

Understanding the relationship between the communicated political brand identity and understood political brand image of David Cameron's UK Conservative Party

Abstract

This paper seeks to build an understanding of the relationship between the communicated brand identity and understood political brand image of the UK Conservative Party. This is supported by the exploration of the applicability of Kapferer's brand identity prism (2008) and brand image framework (Bosch et al. 2006) to the context of political marketing. Despite this research demonstrating the problematic nature of transferring concepts of brand identity and brand image to the political environment, this research develops an improved and focused framework to explore internal and external orientations of political brands. The findings have implications not only for political parties but also for politicians, candidates and other political entities. Organisations will be able to generate a deeper understanding of their brands from an internal and external orientation and investigate whether their projected brand identity is coherent with the understood external brand image.

Keywords: brand image; brand identity; political brands

Study Motivation

Despite the various conceptualisations of brand identity and brand image, these are often used interchangeably and occasionally misunderstood (Nandan 2005; Wong 2010). Nandan (2005) and Bosch *et al.* (2006) argued that a brand's envisaged identity may not be perceived in the same way by the consumer, with separate viewpoints existing. Furthermore, these communication discrepancy gaps need to be as small as possible and ultimately narrowed or eliminated in order for the brand to be considered strong, trusted and valued (Nandan 2005).

Existing research tends to focus on either brand identity or brand image. There have been a few attempts at exploring the identity and image of a brand in the same study (Bosch *et al.* 2006; de Chernatony 1999; Harris and de Chernatony 2001; Roy and Banerjee 2007; Davies and Chun 2002). However, there are limited studies that focus on application and operationalisation of brand identity and brand image frameworks. Furthermore, there is a paucity of identity and image research in the context of political branding. Responding to the identified gap, this research focuses on the transfer potential of Kapferer's brand identity prism and brand image framework (Bosch *et al.* 2006) used to explore how David Cameron's Conservative Party brand was projected and understood prior the 2010 UK General Election.

Research Objectives

This research focused on three objectives. The first objective focused on the application of Kapferer's brand identity prism to explore the UK Conservative Party from an internal orientation. The second objective assessed the transfer potential of the brand image framework (Bosch *et al.* 2006) to understand the UK Conservative Party from an external perspective. The third objective examined the coherency of the UK Conservative Party brand by amalgamating the applied frameworks.

Research Method

Stage one involved thirty in-depth interviews with internal stakeholders of the UK Conservative Party, spanning all three elements; Parliamentary, Professional and Voluntary. Stage two of the study involved eight focus group discussions (forty-six participants in total) with external stakeholders aged 18-24 years. As young citizens aged 18-24 years were considered an untapped and potentially lucrative market and specifically targeted by David Cameron's Conservative Party (Charles 2009) it can be argued that it was appropriate to consider young citizens aged 18-24 years as external stakeholders. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted by the researcher between December 2009 and 6th May 2010 (polling day - UK General Election). Interviews/focus groups were transcribed by the researcher and analysed using Butler-Kisber's (2010) two stage thematic inquiry analytical process.

Findings

The findings indicated that applying a political brand to Kapferer's (2008) brand identity prism and the brand image framework (Bosch *et al.* 2006) can be problematic. However, in the first instance a number of dimensions/components had to be adapted to meet the unique qualities of a political brand. The findings also highlighted that the combination of the conceptual frameworks (Kapferer 2008; Bosch *et al.* 2006) provide a mechanism to highlight both inconsistencies and consistencies between the brand identity and brand image of the UK Conservative Party.

The UK Conservative Party brand identity needs to pay close attention to the lack of internal coherency. The UK Conservative Party brand image is contentious, ambiguous and remains associated with previously held perceptions and imagery. In addition, the discrepancy gaps between the concepts of brand identity and brand image also require attention. Nevertheless this study provides deep insight into the brand identity and brand image of the UK Conservative Party and highlights some detoxification of the 'Tory brand'.

Original Value

Despite this research demonstrating the concepts of brand identity and brand image can be applied to a political brand, this research indicated that there are areas of improvement for the amalgamated framework. The '*brand identity-image network*' therefore enables researchers to explore the internal brand identity and external brand image with greater clarity without undermining the related yet distinct nature of brand identity and brand image. This research also addressed the limited understanding of how a political brand is communicated and understood in the same study. Furthermore, this research adds to the paucity of literature that critically applies and operationalises the concepts of brand identity and brand image.

Theoretical/Managerial Relevance

The findings have implications not only for political parties but also for politicians, candidates and other political entities. Organisations will be able to generate a deeper understanding of their brands from an internal and external orientation and investigate whether their projected brand identity is coherent with the understood external brand image. Inconsistencies between internal brand identity and external brand image can then be addressed. This research also made a theoretical contribution to the body of knowledge with the application, operationalisation and development of the brand identity-image network which could be used beyond the context of political branding.

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