about voter's choices, preferences and behaviour to the political parties and help them design their political platforms so that they can achieve the desired results" (Farhan et al, 2020, p. 125). They go on to state that "brand engagement forms a strong and enduring connection between the brand and consumers by activating consumers through interactions, shared values, experiential contents and rewards" (Farhan et al, 2020, p. 125). The authors emphasise the advantageous role political branding tends to play in electoral politics by claiming that "Most political parties realise the importance of their brands in building relationships with voters" (Farham et al., 2020, p. 126). According to the scholars, the principles of strategic brand management considerably contribute to the development of meaningful and emotional rapport between branded political candidate(s) and voters-consumers. They also stress the importance of building a strong brand for a political party, "since the party also needs to express its identity to build voters' awareness and loyalty" (Farham et al., 2020, p. 127). The voters-consumers' relationship with a political party and/or politician seems to be one of the most important objectives in politics. The scholars blatantly state that "In politics, the voters' relationship with a political party is crucial for retaining existing voters and for influencing potential voters" (Farham, et al, 2020, p. 127). They draw a parallel between commercial brands and political brands by indicating that "Since the relationship between customer and brand is similar to voters and political brand…, political brand engagement is a potential mediator in the relationship of political brand relationship quality (satisfaction and trust) and voters' citizenship behaviour. The assumption is based on the premise that the stronger the voters' relationship with the political party is, the greater the participation and contribution of the voters toward the political party will be" (Farham, et al., 2020, p. 129). Their study presents solid evidence that "political brand relationship quality can successfully enhance brand engagement and voters' citizenship behaviour in the context of politics" (Farhan, et al., 2020, p. 135). The scholars conclude their deliberations by stressing the benefits that political actors would accrue from leveraging political branding: "Therefore, it is very important for a political party to have frequent active dialogues and interactions with voters as it will improve the engagement process with them as well as create voters' citizenship behaviour" (Farhan, et al., 2020, p. 135).

An elucidating perspective on the evolution and role of political branding is being offered by Jernej Amon Prodnik. In his revealing paper titled "The Instrumentalisation of Politics and Politicians-As-Commodities", the researcher observes that strategic brand management's introduction into the realm of politics has been precipitated by a plethora of changes that have taken place within the political sphere in developed democracies. Political branding – as the author contends –

has emerged in the political context that could be described as "an excruciatingly fast-paced, media-led political sphere where communication is reduced to soundbites, manipulative marketing, and demagoguery. … political communication is described as increasingly professionalised through public relations and political branding, whilst marketing and polling have become normalised and political candidates are often conceived simply as another commodity. … Successful access to the media and promotion of the 'brand' is becoming as important as ever for parties" (Prodnik, 2016, p. 154). The author admits that the political actors have internalised the vernacular of branding and business, and that the political environment has seen an incredible expansion of this tendency in recent years. Prodnik argues that "The tendency towards instrumentalisation can most plainly be observed in how parties construct their public communication and how they perceive their (potential) voters. They have overwhelmingly internalised and naturalised the commodity logic…" (Prodnik, 2016, p. 154). Prodnik, however, is cautious about a full-blown criticism of political branding. He sees the use of political branding as part of a more complex process taking place in capitalistic societies. He argues that "The processes occurring in political communication can be connected to transformations in wider society, especially the extension of capitalist social relations to domains previously not under its control. The expansion of capitalism as a system is depended on commodification, which reduces everything to an exchange value and productivity. These processes have been so overwhelming in recent decades that even social spheres formally based outside of capitalist social relations are now in many ways mimicking its functioning" (Prodnik, 2016, p. 148).

The scholar concludes his analysis by acknowledging the recent discoveries in neuropsychology, and their implications for the political actors. He recognises that political actors started leveraging the principles of strategic brand management "once they recognised that the citizen did not so much vote for the candidate as make a psychological purchase of him. What was projected was what counted, meaning the professionally constructed image of the politician was what mattered. Form (e.g. image, style, personality, and emotional appeal) consequently began to prevail over substance and political communication became increasingly trivialised and oriented toward entertainment" (Prodnik, 2016, p. 148). Prodnik wraps up his analysis by indicating that the entire political sphere is currently being affected by the sensationalism, whose objective – as Alison Dagnes elegantly summed up – revolves around "Amplifying language, trying to use very big words that are exacerbating. Something that invokes …a whole lot of emotion" (Vanacore, 2021). In this respect, Prodnik follows a stream of research that showcases how the digitalisation of media affects the political processes. As Ashleigh L. Haw explains: "While the line between news and entertainment has been arbitrary for many years, the emergence of digital media has led to complex challenges associated with profit decreases, concerns with credibility and audience disengagement. News organizations are said to respond to such demands by producing stories that take on more sensational or 'tabloid-style' characteristics. It is therefore critical to understand, not only how sensationalism is manifested in political news but how this affects audiences' trust and engagement with coverage" (Haw, 2020, p. 125). Both authors – Prodnik and Haw – point at the rising competitiveness within the political context and the difficulty in reaching and engaging with high potential voters-consumers. As Patricia Durántez-Stolle and Raquel Martínez-Sanz explain: "…the rising competitiveness, the proliferation of diverse broadcast and podcast media and formats, and especially the dissolution of boundaries regarding political media content, turn out to be crucial to boost the presence of politicians in hybrid television programmes – either in the form of magazines, interviews, talk-shows, or late-night shows – whose common basis

in that candidates can make politics a permanent show and monopolise the viewers' attention" (Durántez-Stolle & Martínez-Sanz, 2019. p. 112). It should be noted here that a consensus exists among political science scholars regarding the antecedents of the rising sensationalism in politics and the emergence of so-called politainment. Virginia Martín Jiménez, Pablo Berdón Prieto, and Itziar Reguero Sanz briefly and clearly explain the processes and phenomena that gave rise to sensationalism and politainment: "This happened as a result of the multiplication of television offerings, caused by an increase in the number of channels and the resulting competition between them. Information began to be subjected to direct profitability criteria such as those that already marked the development of entertainment content. With this came the triumph of a new hybrid genre: infotainment – attractive for the audience and, as a consequence, profitable in economic and advertising terms – which brings together two traditionally distant, and even opposed, functionalities of media: information and entertainment. [...] Information on today's television, rather that providing a better understanding of a citizen's environment, seeks to entertain, to impact, to seduce the viewer into sitting in front of the screen as long as possible" (Martín Jiménez et al., 2022, p. 120). Politainment – as Natalia Quintas-Froufe, Ana González-Neira, and Erica Conde-Vázquez assert – is a "relatively recent term…[that] brings together two functions associated with the media, as are political information and entertainment" (Quintas-Froufe et al., 2020, p. 86). The ultimate objective of politainment is to present political information as a spectacle and performance aimed at attracting viewers' attention.

Prodnik views political branding as a purely tactical activity used by political actors to effectively communicate with contemporary voters-consumers. He acknowledges the impact of media industries on politics and how they orchestrate the public communication. Prodnik observes, however, that political actors must operate within the confines of media environments, ubiquitous promotional and consumer culture, constantly evolving global context, and hyper-competitive capitalist social relations. The political actors, Prodnik says, "are far from autonomous in how they operate in the political sphere and seem *forced* to adapt to it if they want to survive" (Prodnik, 2016, p. 155).

Amit Kumar and Somesh Dhamija offer an eye-opening examination of the role that strategic brand management plays in the context of Indian politics. Their illuminating paper titled "Indian Political Scenario and Scope of Branding" unequivocally states that "a political leader or party could very well be identified as a brand, as the emotional attachment which the voters develop with the party or leader generally supersedes the functional aspect (read manifesto, poll promises) of the political brands. … consumers find it easier to connect with the emotional aspect of brand than its functional/technical aspect. This is so because it is human tendency to avoid new and complex learning. The functional aspect of a brand keeps on getting updated with time. Consumers find it hard to keep up with the same and might get confused (thereby becoming uninterested). Many of them give up in the process. On the other hand, the emotional 'connect' such as values, trust, relatedness, legacy, stories don't change with time, in fact they become even stronger. Such a concept is very much applicable in the field of politics. … Such political leaders and parties which have developed a rapport with the consumer-citizen (read electorate), find it easier to win their trust thereby registering a thumping victory as against those who are new to the field but promise to deliver on their manifesto" (Kumar & Dhamija, 2017, p. 23). The scholars extol the virtues of political branding by indicating that "[p]olitical branding has been instrumental in terms of defining the course of action in such western democracies as US and UK which are leader-oriented. The role played by it in the overall success has been quite significant.

Take as example the stupendous success of brand Obama in the US presidential election, first in 2008 and then again in 2012. He was able to project his image successfully in the minds on the consumer-citizen (read voters) based on his ability to identify with their aspirations" (Kumar & Dhamija, 2017, p. 24).

The authors focus on the advantages that accrue from leveraging the principles of political branding. They investigate these principles and identify the main ones: "Political branding is all about uniformity and consistency of the message and it should convey the same image of the leader and party at all the levels wherever it is required. Hence, a strong political brand acts as the reinforcing and galvanizing agent which brings all the party workers together. In contrast, a weak political brand would always struggle to earn the loyalty of party cadre at all the levels. What is important here is to understand the aspect that for a brand to succeed, it needs to be relatable, approachable, within one's reach, open to access round-the-clock" (Kumar & Dhamija, 2017, p. 25).

The researchers do not attempt to conceal their admiration for political branding. They view it as a positive force in the political context. Political branding is viewed by them as an important strategic philosophy whose contribution to the field of politics cannot be overemphasised. The authors believe that in order for the politicians, and political parties, to succeed, they ought to invest in developing strong brands. They argue that a political brand "needs to be simple, relatable, and down-to-earth. Any political brand with whom the consumer-citizen (read voter) could relate well is bound to do well (having a solid manifesto strengthens its chances further). The trust which results in the process is something which is difficult for the rival brands to emulate" (Kumar & Dhamija, 2017, p. 26).

Another interesting, compelling, and convincing argument for leveraging political branding is made by Lorann Downer. Her paper, titled "It's the Equity Stupid! Protecting the Value of the Partisan Brand", can be considered an outright praise for political branding. Downer argues that "one key to longevity for a contemporary democratic party is attention to partisan brand equity. Brand equity is the voter perception of the value of a political offering. Equity for any brand is built by what consumers "have learnt, felt, seen and heard about the brand as a result of their experiences over time" (Downer, 2016. p. 22). Political brand equity can accrue to a party, its leaders, and policies. Downer is a proponent of the conceptualisation of customer-based brand equity put forth by Kevin Keller: "The power of a brand lies in what resides in the minds of customers. Consumer knowledge of a brand is what creates brand equity or value" (Downer, 2016, p. 23). Similarly to Kumar and Dhamija, Downer zeroes in on the accepted elements of political branding. She acknowledges that by leveraging political branding, political actors can ensure "consistency in messaging and efficiency in launching a new campaign" (Downer, 2016, p. 24). She recognises the importance of political branding and states that "When a party brand strategy fails, however, it may harm candidates or the whole party" (Downer, 2016, p. 24). Downer argues that political branding has transformed politics into a new form of interacting with voters-consumers. She contends that "branding is the new form of political marketing and, further, the new form of the permanent campaign that is a feature of contemporary politics" (Downer, 2016, p. 25). The author proposes the concept of brand-oriented political party. "Such as party undertakes branding deliberately, with an understanding of political branding theory, and a comprehensive approach that encompasses long-term strategy and mid- to short-term tactics designed to build and retain equity. The party uses branding as its organising principle, orienting core values, organisation, leadership, internal culture, external presentation and resources towards a permanent branding campaign throughout the electoral cycle. In doing so, the party actively seeks to create and sustain voter attachment

and support, instead of expecting to be gifted an enduring loyalty. From this, it seeks to create a competitive advantage and achieve electoral success, however that is perceived" (Downer, 2026, p. 25). Of particular significance is Downer's explicit indication that the brand-oriented party's objective is to generate genuine voter attachment and support. Downer's argument is a valid one, since political branding is viewed as a positive force that allows political actors to elicit voters' involvement, attachment, and participation. For Downer, political branding enables political actors to manage political communications. Political branding acts as an organising framework through which the entire scope of brand touchpoints is being filtered and analysed. Political branding helps politicians cultivate their "authenticity, a critical quality that a branded individual 'can reinforce and support through their public performance'" (Downer, 2016, p. 34).

Downer's examination of the logic and role of political branding is a deep dive into the nuts and bolts of contemporary electoral politics. The author recognises the benefits of using the principles of political branding in the current context of highly polarising politics. She praises political branding and asserts that "[t]his concept provides the means to understand, locate, and manage an intangible value that is critical for brand longevity. Embracing the concept requires an ongoing investment of time and resources. It takes time and recourses to craft a brand and to generate and maintain brand equity. Embracing the concept also requires a long-term view of marketing decisions. Each decision should be evaluated for its potential over time to add to or detract from value, as perceived by voters. Further, embracing the concept requires close cooperation between the brand managers – the party in central office and public office – to effectively research and respond to voters' needs and wants" (Downer, 2016, p. 36).

A look at political branding from a slightly different perspective is offered by Andrea Schneiker in her highly comprehensive – and entertaining – paper titled: "Telling the Story of the Superhero and the Anti-Politician as President: Donald Trump's Branding on Twitter". The scholar opens up her study by stating that Donald Trump – the politician – should be regarded "as a political product that is marketed through political branding" (Schneiker, 2019, p. 210). The scholar goes on to describe Donald Trump's political brand as the "superhero anti-politician celebrity" (Schneiker, 2019, p. 211). The author quickly explains that political branding strategies sprung out of the "'mediatised' and 'anti-political' age" (Schneiker, 2019, p. 211). She points out that strategic brand management principles are increasingly being integrated into political science. The scholar indicates that "branding relates both to discourses and to practices. In the context of business, brands can be understood in relation to the perceptions that consumers have of a product and as being related to the product and its producer's 'reputation, identity and image'. In this sense, brands 'function as consumer behaviour heuristics, shortcuts that enable consumers to make faster, simpler choices, their ultimate purpose being to lead consumers to 'identify with a company and encourag[e] them to buy its products and services'" (Schneiker, 2019, p. 212). Schneiker indicates that following the principles of strategic brand management can lead to the development of a distinctive and coherent political brand. Of particular importance in her analysis is the emphasis on political branding's ability to elicit emotional reactions in voters-consumers. By analysing Donald Trumps' political brand, the author refers to other popular – and well-devised – brands, such as Superman, Spiderman, and James Bond. She implies that Donald Trump's political brand is predicated on the 'superhero' archetype brand that plays an important role in the American culture. Schneiker contends that "Just like Superman, Spiderman or James Bond, the superhero that is marketed by Donald Trump is an ordinary citizen that, in case of an emergency, uses his superpowers to save others, that is, his country. She sees a problem, knows

what has to be done in order to solve it, has the ability to fix the situation and does so. According to the branding strategy of Donald Trump…a superhero is needed to solve the problems of ordinary Americans and the nation as such, because politicians are no able to do so. Hence, the superhero per definition is an anti-politician. Due to his celebrity status and his identity as entertainer, Donald Trump can thereby be considered to be allowed to take extraordinary measures and even to break rules" (Schneiker, 2019, p. 218). The political brand of Donald Trump, as the scholar argues, is entirely predicated on a well-developed, articulated, and sound brand strategy.

Schneiker concludes her deliberations by clearly declaring that "The branding of Donald Trump as superhero anti-politician celebrity reflects an understanding of political decision-making as an authoritative setting of 'the truth' by one competent individual instead of a deliberative process based on a pluralism of ideas and interests" (Schneiker, 2019, p. 220). For the author, political branding is a value-neutral strategic instrument aimed at establishing coherent, well-articulated and effectively communicated, and distinctive image that resonates with voters-consumers. The scholar refrains from any hints of criticism of the use of political branding by political actors.

Christopher Pich, Dianne Dean, and Khanyapuss Punjaisri offer a riveting account of the use of political branding strategies by political actors during the 2010 UK General Election campaign. The authors begin their study – "Political Brand Identity: An Examination of the complexities of Conservative Brand and Internal Market Engagement During the 2010 UK General Election Campaign" – by declaring the importance of political branding in electoral politics: "In politics, the consistency of the political party's product offering is crucial to electoral success, and this was exemplified in the 'New Labour' brand and its 'on message' approach to political communication in 1997. Brands are powerful, heuristic devices that encapsulate key values of the product or service…" (Pich et al., 2016, p. 100). The authors expend David Aaker's definition of a brand, and – following Knox's assertions – argue that "a brand is not only distinctive through its name or logo but it provides 'added value based on factors over and above its functional performance'. A brand is a communication device which represents the values, nature and personality of an organisation, product, service or political party" (Pich et al., 2016, p. 101). The scholars recognise that political branding is a communication vehicle that can be used by political actors to forge meaningful relationships with voters-consumers. By dissecting the political branding into its elemental processes and components, the scholars acknowledge the complex nature of it: "Paradoxically, although brands are complex entities, they need to be distilled into a simple, value-based message that must be consistent both internally and externally and integrated in a coherent marketing strategy, hence, a strong brand has a clear identity that resonates with the consumer, stakeholders and the internal market" (Pich et al., 2016, p. 101). Of particular significance in this study is the fact that the authors emphasise the linkage between a brand and competitive advantage: "The competitive nature of today's business environment has rendered tangible, functional benefits of a brand unable to sustain competitive advantage and although a brand is a cluster of functional and emotional benefits, the functional benefits can easily be copied. The skills and knowledge that people possess have been considered as valuable to an organisation. They represent the organisation's operant resources that induce emotional benefits that provide the element of uniqueness and differentiation that a successful brand strives for. Indeed, because employees have direct contact with customers and other external stakeholders, they are the embodiment of the brand in the public's eyes. Therefore, it is necessary that organisations provide their employees with an opportunity to understand their brand to enable them to deliver the brand promise. It is through their demonstration of positive brand-supporting behaviours that the brand can consistently transmit images to stakeholders

which differentiate the organisation in the marketplace. This is crucial in a political marketing context particularly as the internal market members of a political party present the party message to the local community" (Pich et al., 2016, p. 102). The scholars stress the necessity for political actors to embrace – and clearly communicate – a set of values, beliefs, a vision, and a strategy – both internally and externally. Political branding is viewed by the scholars as a framework for devising effective political strategies. The authors assert that "[t]his is where the notion of branding is helpful to political parties as it can provide a framework for presenting their values, vision and strategy for achieving that vision; it short, it can be a very efficient heuristic device" (Pich et al., 2016, p. 104). Political branding's role does not stop at the framework stage though. Pich, Dean, and Punjaisri are of the opinion that "branding can not only be applied to political parties, but it can also be applied to political candidates and leaders which 'build[s] a sense of reassurance and foster[s] identification'" (Pich et al., 2016, p. 104).

The authors give prominence to the benefits that political actors can accrue by leveraging the strategies rooted in political branding. Political branding emerges as an overarching strategic philosophy that should be internalised by political actors to devise, articulate, and communicate a clear message that would resonate with voters-consumers, but also with the internal audience within the party. They criticise those political actors whose inability to leverage political branding renders their electoral efforts ineffective and cause failure: "An ineffective implementation of internal branding inside the party is reflected by the lack of shared vision and resistance to change of some internal audiences. Indeed, the call for a clear message of what the brand stands for further highlights the significant role of internal branding to clearly communicate with the internal market about its brand identity. Without a shared understanding of brand identity, it is unlikely that external audiences receive a coherent brand message at all brand touch points" (Pich et al., 2016, p. 112).

Discussion

By examining the sources – the seven selected papers – it has been possible to take a deep dive into how scholars view the use of political branding by political actors within the political context. Alex Marland, in his riveting paper presented at the 2013 annual meeting of the Canadian Communication Association and the Canadian Political Science Association, elegantly and succinctly summed up the importance of political branding: "Political propaganda and image management have always been present in democracies. George Washington was not defiantly standing in the boat that was crossing the Delaware; Abraham Lincoln's portrait was doctored to elongate his neck; and a polio-stricken Franklin D. Roosevelt avoided being photographed in a wheelchair. So it should come as no surprise that today's political leaders seek to control how they are publicly viewed, whether this is Barack Obama choosing to smoke cigarettes in private… or Stephen Harper cuddling kittens. Projecting a desired public image requires information control. At a minimum, politicians must guard against 'gotcha' politics where a single blunder can damage their career. In his seminal study of public performances, Erving Goffman referred to this as "unmeant gestures" and "faux pas" that are observed during "inopportune intrusions" which lead to a "performance disruption". The need to guard against performance disruption has increased with the growing possibility of inopportune intrusions" (Marland, 2013, p. 2).

Political branding is viewed by scholars as a framework useful for synthesising and communicating core visions, messages, and policies. Moreover, a political brand – according to

numerous scholars – "has increasingly become the main vehicle for cultural expression, superseding, for many, social institutions such as religion, the arts, and education (Smith & Speed, 2011, p. 1309). Political brands are viewed by scholars as cultural signals that have a profound impact upon voting behaviour (Smith & Speed, 2011). A traditional political communication strategy would emphasise the ideological differences between political actors. Instead, political branding strategy emphasises "the 'softer' cultural, social, and psychological functions of the brand as the main sources of brand differentiation and motivation for voters. These functions operate at an emotional level and reflect practitioner and academic evidence that voters are increasingly using emotional intelligence to guide voting decisions" (Smith & French, 2009, p. 218). It has been suggested that commercial brands – and increasingly political brands, such as Barack Obama, Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, Pete Buttigieg – are imagined "as an almost universal articulation of the infinite particularity of consumer desire, which interpellates consumers in terms of 'cool', 'aspirational' lifestyles" (Manning, 2010, p. 44).

Conclusion

Political branding is neither good nor bad. It is a compelling – and natural – response to the gradual transformation of capitalism and the emergence of consumer culture whose key points revolve around needs, choices, identities, social status, culture, and cultural artefacts. Consumer culture is part of the air people breathe and provides new ways of developing social and political identities due to the fact that it is actively reshaping issues related to uniqueness, inequality, social status, and cultural identity. Voters-consumers evaluate issues through the lens of their association with a specific group. There is virtually an infinite number of different groups with which voters-consumers can identity, ranging from those predicated on ascriptive attributes to those predicated on individual decisions, choices, and circumstances that emerge throughout a person's life, such as group membership, political party, socioeconomic status, geographic location, or religious affiliation. Debbie Millman argues that "branding has become …about belonging to a tribe, to a religion, to a family. Our ability to brand our beliefs gives us that sense of belonging" (Torres-Spelliscy, 2019, p. 87).

As political brands foster identity, voters-consumers often respond in specific ways. They voluntarily and willingly become brand propagators actively proselytising brand's vision and messages. Political branding – like its ideological parents, namely capitalism and consumer culture – is here to stay.

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Data Availability Statement

All data will be available and shared upon request.