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## Political brand identity: An examination of the complexities of Conservative brand and internal market engagement during the 2010 UK General Election campaign

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This paper seeks to build an understanding of the importance of internal communications when building a strong political brand. Using Kapferer's brand prism as a conceptual framework, the paper explores UK Conservative Party members' attitudes towards the development of the Conservative brand as personified by David Cameron. There are clear implications for political strategists as the findings suggest that it is crucial to engage the internal market in the co-creation of the marketing communications strategy for as brand evangelists they interpret the brand promise at the local level.

**Keywords:** political communications; internal market; political branding; Conservative Party

### Introduction

As the most successful UK political party in the twentieth century (Denham and O'Hara 2007; Lloyd 2006; Norton 1996), the Conservative Party experienced a hiatus going into the new millennium. New Labour was elected in 1997 and successfully defended its majority against a Conservative Party led by William Hague, Iain Duncan-Smith and Michael Howard respectively. Each Conservative Party leader provided a different perspective on the image, policy and presentation of the Conservative brand reflected through their own Conservative value system. In politics, the consistency of the political party's product offering is crucial to electoral success (Dean and Croft 2001), and this was exemplified in the 'New Labour' brand and its 'on message' approach to political communication in 1997 (Gould 1998). Brands are powerful, heuristic devices that encapsulate key values of the product or service, and there is an emerging body of literature that examines the concept of branding in a political context (Lilleker and Negrine 2003; Reeves, de Chernatony, and Carrigan 2006; Scammell 1995; Smith 2001, 2009; White and de Chernatony 2002). Whilst nascent research has focused on branding the party, leader and political campaigning, Smith and French (2009) examined political branding from a consumer perspective. However, there has been little discussion on the internal market and the political brand. The internal market plays a crucial role as an intermediary between the party and the voters, spreading the message of the political brand (Whiteley et al. 1994). Therefore, this study seeks to examine how the internal market responds to the Conservative Party brand and how they disseminate these messages to their local constituents.

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Using Kapferer's (2001) brand prism as our conceptual framework, we examine the different facets of the Conservative brand from the perspective of the Conservative internal market. We provide some insight into the strengths of the communications strategy and how this has enhanced loyalty in the internal market. However, we also highlight the tension created by the hierarchical nature of what is seen as an increasingly 'corporatised' Conservative brand. The paper seeks to show how 13 years on the opposition benches have focused the Conservative Party leadership on rebranding their party and the extent to which the internal stakeholders buy into this 'modern' Conservative brand. We conclude by suggesting that rather than tightening the political brand, there should be some latitude in the communications strategy to allow some local reinterpretation which will in turn enhance internal market loyalty.

### Branding theory

Although there are a number of definitions of a brand, Aaker's (1996, 7) definition focuses upon the brand as 'a distinctive name and or symbol' and is a differentiating feature in a competitive market. However, Knox (2004) takes this further and suggests 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 (de Chernatony and McDonald 2002; Jevons 2005; Peng and Hackley 2009).

Brands have been described as a 'cluster of values' (de Chernatony 2001), multidimensional constructs (Veloutsou 2008; White and de Chernatony 2002) and also social objects (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) that are personally owned and embraced by the consumer (Neff 2009). Hence brands imbue powerful symbolic values which create loyalty and, more importantly, an emotional attachment (Aaker 1996; Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann 2005; Burnett and Hutton 2007; Cova and Cova 2002; Fournier 1998; Lavine and Gschwend 2006; Lury 2005; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Roper and Parker 2006; Tan and Ming 2003). Paradoxically, although brands are complex entities, they need to be distilled into a simple, value-based message (Needham 2005) that must be consistent both internally and externally and integrated in a coherent marketing strategy (White and de Chernatony 2002). Hence, a strong brand has a clear identity that resonates with the consumer, stakeholders and the internal market.

### Brand identity

The notion of brand identity has been defined as the distinctive, envisaged identity desired by the brand creator (Joachimsthaler and Aaker 1997) which is supported by the internal stakeholders (de Chernatony 2006; Nandan 2005). Brand identity encapsulates the vision and aspirations of the brand which correspondingly has an effect on brand development (Alsem and Kosteljik 2008). Brand identity has been broken down into six main components: vision, culture, positioning, personality, relationships and presentation or reflection (de Chernatony 2002; Harris and de Chernatony 2001). These are all emotional components; however, Kapferer's (2008) brand prism also includes the more functional component of physique. Therefore, the brand prism generates a deeper understanding of a brand (Azoulay and Kapferer 2003). Although brand identity prism is criticised for the authors' failure to conceptualise and operationalise the distinctions between the brand image and the brand identity concepts (Azoulay and Kapferer 2003; Dahlen et al. 2010; de Chernatony 2006; Harris and de Chernatony 2001), it provides a mechanism to evaluate

brand coherence and brand integration (de Chernatony 2006). Indeed, 'a sense of identity and core values that underpin it provide an anchor around which all activities and communications can be structured' (Dinnie 2008). Therefore, the brand prism, which represents a complex construct of brand identity, may enable a deeper understanding of the brand and in this instance the political brand.

On the one hand, internal and external stakeholders are crucial when building a strong brand identity (Dean and Croft 2001). On the other, for the brand to be perceived as authentic by external stakeholders, internal stakeholders have to believe in the brand's shared values (Harris and de Chernatony 2001; Kapferer 2001; van Riel and Fombrun 2007). Hence building a shared brand vision with internal stakeholders can only enhance brand identity.

### **Internal branding**

The competitive nature of today's business environment has rendered tangible, functional benefits of a brand unable to sustain competitive advantage (King and Grace 2010) and although a brand is a cluster of functional and emotional benefits (de Chernatony 2001), 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 (Vargo and Lusch 2004) that induce emotional benefits that provide the element of uniqueness and differentiation that a successful brand strives for (Papasolomou and Vrontis 2006a). Indeed, because employees have direct contact with customers and other external stakeholders, they are the embodiment of the brand in the public's eyes (Wangenheim, Evanschitzky, and Wunderlich 2007). 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 market place. 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. As Edelman (1964, 11) suggests:

meanings are not in the symbols. They are in society and therefore in men. Political symbols bring out the concentrated from those particular meanings and emotions which the members of the group create and reinforce in each other.

Hence, political brand identity is co-produced by the party elite, media and also the citizens, but should be reinforced by the internal market when presenting this to the local constituents.

Recently, marketing researchers and practitioners have focused on internal branding as a means to enable an organisation to fulfil its brand promise proposed to external constituencies (e.g. Drake, Gulman, and Roberts 2005; Mitchell 2002). A number of studies (e.g. King and Grace 2010; Miles and Mangold 2004; Punjaisri, Wilson, and Evanschitzky 2009) have supported the notion that internal branding enables employees to develop a shared understanding and necessary skills that allow them to effectively 'live' the brand and become 'brand Evangelists' (Nadeem 2007). Such positive outcomes of effective internal brand management such as enhanced employees' brand commitment (Aurand, Grochels, and Bishop 2005; Burmann and Zeplin 2005), brand loyalty (Papasolomou and Vrontis 2006b) and brand identification (Punjaisri and Wilson 2007) have been empirically documented. Indeed, when employees have positive attitudes towards the brand this encourages brand consistent behaviour (Punjaisri, Wilson, and Evanschitzky 2009). By securing management's understanding and commitment,

employees will better accept and internalise brand values, resulting in a better alignment between their attitudes and behaviours, and the brand (Vallaster and de Chernatony 2006). Consequently, they can act and behave naturally when delivering the brand promise at any brand touch points (Mosley 2007). In political campaigning, galvanising the internal market so they can convey the political brand to voters is a crucial component of electoral strategy.

Internal branding requires support from a communication strategy that takes account of both external and internal communication practices (Hallam 2003). According to Bergstrom, Blumenthal, and Crothers (2002), internal branding should focus on effectively communicating the brand to employees and convincing them of their worth and relevance to the delivery of the brand promise. Therefore, internal communications become an integral element of internal branding, reflecting the marketing input into the internal branding process. Indeed, Terry (2003) has argued that marketers can add credibility to internal communications because of their knowledge about peoples' motivation, needs, desires and weaknesses; they are capable of not only communicating the brand but also shaping people's perceptions. Various authors have viewed internal communications as an effective motivation mechanism (e.g. Piercy 1995; Rafiq and Ahmed 1993) having the capability to reduce employee resistance in times of change (Foreman 2000). Zucker (2002) argues for internal communications as being the first point of focus in internal branding to induce employee's commitment and encourage behavioural changes. Indeed, Punjaisri and Wilson (2007) have found that internal communications exert a relatively higher effect on employees' brand-supporting behaviours than training programmes do, although they have contended that the coordination between Marketing and HR is essential in internal branding.

In order to optimise the effectiveness of internal communications, authors (e.g. Henkel et al. 2007; Wood 1999) have highlighted the balanced management of both formal and informal communications. Furthermore, an open environment, a two-way communications process is pivotal when building mutual understanding and trust between managers and employees within and across departments (Sonnenberg 1991; Varey 1995). This can build up to four times higher employee satisfaction and twice their commitment (Higgins 1996). For activists and party members who are largely voluntary, satisfaction and commitment are central to their engagement (Capato 2008; Parry, Moyser, and Day 1992). This section discussed the theoretical concepts of branding in particular brand identity and internal branding; the next section will examine these constructs from a political perspective.

### Political branding

Branding has been applied to destinations, countries, cities, stately homes (Adams 2010; Bily 2008; Morgan, Pritchard, and Piggott 2002; Robinson 2004; White and de Chernatony 2002), as well as for religion, sports teams, rock bands, people (Einstein 2008), universities and the metropolitan police. More recently, there has been an emerging interest in applying branding concepts to politics (Lees-Marshment 2009; Lilleker, Jackson, and Scullion 2006; Moufahim and Lim 2009; Phipps, Brace-Govan, and Jevons 2010; Reeves, de Chernatony, and Carrigan 2006; Smith 2009; White and de Chernatony 2002), but as Harrop (1990) pointed out, the nature of governing is much like a service provider, in that it is intangible, complex and heavily reliant on people. This services perspective of political parties was supported by Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy (2007) who argued that there are three components of the political brand: first, policy as the

service offering; second, the politician as the tangible service offering and; third, the party as the brand offering.

Nevertheless, voters elect the party they believe to be most capable of providing those services (Butler and Stokes [1969] 1974; Clarke et al. 2004), but as Lock and Harris (1996) pointed out in their seminal paper, political parties are ‘complex intangible products which the voter cannot unbundle [so] . . . voters have to judge on the overall packaged concept or message’. Therefore, during an election campaign, political parties position or reposition themselves through the development of policies that resonate with their target group (Lees-Marshment 2009). Over time, re-positioning is necessary in order for the party or candidate to adapt to environmental or market trends but this is largely constrained by the party history, ideology and their record on promise delivery (Worcester and Baines 2006). This 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; in short, it can be a very efficient heuristic device. However, this vision needs to be shared by all stakeholders, but in politics it is more complicated as political parties are ‘complex organisations with multiple levels, sites of authority and goals’ (Bale 2008). The hierarchical nature of political parties with party members, Members of Parliament (MP) and the leadership creates a dynamic tension on the development and consistency of the political brand. Leadership is crucial and can affect how the brand is perceived by voters. Peng and Hackley (2009, 174) claim that branding can not only be applied to political parties, it can also be applied to political candidates and leaders which ‘build[s] a sense of reassurance and foster[s] identification’, conversely, the party leader can also create dissonance amongst voters (Scammell 1995). Hence this paper will attempt to unbundle the key characteristics of the Conservative brand identity and this may go some way in explaining how the Conservative Party only partially succeeded in getting into power after the UK 2010 General Election campaign.

### **The Conservative Party**

The Conservative Party has a strong tradition in the UK as one of the oldest political parties; its origins can be traced back to the seventeenth century (Blake 1989; Charmley [1996] 2008; Norton 1996). During the last century it was the most successful party in the UK (Denham and O’Hara 2007; Lloyd 2006) and has been seen as the natural party of government of the UK (Willets and Forsdyke 1999). However, this masks an underlying tension that runs through the Conservative Party, which has been present since the 1832 Reform Act and the repeal of the Corn Laws. This tension is two-dimensional; first, there are two factions within the Conservative Party who differ on one key dimension, namely the authoritarian/liberal dimension. This is exemplified by traditional/protectionist and progressive/free trade and, although the party’s core value is to conserve, these two factions differ in how conservation is conceived, managed, and how it provides the vision for governance (Charmley [1996] 2008). This key distinction still affects Conservative thought on issues such as society, the tension between the rural and urban constituencies (Woods 2002), acceptance to change, law and order, wealth creation and role of government, the state and institutions (Hickson 2005; Kavanagh 2000; Norton 1996). This factional distinction also affects the Conservative perception of the UK and its position in the world, particularly its vexed relationship with Europe (Lynch 2009). Second, there is a tension between ‘visceral Conservatism and political necessity’ (Charmley [1996] 2008, 3), the distinction between ideology and pragmatism. This affects how the Conservative Party relates to power, the mechanisms used to gain power and the rhetoric of persuasion. In summary, the picture painted of the Conservative Party is one of a complex collection of



beliefs and values that have been created historically, occasionally ideologically and often pragmatically.

For some, the reason for the enduring success of the Conservative Party during the twentieth century was the notion of moderation (Blake 1989), a post-war consensus with a centre-right focus. This moderation is evident in many Conservative governments from Churchill to Heath; however, moderation was not what the Thatcher government was noted for. After Thatcher's demise, there was a series of Conservative Party leaders; only Major succeeded in winning a general election, the rest – Howard, Duncan-Smith, Hague – all presided over a 'sales-led' Conservative Party (Lees-Marshment 2004) on the Opposition benches whilst Blair's New Labour was in power.

This brief historical analysis sets the scene for the situation David Cameron inherited when he became Conservative Party leader, his aim was to diminish their 'Nasty Party' image famously described by Theresa May. Research conducted by Lord Ashcroft (2005) found that 'the Conservative party doesn't stand for anything anymore' (Ashcroft 2005, 93) but crucially, he believed that 'millions of people thought the Conservative Party wasn't like them and didn't understand them; the problem is that they were right'. The Conservative brand had become 'toxic' and it was Cameron's role to decontaminate it (Jones 2008, 3).

Denham and O'Hara (2007) note that 'what an opposition can do: prepare for office, seek to present itself as a credible alternative to the government and exploit opportunities when they arise'. Cameron's repositioning of the Conservative brand was an attempt to present a credible, electable alternative and this meant that the new branding strategy had to be accepted by party members who would in turn reinforce the brand values and create a coherent brand identity. This was the message learned by New Labour who during the 1997 UK general election campaign ensured all political activities and communications were 'on message'. The Conservative brand needed to be synchronised internally in order to present a consistent image to external stakeholders including the electorate, the media and other interest groups such as business (Dean and Croft 2001; Harris and de Chernatony 2001; van Riel and Fombrun 2007). This paper examines how the internal Conservative stakeholders accepted the David Cameron's Conservative brand image through the conceptual framework of Kapferer's brand prism.

## Methodology

This paper seeks to examine the Conservative Party brand from the perspective of the internal stakeholders, thus building an understanding of Conservative brand identity. Political branding research is at the exploratory stage (Lees-Marshment 2009; Smith 2009) and Davies and Chun (2002) suggest that qualitative research is useful at the early stages of a relatively under-researched area. The methodology aims to take an 'inside-out' approach to the Conservative Party brand (Harris and de Chernatony 2001; Peng and Hackley 2009; van Riel and Fombrun 2007). By understanding how the internal stakeholders conceive the brand, it is possible to identify where problems arise and where they can be ameliorated. With this in mind, this paper adopted a qualitative research approach using in-depth semi-structured interviews in order to understand the UK Conservative brand from the perspective of internal stakeholders (Gillham 2005; Warren and Karner 2005). In-depth interviews, often seen as 'special conversations' (Rubin and Rubin 1995, 6), can be seen as flexible in terms of topic area development, spontaneous and 'potentially a Pandora's box generating endlessly various and abundant data' (McCracken 1988, 12). A judgement sample was adopted and this generated a sample size of 30 internal Conservative stakeholders including Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), House of Commons

and House of Lords, councillors, activists and prospective parliamentary candidates (PPCs). Interviews were conducted prior to the 2010 UK general election, during December 2009–April 2010. Each interview was tape recorded and fully transcribed for analysis. There are a number of issues that qualitative researchers face when conducting research, most notably validity, generalisability, access and consent, reflexivity, voice and transparency (Butler-Kisber 2010, 13). These issues were considered throughout the research design, data collection and analysis process. The validity of this paper is, thus, based on the quality of interviews and findings interpretation in relation to the extant literature. The thematic enquiry was adopted following the approach of Bird et al. (2009):

the initial categories were modified from a broad and culturally appropriate list ... following the first round of coding, categories were broken into sub-categories by identifying properties that described the content of each category

Drawing on authors such as Kvale (1996), Rubin and Rubin (1995) and Heath and Heath (2008), the transcripts were examined using Kapferer's (2001) brand prism as a conceptual framework (Figure 1).

Therefore, the findings are organised into the categories physique, relationship, reflection, personality, culture and self-image. Using these facets, this study builds an understanding of internal market's engagement with the repositioned Conservative brand identity.

## Findings

### *Conservative Party physique*

Einstein (2008, 12–13) argues that in terms of successful branding 'the name or the logo appears on everything that is associated with that brand comes to mind'. Within the conceptual framework of Kapferer's brand prism, the physique is the functional aspect of

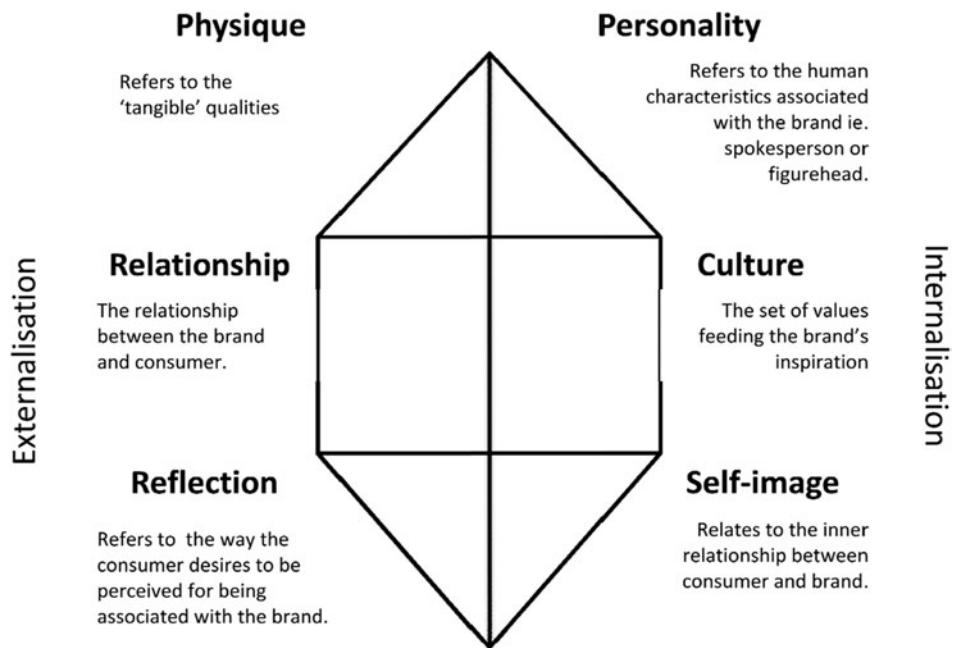


Figure 1. Kapferer's brand identity prism. *Source:* Adapted from Kapferer (2008).



the brand identity; for de Chernatony (2006), it refers to the tangible elements of a brand. Many respondents were ambivalent about the change in visual identity, one party member pointed out that they:

quite liked the torch but was tied to specific aspects – Mrs T [Thatcher] ... so time for a change.

Another councillor believed that:

the torch was more strident. The torch represented the part of Margaret Thatcher; it was a strident, strong symbol. It represented Britain in the world going forward. The tree is an eco; we jumped on the eco bandwagon – vote blue, go green – I don't agree with it. I am not an eco person at all.

A further councillor argued that they 'ignore' the new oak tree logo:

apart from it goes on the ballot papers, I have completely ignored it. Why? I dislike it, I don't understand it.

Other comments followed a similar viewpoint suggesting that they 'don't fly the Tory colours' in their constituency and consider the blue and green oak tree as 'dull and boring' (MP), instead have their own colours and established identity. If the logo was ignored, so were central policies as one MEP claimed to:

campaign very much on broadly local issues and on the reputation of being independent-minded ... in politics what matters is your reputation and you have to establish that from day one.

This tension between central and local party identity has affected the consistency of the 'modern' Cameron Conservative brand.

### *Conservative Party relationship*

The relationship facet of the brand prism is described as the relationship between the brand and the consumer, and between the brand and the internal market (de Chernatony 2006; Kapferer 2001). For a political party, this can be explained through: (a) voter attitudes (an external perspective that is beyond the scope of this paper); (b) structural nature of the party, the party leadership and the internal market; and (c) the emotional sense of belonging to the brand (Figure 2).

The structure of the Conservative Party comprises three elements: the Parliamentary Party, Professional Party and the Voluntary Party where there is some degree of overlap. MP belong to the Parliamentary Party; the Professional section includes local councillors, representatives and PPCs whilst regional associations, volunteers, activists and sub-groups make up the Voluntary section. There was a broad consensus from the internal stakeholders that there is a distinction between the Parliamentary (Central) Conservative Party and the Regional Conservative brand in terms of the values, outlook and traditions. However, it was also suggested that each region or association could have its own identity yet still hold Conservative Party brand values.

The relationship between the party leadership and the local/European Parliamentary members has raised some concerns of accelerated centralisation of the Conservative Party message. It was suggested by some that the Parliamentary Party has taken away powers from the local/European level leaving some to concur that 'the party has become too centralised' (MEP), whilst another MEP claimed that they 'regretted the way we are obliged to centralise our organisation and campaigning'. This is further illustrated by a local party member when he claimed that there was 'more power to grass-roots in my day

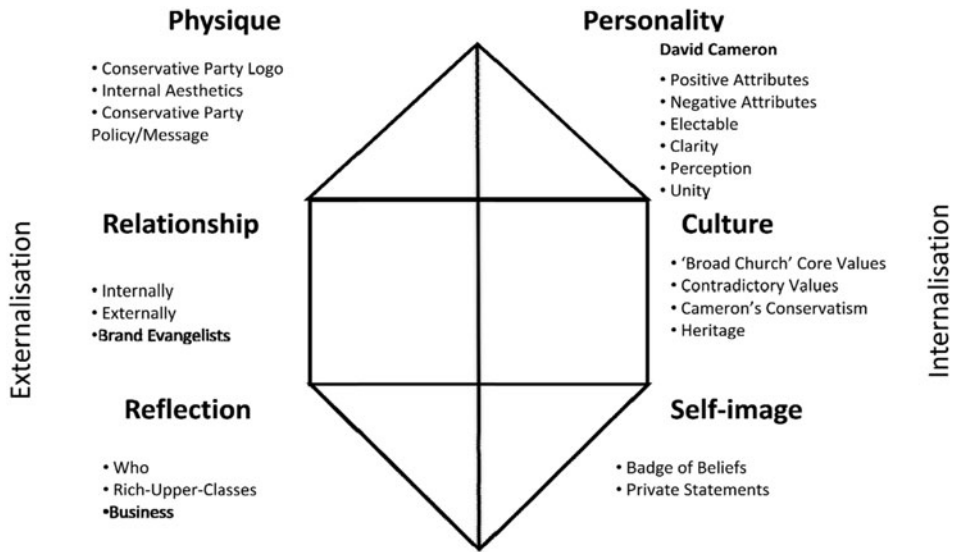


Figure 2. UK Conservative Party brand and the brand identity prism. *Source:* Adapted from Kapferer (2001, 2008).

... all areas had power, more of a community-themed party'. Another local party activist claimed that 'everything comes from CCHQ [Conservative Party Central Head Quarters] ... and Conservative Associations are resenting this being told what to do'.

Centralisation of the Conservative branding strategy has put a strain on the internal market relationship, as one party member commented: 'The central [Parliamentary] party needs to trust local associations and regional levels of the party more ... the electorate trusts us but this sense of trust is missing between the central and local parts of the party'.

There was little understanding or acceptance of the need to have a consistent message, particularly in today's instant media environment. Several participants were disgruntled that the Conservative Party did not appear to echo the concerns of citizens outside Westminster. Some stated that even Conservative stakeholders are not totally 'convinced' or comfortable with policies and approaches adopted by the Parliamentary Party, 'The further you go away from London and in other parts of the country; I don't think it is resonating as good' (party member).

A number of participants of the Conservative Party regions and MEPs felt that there was a 'them and us' mentality with many feeling 'disconnected' from Westminster. One MEP stated that there have 'always been problems between the Parliamentary Party and the European Conservative Party'. Nevertheless, they still see themselves as Conservatives, but the locus of control is firmly at the Parliamentary Party. The literature reflected a consistent coordinated message but one councillor believed that the local publicity material was more successful; he claimed that:

when centralised Conservative literature is given out during campaigning many people say no I don't think I am going to vote Conservative. When given the locally branded literature citizens have replied oh I will definitely vote for you – we get loads of those through the door.

For some, the Conservative brand was a modern political party, offering something for everyone in terms of policy and values, in tune with modern. This point was shared with a

Prospective Parliamentary Conservative Candidate who believed that the Conservatives were:

a lot more unified – all harmonised over big issues ... brought new blood into the party from different backgrounds ... good team in place ... good policy.

It appears that there are constituency members who have promoted their own version of the Conservative brand whilst sitting comfortably under the UK Conservative Party banner. They are fiercely loyal Conservatives who are loyal to the fundamental core Conservative values of responsibility, freedom, aspiration and individualism and used these values as a structure for dealing with the issues facing their local constituents.

However, during the course of the interviews, it emerged that there were tensions between different elements of the Conservative Party in terms of trust, personal support and values. MEP considered that there was an indifferent relationship between the Westminster Conservative Party and the European Conservative Party. A number of participants of other elements of the Conservative Party, including the professional and voluntary strands, still considered a ‘them and us’ mentality and the feeling of being ‘disconnected’ from the Westminster bubble.

Many were also not entirely convinced with the direction the Conservative Party was going in and there was a distinct lack of trust of Central Office leading to a lack of support from many constituency members. One Conservative councillor, although conceding that branding was an important concept, questioned who:

controls the brand ... we make the brands in the provinces ... we don’t have to buy into it ... Obviously the tree [logo] was chosen by Dave’s henchmen in Central Office and if tomorrow they chose to have a venetian clock tower [as their logo] that’s what we will have, that’s their choice. In that sense they are the centre – the corporate Conservative Party.

This was a recurring theme throughout the interviews with many respondents, particularly those outside Westminster, resisting any attempts at controlling the message and the brand. This is also reflected in the next section on culture and reflection.

### *Conservative culture and reflection*

Culture is described by Kapferer (2001, 101) as ‘the set of values feeding the brand’s inspiration’. The findings revealed the core Conservative values of responsibility, freedom, aspiration and individualism, which are interpreted and operationalised at Constituency level. This view was shared by a Conservative MP who suggested that ‘the party has distinct characteristics in different parts of the country ... the party reflects the character of the place’.

One MP went further stating that the Conservative Party in their part of the UK was ‘10 years behind the game ... more traditional’ than the Conservative Party in the South of England and the Parliamentary Party. There was a view that the local party needed to respond to local beliefs and values; for instance, one PPC commented: ‘Distinction is nothing new. A provincial Northern seat ... can only win by showing clearly you have got sort of a local identity’.

This local interpretation of Conservative values was a recurring theme throughout the interviews; for instance, another councillor suggested that:

Each region of the Party [Conservative] has their own identity and promotes different forms of conservatism ... We reflect the local needs filtered through our party agenda but tailored from the dining a la carte of the menu of the best issues ... whether it is urban, suburban or rural. We are all dining from the big book of recipes but the menu’s we are choosing to dine off are different albeit all put together by the same master chef Dave.

In the marketing literature, it is argued that consistency is key to a strong brand; this is also true for political brands according to Schneider (2008). However, local interpretation of these values is evident in the Conservative safe seats where a consistent, tailored message continues to resonate with the local electorate.

### *Conservative personality*

Personality is described as the figurehead or spokesperson for the brand (de Chernatony 2006; Kapferer 2001). For the leader, there was a view that David Cameron had:

great integrity, had a generosity of spirit and I liked his values and I liked his positive view on the world. It's not an angry philosophy basically an enabling philosophy.

One curious aspect is that although there was a view that Cameron was centrist in terms of Conservative policy-making, he was seen by some as being very keen to localise politics, to give decisions back to local people. He was seen as very keen to reduce the size of the state again empowering people to take charge of their own lives within their own communities (PPC). For one MP, Cameron was a curious mix of traditional/liberal Conservative, 'you can trace him back to Macmillanite–Disraelite with a touch of Gladstone – the only thing he didn't have a ideological tap into was Thatcher in a funny way' almost 'all things to all Tories'. He was also seen as being a good communicator who espoused the virtues of the 'one-nation' Conservatism; he was also perceived to be 'sincere' (MP) and 'keeps his cool' under pressure (Member House of Lords). One respondent suggested that as he was an unknown quantity, he had no baggage so 'determined to succeed and repackage the Party plus presenting himself doing it'. He believed he would be successful in attracting the middle classes who had deflected to New Labour by 'the huskies, the goodies, the greenery, the socially inclusive, trendy, Notting Hill sort of approach'. One key point raised by one respondent is that 'David Cameron has transformed the standing of the party that people are prepared to listen to us'. So after three election defeats, the majority of participants were willing to support Cameron as they could see 'he's a winner', 'electable' and they were 'sick of losing' and this was the 'best chance of re-election for a generation'.

### *Self-image*

Self-image refers to the way 'in which a brand enables users to make a private statement to themselves' (de Chernatony 2006, 212). As the internal market comprises consumers of the Conservative brand, this will be examined rather than the views of external stakeholders. There was a high level of inconsistency amongst respondents regarding the extent to which the brand had changed. Moreover, for those who believed the brand had changed, there was a diversity of views as to how the brand had changed and what was the catalyst for change. For many respondents, like this Conservative Future member, the facade of the Party had changed under the leadership of David Cameron but in reality the Party was still the same as it was under the leadership of Michael Howard. This was reflected in comments from party members who were sceptical about the extent to which Cameron could change the party, for instance one remarked that: 'The MPs haven't changed so how can the party have changed . . . if Cameron wins and after the honeymoon period the veneer will peel off'. Another suggested that 'the values [of the Conservative Party] are still the same but the perception of leadership has changed'. Many respondents supported this view arguing that the Conservative Party was focusing on 'style' of the message rather than 'substance' of policies.

Contrasting this view, there was a significant proportion of interviewees who believed that the Conservative Party had changed under Cameron's leadership: 'he has changed it, he has softened it, he's chosen quite a few what he believes to be popular elements and the whole green agenda – I think he truly believes in' but the clarity of the message was missing. It was 'too vague'; Cameron had 'changed the look [of the Party] but did not do enough with the message ... it's not clear what they stand for'. One MEP suggested that David Cameron 'hasn't made enough of a change' arguing that the Conservative Party needed more 'substance'.

For many respondents, substance meant that the electorate understood what the Conservatives stood for as compared to Labour; for instance, one MP was worried that 'we don't have a clear distinction ... no differentiation ... we need to get that back ... I don't think we have any clear values'. The concern for a clear message that distinguished the Conservative Party from the alternatives was also evident amongst the voluntary party members; one suggested, 'we haven't put across a clear alternative'.

A number of participants were unsure about the Conservative brand and 'we don't really know what the central party stands for and Dave is not clear too' (Councillor); 'do not know what Dave's purpose or central idea is yet' (MP). When asked to clarify their confusion, it was again claimed that the Conservative Party's message was not clear enough, which was confusing not just the participant but also the electorate. A handful of participants were concerned that the Party itself did not fully understand the message it was trying to project and did not know the core values of the Conservative brand despite the General Election being only months away. This was reiterated by a member of the Professional element of the Conservative Party who revealed that many members of the Party including CCHQ did not understand the envisaged identity and 'if CCHQ don't understand their brand what hope can we have for the rest of the country'.

The lack of a clear brand identity did not worry one MEP who reacted pragmatically and claimed to 'campaign very much on broadly local issues and on the reputation of being independent minded ... in politics what matters is your reputation and you have to establish that from day one'. The Conservative Party members are the 'brand evangelists' so need to be on message supporting the Cameron Conservative brand message. However, some respondents argued that it was their personal relationship with the local electorate that was responsible for their success; hence, we have two physical manifestations of the brand, not only the Party leader but also the local MP. This was particularly evident in the safe seat constituencies, and the local MP empathised with the needs of the area in terms of business, economy and local people.

There was a belief that Cameron may be the best chance for electoral success for some time, so many kept their reservations quiet and went along with what he was doing; although he was changing the perception of the Conservative brand he was not going to change their beliefs. Cameron has merely 'quietened the dissatisfaction and united around the fact we need to shut up and win' (Councillor), as 'You can achieve nothing in politics if you don't win elections' (Councillor). Finally, it appeared that being on the opposition benches for 13 years, many respondents concluded 'we are all willing to shut up to get Cameron elected' (MEP), 'we can't go on like this' (MP) and 'it's time to keep quiet and get elected' (party member).

## Conclusion

In terms of communicating the values of the brand, the findings clearly indicate that the Conservative Party still does not have a clear brand identity within the internal market and

demarcation lines follow the historical strands within the Conservative Party. Furthermore, there are clear distinctions between the national and local Conservative brand and how this is presented to the citizen by local campaigners. This notion of central and local message differentiation is quite a dilemma for Central office, there is a need to respond to local issues to act local but it needs to be underpinned by a central core message. Although if more control goes to the local constituency, there is a chance that the message may become more diluted and this could undermine the Conservative brand. This dilemma is not new, nor necessarily problematic. Downs (1957, 135) in his seminal work argued exactly this when he discussed appealing to rural and urban constituencies with different policies that were not conflicting. The crucial aspect of building a political brand is that it must contain core values that are consistent with the ideology, values, history and culture of the party and the leader embodies this through their own interpretation of Conservative values. The importance of the local constituencies is to operationalise this Conservative brand through peripheral values that resonate with the core values but are more flexible in identifying specific values that echo the local constituency reflecting the culture and circumstances of the local constituency electorate. Vallaster and de Chernatony (2006) argue that internal stakeholders play a crucial role in promoting a successful brand, with a strong identity that has the potential of instilling and maintaining confidence with the consumer or citizen (Schneider 2008).

Wagenheim, Evanschitzky, and Wunderlich (2007) suggest that the key strengths of the internal market are the skills and knowledge of the local market, and the enthusiasm and the motivation they have for the brand demonstrate they are the 'embodiment of the brand'. In terms of brand-supporting behaviours and a shared understanding, there is still some dissonance here; internal communications need to reveal a consistency with the local party values and Cameron's Conservative brand.

### **Implications**

The implications arising from this study focus upon first the use of Kapferer's brand prism. This conceptual framework was useful for building an in-depth understanding of the Conservative brand and unearthing the challenging aspects the brand is experiencing. In particular, the culture and the relationship facets of the brand prism raised the most concerns. For instance, the past failures of the Conservative Party which have been due to poor strategic decisions which were short-term and sales-led (Lees-Marshment 2004); disunity in a number of guises (Norton 2008), for instance splitting the rural vote (Woods 2002); Europe (Lynch 2009) and finally the legacy of Margaret Thatcher (Butler and Kavanagh 2002). The 'them and us' mentality identified in this study suggests that there is a lack of message consistency across the internal stakeholders of the party. 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. As a result, there is evidence of resistance to change from some party members. Without a shared understanding of brand identity, it is unlikely that external audiences receive a coherent brand message at all brand touch points (e.g. Punjaisri, Wilson, and Evanschitzky 2009). Second, although this research paints an interesting picture of the internal Conservative brand, there are serious implications arising from the contradictions and uncertainty about the Conservative brand. Whilst David Cameron is considered the personality of the brand identity prism, the perceived lack of the management's



understanding and commitment explains the issues found in the culture and relationship dimensions. This highlights that all dimensions of the brand prism are distinctive, yet interdependent and internal branding cannot be effective without first securing the understanding and commitment from the party leadership members. Also, this study encourages management to implement open-environment, two-way communications in order to build mutual understanding and trust across the political party. When trust exists across the internal audiences, internal branding becomes more effective in enhancing the party members' commitment and loyalty (Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009). However, our research suggests that the historical hierarchical nature of the Conservative Party is partly to blame. During and after the Thatcher era, much of the traditional elite power structure was replaced with more accessible institutional processes; many respondents were concerned about the return to an elite power structure under the leadership of David Cameron. This affects not only how internal market engagement is developed but also how internal communications are managed and communicated. From this research, it is clear that there still remains an unswerving loyalty to the Conservative Party amongst the participants of this study. The enthusiasm and loyalty that exists amongst the party activists who continue to be 'Brand Evangelists' for the Conservative Party needs to be harnessed and not viewed with apprehension.

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