Understanding the role of social media in political corporate branding research in the context of Indian politics

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore how political actors within the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) use social media in their communication campaigns and how these social media platforms are understood by citizens following the 2014 Indian General Election. This research attempts to address the limited understanding of social media in the context of politics (Barnard and Kreiss, 2013; Burton and Shea, 2010; Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011; Ganz, 2009; Gulati and Williams, 2007; Kumar 2009; Owen and Davis 2008). Furthermore, the limited research on political branding and social media has predominantly focused a western context negating eastern perspectives including the republic of India. This study will use the adapted Kapferer's (2008) brand identity prism developed by Pich *et al*. (2014) to a political setting. This framework will ground the study and offer the opportunity to examine the role of social media from an internal brand identity and external brand image perspective. The findings will have implications not only for political parties but also for politicians, candidates and other parties interested in social media. This study will offer organisations a mechanism that will allow them understand how their social media is projected and understood and allow them to investigate whether their projected brand identity is coherent with the understood external brand image.

Keywords: brand image; brand identity; social media

Study Motivation

It can be argued that the use of social media platforms are important tools within political communication campaigns to secure victory and encourage interaction between political parties/candidates and voters (Austin 2008). According to Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011:208) the 2008 USA Presidential Election was a "*watershed moment in the use of social media for campaigning*" in democratic elections. Furthermore, each electoral cycle presents new marketing and communication tools aimed to strengthen the relationship between political parties, candidates and citizens (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011; Panagopoulos 2009; Shea and Burton 2006). Despite the growing relevance of research on social media and political communication, there is still so much not understood compared in this area (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2013). Additionally, studies that focus on the use of social media platforms in political branding research remain limited (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011; Owen and Davis 2008; Kumar 2009; Burton and Shea, 2010; Ganz, 2009;

Gulati and Williams, 2007). More specifically, there is a paucity of social media and political branding research from an eastern political context with the majority of research focusing on a western perspective. The limited research tends to highlight a content analytical review of the social media platforms used within election campaign periods (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2013). For example, this content analytical view is evident in the work by Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011). The authors explored the communication strategy used during the 2008 Obama campaign with the aid of researcher-led content analysis. Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011) concluded that the social media tools used during the 2008 Obama campaign were developed and supported at a grass-roots level and fully integrated with their offline activities. Therefore, the existing research neglects the use and communication of social media tools from the standpoint of internal political actors. This presents an opportunity to examine the role of social media from an internal brand identity and external brand image perspective. This will illustrate how internal stakeholders use social media tools and highlight how these platforms are understood from the perspective external citizens in the context of political branding. This is currently missing from the existing literature.

As the limited existing studies in social media and political branding have predominantly focused on a western context, this research will focus on an eastern perspective namely the republic of India. India has been described as an emerging economic and political power with a population of over one billion citizens (Castells 2011). Furthermore, there are projections that the population of India will surpass the population of China by 2030, which will increase by an additional four hundred million citizens (Whitty 2010). This will make India one of the largest democratic nations home to numerous political brands. This study will focus on the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is the current largest party within the centre-right coalition; the National Democratic Alliance. After ten years as the official opposition, the BJP-led coalition returned to power following the 2014 General Election thereby electing Narendra Modi as the country's Prime Minister (North 2014). The BJP was successful in winning over young voters 18-30 and first-time voters compared with their political rivals (Vaishnav 2014). The BJP attracted young voters making them the largest supporting age group of their party by using social media as a major element of the party's election strategy (Ali 2014). Therefore, BJP successfully adopted social media platforms as campaign tools to communicate and interact with young citizens. However, there is little research on how the party uses social media platforms particularly following the 2014 General Election. Furthermore, there is a limited understanding of how young citizens interpret the social media platforms used by BJP.

Ultimately, this study will use the adapted Kapferer's (2008) brand identity prism developed by Pich *et al*. (2014) as a framework that will ground the study and offer the opportunity examine the role of social media from an internal and external perspective. Therefore, this research aims to study how the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) uses social media platforms and how this is decoded by Indian citizens following the 2014 Indian General Election campaign.

Research Objectives

This research focuses on two objectives. The first explores the role of social media of the BJP political from an internal orientation with the aid of the adapted brand identity prism (Kapferer 2008; Pich *et al*. 2014). The second objective involves generating a deeper understanding of how Indian citizens understood the use of social media by BJP following the 2014 Indian General Election. This will be supported by a focus on political brand image (Pich 2012).

Research Method

Stage one involves conducting in-depth interviews with internal stakeholders of the BJP, spanning the Parliamentary, Professional and Voluntary bodies. Stage two of the research involves conducting focus group discussions combined with qualitative projective techniques and netnographies with external stakeholders aged 18-30 years. The sample of 18-30 year old citizens were chosen as they represented a third of the Indian voting population (Dasgupta 2014) and shaped the outcome of the 2014 Indian General Election (Virmani 2014). Interviews and focus group discussions will be conducted between November 2014 and April 2015. Interviews/focus groups will be transcribed by the researchers and analysed using Butler-Kisber's (2010) two stage thematic inquiry analytical process.

Findings

The findings will add to the limited understanding of the role of social media in the context of political branding. The findings will also highlight insight into how social media is used by internal stakeholders of the BJP and assess its consistency with how it is understood in the minds of external stakeholders (citizens). This study will also add to the growing body of research that focuses on both internal brand identity and external brand image. Additionally, the findings will provide an applied example of the adapted brand identity prism developed by Pich *et al*. (2014) in action. This may result further adaption and refinement of the political brand identity prism (Pich *et al*. 2014). Finally, the findings will provide a greater understanding of the BJP, which will address calls for more detail and knowledge on political brands (Baines *et al*. 1999; Rawson 2007; Smith 2005; Smith and French 2009).

Original Value

This research will add to the limited understanding of the role of social media platforms set within political branding from an eastern context. This will go some way in addressing the western dominated perspective that currently exists within the political branding literature. This study will also generate deeper insight into the use and communication of social media tools from the standpoint of internal political actors and assess how these messages are understood from the perspective external citizens. This rich insight will compliment and build on the existing research that tends to adopt a content analytical perspective (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011). Finally, this study will present insight into the role of social media platforms outside the election campaign period following the success of BJP in the 2014 Indian General Election. This will provide some understanding of a time period that is often overlooked compared with the pre-election campaign period.

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 social media tools and communication from an internal and external orientation. Furthermore, this will allow organisations to investigate whether their projected message is coherent with their understood external brand image. In addition, this will empower organisations to assess the suitability of the social media platform when communicating with citizens. Inconsistencies between internal brand identity and external brand image can then be addressed. This research could be used as grounding for an in-depth

comparative study with a western political brand to explore similarities and differences between social media platforms and understanding of citizens across cultures. Finally, this research will also highlight whether post-election communication warrants equal attention as pre-election communication in the long term development of political brands.

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