

INVESTIGATING POLITICAL BRAND REPUTATION WITH QUALITATIVE PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUNG ADULTS

Abstract

Capturing and understanding the images and reputations external stakeholders assign to brands can be confusing and challenging. This is reinforced by explicit calls for more pragmatic tools and methods to comprehend the external orientation of brands. We respond by investigating the applicability of qualitative projective techniques in exploration of the external current image *and* long-term reputation of the UK Conservative Party corporate brand from the perspective of young voters aged 18-24 years. This is achieved by comparing and contrasting the external brand images prior the 2015 UK General Election with the findings collected before the 2010 UK General Election. We demonstrate that qualitative projective techniques are useful applications to capture, deconstruct and understand current image *and* long-term reputation of political brands. Organisations including those beyond the political context will be able to use this paper as a guide to generate a deeper understanding of their brands image and consistency of their reputation.

Keywords

Brand image, brand reputation, political brands, qualitative projective techniques

1.1 Introduction

The application of corporate branding theory to the political arena allows political parties, candidates, politicians and coalitions otherwise known as ‘political brands’ to develop desired identities and reputations, create an authentic-credible offering of intangible and tangible elements and to project an ideal position to multiple stakeholders (Nielsen 2015; Scammell 2015; Speed *et al.* 2015). Corporate political brand can be conceptualised as a trinity of elements including the *party*, *leader* and *policy* (Butler *et al.* 2011; Davies and Mian 2010; Smith and French 2011). Corporate ‘political’ brands are multifaceted constructs yet should provide a clear, understandable, consistent message and avoid ambiguity to be considered authentic, credible and successful (Gurau and Ayadi 2011; Phipps *et al.* 2010; Smith and French 2009). However, attempting to capture and comprehend political brands particularly from an ‘external’ voter-citizen perspective can be challenging and confusing as there are very few models, tools and techniques designed to undertake this task (Baines *et al.* 2014; Scammell 2015; Speed *et al.* 2015). This raises the question of how to capture and understand the long-term external orientation of political brands?

This paper seeks to generate insight into the UK Conservative Party’s brand ‘reputation’ prior the 2015 UK General Election. This will be supported by replicating the work of Pich *et al.* (2015) who assessed the revelatory qualities of ‘qualitative projective techniques’ in the context of political brand ‘image’ research. Projective techniques are a series of data collection methods such as word-association and illustrative expression used to enable participants to reveal deep-seated thoughts, perceptions and attitudes compared with traditional data collection methods and direct questioning (Barbour 2007; Levin-Rozalis 2006). Can ‘qualitative projective techniques’ be used to capture and comprehend political brand ‘reputation’ as well as political brand ‘image’?

We explain the concept of corporate branding and its application to the study of political campaigns and contexts. Projective techniques, what they are and how they work are next reviewed. Followed by an outline of our research approach including the justification of our sampling framework. We then present the key findings followed by a discussion on the elicitation capabilities of qualitative projective techniques in political brand image-reputation research. The concluding section sets out the implications of this study and areas for future research.

2.1 Corporate Branding: Image and Reputation

Brand *image* is often conceptualised as the associations, perceptions and imagery linked to the brand by the external stakeholder (Nandan 2005). *Brand reputation* on the other hand remains an often confusing and contradictory concept across the discipline especially defining its relationship with internal identity and external image (Davies *et al.* 2004; Fetscherin and Usunier 2012; Fombrun and Van Riel 1997; Gotsi and Wilson 2001; Gutman and Miaoulis 2003). Further, the construct of reputation is complex, which in turn makes it difficult to operationalise and understand (Abratt and Kleyn 2012; Davies and Mian 2010). This is supported by explicit calls for more insights and understanding in this area particularly the ‘increasingly important’ area of brand reputation (Barnett *et al.* 2006; Perez 2015; Veloutsou and Moutinho 2009).

Despite the debate, many authors concur with the notion that reputation creates a competitive advantage and provides organisations with a key asset comparably to its competitors (Abratt and Kleyn 2012; Brown 2006; Dowler 1993; Firestein 2006). In addition, there is consensus that ‘image affects reputation’ (Lewellyn 2002) for example, understanding image can be a precursor to generating and managing reputation and attempt to safeguard brands from undesired associations and negative connotations (Lewellyn 2002; Perez 2015). However, this

raises key propositions such as what is brand reputation, how is it distinct from image? There are models and frameworks designed to measure brand reputation (Davies *et al.* 2004; Harris and de Chernatony 2001; Sengupta *et al.* 2015). For example Davies *et al.* (2004) established the ‘Corporate Character Scale’, a scale which uses personality metaphors such as “agreeableness”, “chic”, “ruthlessness”, partly as a measure of external image as if it were a person. However, the pre-populated scales fail to capture the rich perceptions, associations and imagery connected to brands, which underpin the very nature of image and reputation (Davies *et al.* 2004; Sengupta *et al.* 2015).

According to Marwick and Fill (1997), the concepts of brand reputation and brand image are often used ‘synonymously’ which seems to add to the complexity and confusion surrounding the topic (Abratt and Kleyn 2012; Davie and Mian 2010). Therefore, greater clarification and discussion is needed to understand the concept of reputation. *Image* is viewed as the short term, current perceptions and impressions associated with a brand (Argenti and Druckenmiller 2004; de Chernatony 1999; Lewellyn 2002; Perez 2015; Pich *et al.* 2015; Fombrun and Van Riel 1997). In contrast, there is some agreement within corporate branding scholars that conceptualises *reputation* as the long term, durable, stable, external view of a brand (Fetscherin and Usunier 2012; Harris and de Chernatony 2001; Kowalczyk and Pawlish 2002). Further, *reputation* unfolds from a ‘collective representation of images’, an aggregate of reflections [images] developed over time (Argenti and Druckenmiller 2004; Lewellyn 2002; Mahon 2002; Perez 2015; Veloutsou and Moutinho 2009). In other words, reputation is built on stakeholders’ perceptions of *multiple images* (Balmer and Greyser, 2003: 311) and therefore the means by which the corporate brand is positioned in the minds of key stakeholders. However, the existing literature fails to provide clear and detailed distinction between image and reputation in terms of conceptualising or defining a timeframe [image short-term and reputation long-term

and over time] or clarifies durability and stability. This in turn adds to the confusion of defining image and reputation and complexity of researching the two related yet distinct concepts.

When a brand's image is consistent and coherent through time, a brand's reputation is considered positive and successful (Fill 2002; Marwick and Fill 1997; Perez 2015). Further, a positive and strong reputation can improve a brand's credibility and authenticity by reaffirming consistent values, imagery and beliefs (Milewicz and Herbig 1994; Perez 2015). This suggests that the two concepts of image and reputation are allied yet distinct and "*one is necessary for the other to be developed*" (Lewellyn 2002; Marwick and Fill 1997:398). With this in mind, this study puts attempts to provide clearer distinction and greater clarification to the two concepts of image and reputation, summarised in table 1.

Table 1: Working distinctions between brand image and brand reputation - in appendix 5

[HERE]

This study therefore conceptualises 'brand image' as current-immediate associations, perceptions and imagery connected with a brand from the perspective of external stakeholders. In contrast, 'brand reputation' is defined as a collective representation or aggregate of images associated with a brand over-time (Argenti and Druckenmiller 2004; Lewellyn 2002; Mahon 2002; Perez 2015; Veloutsou and Moutinho 2009). Further, this study supports the idea that in order to uncover a brand's reputation *both current and past* brand images must be understood, which would reveal consistencies and contradictions with the brand and highlight opportunities to make strategic management adjustments to the brand if required (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Marwick and Fill 1997). Consistent representations should reveal a brand's reputation whereas incoherent *current and past* associations are not recognised as long-term 'brand reputation' and instead reveal current 'brand image' (Argenti and Druckenmiller 2004; Lewellyn 2002; Mahon 2002; Marwick and Fill 1997; Perez 2015). Therefore, future research should address explicit

calls for further research on brand reputation and provide greater insight into the related yet distinct nature of brand image and brand reputation (Argenti and Druckenmiller 2004; Barnett *et al.* 2006; Perez 2015; Veloutsou and Moutinho 2009). Nevertheless, this raises the same proposition how can we *actually* capture or understand reputation. If brand reputation develops from an aggregate of images, we need to take a step back and consider existing research on brand image as a way to address the working proposition. However, research on brand image and brand reputation remains sparse particularly in the context of politics.

2.1.2 Corporate ‘Political’ Brand Image and Brand Reputation

The limited research in this area has tended to focus on ‘current brand image’ rather than ‘long-term brand reputation’ with even fewer studies on both concepts. Davies and Mian (2010) was one such study to focus on ‘political brand reputation’ and specifically, two of the three elements of a political brand; *leader* and *party*. The work faced the limits of other quantitative studies in that the research fails to explore, uncover and understand the political brand in-depth (Davies and Mian 2010). Further, the study did not consider the ‘continuity of images’ that develop into brand reputation (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Marwick and Fill 1997). Consequently, Davies and Mian (2010) concluded that future research should continue to research political brand reputation adopting a qualitative perspective to capture greater insight, richness and depth, which is missing from the sub-discipline of political branding.

In contrast, research on ‘political brand image’ has received greater attention compared with ‘political brand reputation’ (Guzman and Sierra 2009; Pich *et al.* 2015; Smith 2001). For example, Smith (2001) measured the importance of brand image in British politics during the 2001 General Election. Smith (2001) used variables identified by MORI polling to evaluate and compare the brand image of the main UK political parties [Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats] and party leaders. It was found that party leaders often have greater

influence than the actual party and traditional traits have an impact on the appeal of a political brand's image. Further, Smith (2001:992) concluded that "*image in politics is of critical importance and as such merits further analysis*" and future studies could explore rather than measure brand image. Similarly, Guzman and Sierra (2009) critically applied the brand personality scales of Aaker (1997) and Caprara *et al.* (2001) to measure the brand image of political candidates during the 2006 Mexican General Election. Guzman and Sierra (2009) concluded that Mexican presidential candidates were evaluated according to their personality rather than policy, and developed a framework to calculate the image-personality of political brands. However, this study focuses more on the quantification of 'personality characteristics' linked to brand personality literature rather than brand image perceptions and associations (Aaker 1997; Caprara *et al.* 2001). Nevertheless, similar to the proposition put forward by Davies and Mian (2010) earlier in this paper, Guzman and Sierra (2009) called for further research in this area particularly to generate deeper exploratory insights.

2.1.3 Corporate 'Political' Brand Image and Projective Techniques

Pich *et al* (2015) explored the external brand image of the UK Conservative Party before the 2010 UK General Election. This was achieved by assessing the elicitation capabilities of qualitative projective techniques. Projective techniques are a series of data collection exercises used to enable participants to reveal deep-seated thoughts, perceptions and attitudes through the medium of illustrations, associations and activities and verbal expressions (Boddy 2004; Bond and Ramsey 2010). Further, projective techniques have the ability to provide deeper access to private opinions sometimes tacit to the participant offering richer understanding compared with traditional data collection methods and direct questioning (Barbour 2007; Boddy 2005; Levin-Rozalis 2006). Projective techniques can be divided into five categories; *association, construction, expressive, completion* and *choice ordering* and outlined in table 2 (Bond and Ramsey 2010; Hofstede *et al.* 2007; Pich *et al.* 2015).

Table 2: projective techniques – in appendix 5 [HERE]

Pich *et al.* (2015) revealed that projective techniques can provide a greater understanding into underlying feelings and deep-seated attitudes towards political parties, candidates and the positive and negative aspects of ‘political brand image’. For example, the study ‘unbundled’ the corporate political brand image by conceptualising the entity into three components for example the party leader, party and party policy (Butler *et al.* 2011; Smith and French 2011). The findings concluded that the UK Conservative Party brand image under the leadership was complex, multifaceted and often contentious, which was inconsistent with the existing literature on successful political brands (Needham 2006). Further, the UK Conservative Party had not managed to completely dispel the party of the rich and stereotypical perceptions and associations (Ashcroft 2010; Helm 2010) and failed to demonstrate the desired inclusive image.

The work by Pich *et al.* (2015) concluded future research should [re]consider the applicability of projective techniques to explore the perceptions, associations and beliefs linked to political brands in different settings, conceptualisations, contexts or political brands over time. This suggests that qualitative projective techniques could be used to uncover current associations and perceptions that constitute brand image *yet* also capture long-term view of political brands and reveal ‘collective representation and continuity of images’ that form reputation (Argenti and Druckemiller 2004; Lewellyn 2002; Mahon 2002; Marwick and Fill 1997; Perez 2015).

Subsequently, research in political branding should focus on creating in-depth insight into the image creation process and strengthen knowledge on how political brands are positioned in the mind of voters (Guzman and Sierra 2009; Needham and Smith 2015; Nielsen 2016; Smith 2001). Further, in order to discover a brand’s long-term reputation; a brand’s image must be understood (Balmer and Greyson 2003; Dowling 2001; Harris and de Chernatony 2001) and this could be achieved by exploring the current brand image in contrast to previous or past

brand image (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Marwick and Fill 1997). This raises a key question; can projective techniques be used to uncover the UK Conservative Party long-term brand reputation as well as current brand image? Therefore, this study will utilise qualitative projective techniques so as to build and replicate the work of Pich *et al.* (2015) and will not only reveal the current brand image of the political brand but also provide the opportunity to compare and contrast the findings. This in turn will provide insight into the long term brand reputation of David Cameron's Conservative Party. Revisiting and applying key concepts and tools, will not only address the calls and challenges of capturing the external orientation of brands but will also advance the discipline of political branding (O'Cass and Voola 2011; Scammell 2015; Speed *et al.* 2015).

3.1 Research Approach

This study adopted focus group discussions combined with qualitative projective techniques. Further, this study adopted the same focus group schedule (appendix 1) including the three projective technique categories (*association, construction and completion*) as Pich *et al.* (2015). Focus group discussions are an ideal method to capture opinion, feelings and beliefs (Bloor *et al.* 2001; Flick 2007; Malhotra and Birks 2003). However, projective technique activities can be incorporated into focus group discussions with little difficulty and have the ability to generate a deeper understanding of perceptions and highlight deep-seated associations than stand-alone group discussions (Barbour 2007; Boddy 2005; Levin-Rozalis 2006; Ramsey *et al.* 2006).

Focus group discussions were conducted prior the 2015 UK General Election [between 1st December 2014 and 6th May 2015]. Each discussion lasted between one hour and one hour and half. Participants were briefed on the objectives of the study and all ethical procedures were outlined before the beginning of the study. This included an introduction to the projective

technique booklet and participants were also encouraged to complete the demographic data such as age, gender, supporting political party-affiliation and party voting intention at the 2010 UK General Election. Finally supporting political party-affiliation and party voting intention was not explicitly discussed openly with the group during the discussion. The projective technique activities were positioned as *expressive exercises/activities* throughout the focus group discussion. This is outlined in the focus group schedule in appendix 1. For example, several themes grounded the discussion for the first fifteen minutes followed by the first ‘association projective technique’ activity. After the respondents had completed their first projective technique activity, discussed and annotated the expressions [15 minutes], the group returned to broad themes that would facilitate the discussion until the next projective technique activity.

Each booklet was used to capture the respondent’s expressions for the three categories of projective techniques (*association, construction and completion*). The booklets also aided the analytical process and helped ensure anonymity of participants and the recording of demographic data. Participants were encouraged to annotate drawings to provide greater explanation. Participants were also encouraged to discuss their illustrations-expressions during each projective technique activity. This also allowed participants the opportunity to reflect and confer on their illustrations and visualisations (Pich *et al.* 2015). In addition, echoic probing (also known as laddering) was adopted a process which is used to strengthen the interpretation process as it involves asking the respondent to elaborate on their projected expressions or annotations (Branthwaite 2002; Day 1989). This enables researchers to explore respondents projected expressions with participants in order to strengthen clarity and understanding from the perspective of the individual rather than rely on the interpretation of the researcher (Boddy 2005; Pich *et al.* 2015). Echoic probing must be carried out sensitively to allow respondents to

explain their own expressions in their own words rather than lead or interrogate respondents or misinterpret the projected associations (Branthwaite 2002; Day 1989; Pich *et al.* 2015).

Pich *et al.* (2015) justified the purposive sampling approach as their study had a specific purpose to explore the UK Conservative Party brand image from the perspective of external stakeholders (Alston and Bowles 2007; Zikmund 2003). Further, Pich *et al.* (2015) rationalised their sample of young citizens 18-24 years (external stakeholders) as this segment was considered an untapped market and was actively targeted by the UK Conservative Party following David Cameron's accession as party leader (Ashcroft 2005; Charles 2009; Dermody *et al.* 2010). Table 3 presents each coded participant, their political affiliation, gender and the date when the discussion was conducted.

Table 3: Outline of Sample of Participants – External Stakeholders 18-24 years [HERE]

This research adopted a two-stage process of thematic analysis, *coarse-grained* followed by *fine-grained* (Butler-Kisber 2010; Warren and Karner 2005). The coarse-grained stage included familiarisation of all findings by reviewing each booklet, pragmatically cataloguing the expressions [appendix 2, 3, 4] from each activity as this supported interpretation and simplified comparison, assessing emerging themes and reviewing the transcripts from the recorded focus group discussions. The fine-grained stage was more focused and involved reviewing formulated categories, analysis for hidden meaning, cross-checking and comparing illustrations across techniques and reviewing echoic probing and revisiting themes identified from the coarse-grained stage (Bird *et al.* 2009; Butler-Kisber 2010; Hofstede *et al.* 2007; Warren and Karner 2005). Finally, the themes were then compared and contrasted with the work of Pich *et al.* (2015) in an attempt to assess the application of qualitative projective techniques to uncover 'continuity of images' that form 'political' brand reputation (Marwick and Fill 1997).

4.1 Findings - Reviewing Qualitative Expressions

In order to uncover a brand's reputation; *current-immediate* brand image should initially be understood. Once this is achieved, this will be compared with an aggregate of *past* associations, perceptions and imagery, and if there are consistent representations, this should reveal a brand's reputation. Incoherent *current* and *past* associations are not recognised as long-term 'brand reputation' and instead reveal current 'brand image' (Argenti and Druckenmiller 2004; Lewellyn 2002; Mahon 2002; Marwick and Fill 1997; Perez 2015). In terms of the *current-immediate* political brand image, the expressions are organised under the three elements of a political brand namely; *political party*, *party policy* and *party leader* (Butler *et al.* 2011; Smith and French 2011).

4.1.1 UK Conservative Party

Participants were presented with the proposition "*what comes to mind when you think of the UK Conservative Party*" and instructed to write down '**associated words**' on the second page of the projective technique booklet. Participants were also encouraged to provide additional annotations and discuss expressions at their discretion. Figure 1 presents the words associated with the 'Party' element of the political brand prior the 2015 UK General Election and the common themes reproduced from Pich *et al.* (2015). Further, table 4 presents the associated words segmented into Conservative voters and floating voters.

Figure 1: Common words identified in association with the UK Conservative Party 2015 and 2010 [HERE]

Table 4: Words associated with the UK Conservative Party from floating voters and Conservative supporters [HERE]

The majority of participants including Conservative and floating voters revealed several common themes including *David Cameron*, *Margaret Thatcher*, *Party of the Rich*, *Middle-Upper-class people* and a *Strong Economy*. Further, these ‘**top-of-mind words**’ were occasionally positively and negatively presented with additional comments or discussed [participant-led] at the end of the projective activity. This additional insight revealed personal opinion that lead to deeper perceptions and raised a number of questions. The word associations also revealed that a number of participants particularly floating voters revealed a degree of ‘*reluctant support*’ for the Conservative Party. For example, one floating voter argued “*they are concentrating what’s best for the UK and moving forward and being economically strong...in the long run then this should help people*” (P1FG1). Similarly a floating voter highlighted the “*Tories say we’re going to look after the economy, we’re going to do what’s best for the country*” (P6FG3). Whereas a Conservative supporting participant revealed “*they don’t make popular decisions but they’ve managed to pull us out of recession. Admittedly they’ll privatise things but I think they will run a harder line*” (P2FG3). Therefore, the Party continued to be linked to Conservative leaders [Thatcher and Cameron], *Party of the Rich*, and *Middle-Upper-class* associations yet appeared to have acquired associations representing a *Strong Economy*.

Affluence and Wealth

Following on from the ‘**word association**’ projective technique, participants were set ‘**construction**’ activities to uncover the current imagery and perceptions ascribed to the UK Conservative Party (Pich *et al.* 2015). More specifically, participants were instructed to illustrate the ‘Party’ if it were a *person, food, drink, holiday destination* and *sport*. Participants were instructed to express each illustration on a different page within the booklet, probed to record annotations for additional insight-clarity and encouraged to discuss their illustrations aloud and/ discuss with other participants during the activities if they wished. A full breakdown

of the catalogued illustrations can be seen in appendix 2 and an example of the ‘**cataloguing process**’ including some of the findings from the construction expression can be seen in table 5 and illustrations can be seen in figure 2.

Several themes were revealed and discussed across focus groups and by participants of all political persuasion including Conservative and floating voters such as *affluence, wealth* and sub-themes such as *heritage, sophistication, and traditionally British*. The majority of participants including Conservative supporters and floating voters revealed the Party as *male, middle-aged, middle-upper-class, business oriented, professional in nature and appearance and revealed affluent and wealthy expressions*. However, the majority of revelations were not necessarily negative and when probed could not elaborate ‘why’ the Party was perceived as *male, middle-aged, middle-upper-class, business oriented, professional in nature* etc. This additional probing, discussion and annotations provided additional depth and detail to the illustrations and attempted to provide some justification for the expressions.

Table 5: Expressions and annotations expressed by participants if the ‘Party’ were a ‘Person’

[HERE]

Figure 2: Expressions of the UK Conservative Party if it were a person by a floating voter

[left] and Conservative voter [right] [HERE]

This theme of *affluence* and *wealth* were also revealed when participants were instructed to express the ‘Party’ if it were food. For example twelve types of food were depicted including premium-expensive food, caviar, posh-cheese-board, pheasant, smoked salmon, rack of lamb, wagu-massaged steak, lobster, duck, snails, mussels, Eton-Mess, a traditional three course meal and “*fine dining*” (P6FG1) which a Conservative supporter crafted “*caviar and sushi – very high class, luxury food. That doesn’t fill you up so seems pointless*” (P5FG1). This can be seen in figure 3. Similarly, a floating voter illustrated “*posh country pub food*” because the Party

was considered “*quite expensive, country like, quite high quality but too expensive for most people, unapproachable*” (P2FG4). Therefore, the themes of affluence and wealth were supported by sub-themes of traditional, heritage, style over substance, disconnect and rural imagery, which provided additional detail and depth into the current brand image.

Figure 3: Expressions of the UK Conservative Party if it were food by floating and Conservative voters. [HERE]

Similarly, *affluence* and *wealth* imagery was uncovered when participants were instructed to illustrate the ‘Party’ if it were drink. The most frequent association was red wine, followed by Champagne, whiskey, Grey Goose vodka, gin and tonic and a martini. Many participants including Conservative supporters and floating voters enhanced their expressions with annotations to reveal “*expensive*” (P2FG1), “*sophisticated*” (P5FG1), “*civilised*” (P6FG1), “*upper-class*” (P2FG2), “*pretentious*” (P4FG2), “*posh to an extent*” (P1FG4) attitudes. For example, a floating voter explained they had illustrated whiskey because they could imagine a “*fire place, in the background with leather chairs and horse riding attire*” and this linked to the Party’s imagery as an expensive, rural, wealthy and traditional lifestyle (P6FG4). Similarly, a Conservative supporter visualised the Party as ‘red wine’ the beverage was “*civilised, expensive, and goes with fine dining*” yet also associated ‘whiskey’ as it was a drink consumed by “*high professionals*” at the end of a long day in the office (P6FG1). Examples of three annotated illustrations can be seen in figure 4.

Figure 4: Expressions of the UK Conservative Party if it were drink [HERE]

The *affluence* and *wealth* theme was consistent across the final two construction activities where participants were instructed to illustrate the ‘Party’ if it were ‘sport’ and ‘holiday destination’. Over ten different sports were illustrated including horse riding, football, croquet, rugby, cricket, fox hunting, golf, polo, clay pigeon shooting, badminton, rowing and athletics.

For example, a Labour voting supporter associated the Party with ‘polo’ as it was a “*very posh sport, very British*” (P2FG1), whereas a floating voter revealed ‘shooting’ as they pictured a “*tweed jacket, country man going shooting due to more upper class associations*” (P2FG4). In addition, a floating voter argued the Party was ‘European football’ because it was full of “*diving, cheating, dirty tactics, anything to win, total disregard for opponents, no sportsmanship and no respect*” (P3FG1). Again, the discussions and annotations strengthened the sub-themes of tradition, patriotism, social class, rural yet distrustful imagery.

Ten destinations were revealed including Italy, Dubai, Las Vegas, Hamptons USA, Cornwall, France, Marbella, Barbados and Monaco and also types of holidays were highlighted including safari, skiing, private and beach/island. For example, a floating voter associated the Party with ‘Monaco’ because it was “*rich and exclusive*” (P4FG2). Similarly, another floating voter revealed ‘Marbella’ as the Party does not want “*to come across as too posh so people can relate to them*” suggesting the Conservatives were conscious of their brand image and aimed to develop a more approachable and relatable position (P1FG3). However, a Green supporting participant associated a ‘safari holiday’ because it has a “*kind of holiday for a rich person, don’t have to come contact with any culture apart from the tour guide and the rest of the in expensive villa or killing things*” (P7FG1). Subsequently, the *affluence* and *wealth* theme along with several sub-themes were consistent across projective technique activities and were reinforced by the annotations and discussion put forward by participants, which offered additional insight into the current political brand image.

Arrogance

The expressions also highlighted some overly negative sub-themes across the different categories evident in figure 5. For example, a floating voter crafted a smiling man with a bag of money annotated with “*narrow minded*” standing over group of smaller people calling out

“please sir can I have some more” (P4FG2). Similarly, a Green Party supporter illustrated a big top-hated man shouting “I’m bigger than you and better than you” accompanied with the annotation “crushing people not giving them a chance in life because they weren’t as privileged as them” (P7FG1).

Figure 5: Expressions of the UK Conservative Party if it were a person [HERE]

Subsequently, the participants in this study including Conservative and floating voters associated the UK Conservative ‘Party’ brand image with affluent and wealthy ‘party of the rich’ imagery, traditional and stereotypical expressions such as David Cameron, Margaret Thatcher, rural communities, arrogant in nature and business-money focused. However, participants also linked the 2015 political brand image to some newer stronger economic perceptions and illustrations linked to aspiration and a stronger economy.

4.1.2 Party Policy

In order to uncover understanding and perceptions on Conservative policy, ‘**completion techniques**’ and ‘**construction techniques**’ were used. Further, the findings were catalogued according to the respective technique along with political affiliations and gender outlined in appendix 2 and appendix 3. The findings could be broadly categorised into positive, negative and questionable attitudes in regards to expectations of Conservative ‘policy’. The key themes from this study compared to that identified by Pich *et al.* (2015) and can be seen in table 6.

Table 6: Key themes relating to Conservative ‘Policy’ 2015 and 2010 Pich *et al.* (2015)

[HERE]

More participants including Conservative and floating voters had some understanding of what to expect from a Conservative victory in 2015 compared with uncertainties and ‘second-

guessing' outlined in (Pich *et al.* 2015). Examples of the catalogued expressions segmented into Conservative and floating voters can be seen in table 7.

Table 7: Catalogued completion projected expressions segmented into floating voters and Conservative supporters [HERE]

Positive Expectations – Strong Economy

Participants were presented with two pictures of two stick figures with speech and thought bubbles - '**completion technique**'. One picture was headed with the statement '*imagine the UK Conservative Party have just won the 2015 UK General Election*' and the second picture was headed with '*imagine the UK Labour Party have just won the 2015 UK General Election*'. The figure with the speech/thought bubble would represent the participant and the second figure would be a friend or family member. A full catalogued breakdown of the illustrations from the completion technique can be found in appendix 4.

The majority of participants including floating voters and often Green supporters revealed positive opinions based on a Conservative victory. For example, figure 6 highlights a floating voter that revealed "*I am happy with the result, hopefully the economy will continue to grow and wealth improves*" and thought "*It's going to be a tough 5 years. I hope I don't have to rely on benefits and the public sector too much. I hope we don't leave the EU*" (P1FG3). Similarly, a Green Party supporter argued "*best leader especially on the international stage...supports the rich*" (P4FG3) and another floating voter annotated "*Not as much in agreement with some policies e.g. cuts/EU...like his [Cameron's] strength as leader, has become more likeable*" (P2FG4).

Figure 6: Projected expression from a floating voter after hearing the UK Conservative Party have won the 2015 UK General Election [HERE]

Table 8: Catalogued construction projected expressions segmented into floating voters and Conservative supporters [HERE]

Many participants therefore, expected Conservative Party policy to represent a positive impact on the long-term economic prospects of the country compared with the UK Labour Party. This is evident in figure 8. Under a Conservative administration a floating voter believed the UK would equate to “*more employment, lower petrol and no to EU*” in contrast to a Labour governed UK that would equate to “*more unemployment, high tax, more borrowing, possible recession, higher benefits bill and bullied in Europe and NATO and G8*” (P1FG3).

Figure 7: Projected expressions of the UK under a Conservative Government and a Labour Government

Negative Expectations

The ‘**construction**’ projective technique also highlighted that Conservative Party policy was expected to have an impact on rising university tuition fees, increase in inequality and wealth divide, relocation of some industries abroad, concerns over privatisation and “*no more National Health Service*” (P7FG1). Conservative Party policy was expected to provide more unemployment especially skilled professions, a strong standing in the world, fewer benefits, increase in house buying “*Help to Buy*” (P4FG4) with policy tailored to support the ‘rich’ middle-upper classes rather than the ‘poor’ working-classes. This was in contrast to the expectations of Labour Party policy. Labour Party policy would equate to “*professionals not happy about the mansion tax, confusion, unhappy with decisions*” (P7FG1), offered the prospect of more unskilled employment, weak international relationships, and an increase in Welfare dependency, and “*education and NHS will improve*” (P5FG3).

Questionable Expectations

Several participant's highlighted a Conservative victory would raise questions about the future. For example, a Conservative supporter highlighted "*will there be any changes that affect me*" (P3FG4) and "*if Scotland separates from the UK – not a good thing – too many issues surrounding it. Do we need passports? If we went to uni there would we be international students*" (P5FG1). In contrast figure 8 demonstrates more questions were raised regarding a Labour victory and what this would mean to voters. Questions such as "*how will this affect me...what does this mean will change*" (P3FG2), and "*do you know much about politics...is this a good thing or a bad thing they won*" (P3FG1).

Figure 8: Projected expression from floating voters after hearing the UK Labour Party have won the 2015 UK General Election

4.1.3 Party Leader – David Cameron

In order to generate insight into perceptions, associations and imagery linked to David Cameron; the UK Conservative Party leader, a '**word association**' projective technique was used. Participants were instructed to write down 'strengths' and (or) 'weaknesses' associated with David Cameron in the projective technique booklets. Participants were free to write as many or as few words in relation to each category. Participants were also allowed to provide additional annotations at their discretion. Thus 'strengths' and 'weaknesses' also served as themes to code the expressions. Following the exercise, a short discussion on the positive and negative characteristics of David Cameron was explored. Figure 9 presents the strengths and weaknesses associated with the 'leader' element of the political brand prior the 2015 UK General Election. Figure 10 presents the strengths and weaknesses of David Cameron prior the 2010 UK General Election reproduced from Pich *et al.* (2015).

Figure 9: Word associations linked to Party leader; David Cameron in 2015 [HERE]

Figure 10: Word associations linked to Party leader; David Cameron in 2010 [HERE]

Although many participants highlighted at the beginning of the focus group that they knew very little about David Cameron, the majority of participants revealed several themes linked to the Party leader such as *Prime-Ministerial*, *strong leader* yet linked *money-motivated*, *posh-wealth* and often *sleazy*, *salesman-like* and *sly*. The positive and negative associations segmented into floating and Conservative supporters (illustrated in table 9).

Table 9: Positive and negative expressions related to ‘leader’ David Cameron 2015 [HERE]

Prime-Ministerial

The majority of participants of all political affiliation revealed more positive perceptions associated with David Cameron compared with negative perceptions. For example participants including floating voters and Green Party supporters believed David Cameron “*comes across as a strong leader*” (P2FG2), “*a good politician*” (P6FG3), “*approachable*” (P4FG1), “*prepared to listen*” (P5FG1) and has “*a lot of authority about him*” (P4FG2). Further, David Cameron was considered charismatic, passionate compared with political rivals, Prime Ministerial, intelligent and also friendly. For example, David Cameron was believed to be “*well educated and that’s prepared him well to be Prime Minister of the country, quite intelligent rather than be pretty thick*” (P2FG3).

Positive ‘Negatives’

Despite that David Cameron was seen as “*well educated*” (P3FG1) although positive association was also considered a weakness that linked to associations such as privilege, wealth and that “*Etonian Oxbridge clique going on that Bullingdon Club*” (P1FG3). Further, participants of all political affiliation including some Conservative voters associated David

Cameron as “*untruthful*” (P4FG3), “*smarmy*” (P1FG2), “*sly*” (P4FG1; P4FG4) and “*a crowd pleaser*” (P4FG1). Nevertheless, many of the negative associations were considered positive characteristics of a well trained professional politician. For example, David Cameron was seen as “*a good politician... I think he is slimy, liar, snake and I think that makes you a good politician and I think he will get things done for us as a country*” (P6FG3).

Proactive

David Cameron was seen as proactive in terms of governing and leading the country at a national and international setting. For example, a Labour supporting participant highlighted “*he seems quite proactive as you see a lot more about him...like you will see him meet like Obama for example so he is actually going somewhere*” (P5FG2). This was supported by a floating voter that argued “*yeah you’re right, you see him on the news visiting everywhere so very proactive*” (P3FG2). This idea that David Cameron was seen as a strong leader and international statesman was in contrast to the perceptions and associations linked to political rivals particularly Ed Miliband; leader of the UK Labour Party. For example “*even if you’re not a fan of his [Cameron’s] political views you have to accept that he is much more charismatic...at the end of the day when he is sitting in a room with Vladimir Putin opposite him and he is trying to negotiate something Ed Miliband would get laughed out the room*” (P2FG3).

Strategic – Not Ed Miliband

Several participants, mainly floating voters revealed that they would vote for David Cameron to be ‘strategic’ at the General Election due to their dislike of Ed Miliband. Further, many participants of all political affiliations including floating voters and Labour supporters revealed that David Cameron was more appealing, a stronger leader, and more charismatic than Ed Miliband. For example, Ed Miliband was considered “*so annoying...I don’t trust him...I find*

him unprofessional” (P6FG1). Similarly, “*he is doing Labour no help at the moment...Ed Miliband couldn’t sell you a pencil*” (P2FG1). “*I remember that bit about the Mansion Tax when Myleen Klass ripped into him live on TV and he couldn’t defend himself and he got back into a corner and he changed the subject*” (P3FG1). Ed Miliband was seen as “*soft in comparison with David Cameron. He’s [David] got a lot more authority about him. Whenever I have seen any of his [Ed’s] talks there is no real enthusiasm... a moist wet wipe*” (P4FG2). Therefore participants highlighted a distinct contrast between the two Party leaders with David Cameron considered most favourable and the “*best candidate by far in the race*” (P6FG3) compared with a weak, unprofessional Ed Miliband.

5.1 Discussion

This study demonstrates the applicability of qualitative projective techniques in exploration of the external current image *and* long-term reputation of the UK Conservative Party corporate brand and their potential to capture rich insights and tacit knowledge (Boddy 2005; Levin-Rozalis 2006; Porr *et al.* 2011). For example, the previous section outlined insights into the *current-immediate* UK Conservative brand image [2015] subdivided into party, leader and policy. If this is compared with *past* images of the UK Conservative brand captured in 2010 (Pich *et al.* 2015) to explore consistencies and contradictions, the existing literature suggests this would reveal some understanding into the *political brand reputation*. For example, table 10 outlines a collection of represented images from 2010 and 2015.

Table 9: An Aggregate of Images Associated with the UK Conservative Brand 2010-2015
reproduced in part from Pich *et al.* (2015) [HERE]

Table 10 suggests the UK Conservative *brand reputation* developed from a set of multiple images remains associated with traditional stereotypical representations such as ‘party of the rich and privileged, middle-upper class, business, rural and links to heritage and prominent

party leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and David Cameron'. Further, the UK Conservative *brand reputation* continues to include reflections of 'strong economic competence and responsibility' that have developed from associations of 'cutting the deficit and balancing the books'. The findings also suggest David Cameron continues to be viewed as a controversial leader, and a competent 'electable-Prime Ministerial' compared with political rivals and more appealing to non-Conservative voters than the 'party' as a whole. This suggests David Cameron continues to be seen as a unique element of the UK Conservative *brand reputation*.

Nevertheless, the UK Conservative *brand reputation* continues to be associated with uncertainty and questionability in terms of voter expectations and policy however this uncertainty and questionability does not seem as prominent compared with 2010. This suggests the UK Conservative brand has made some progress in developing its long-term *reputation* and presents opportunities to strategically manage and develop the brand for future elections (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Marwick and Fill 1997). In contrast, table 9 also outlines incoherent *current* and *past* imagery such as policy initiatives 'the Big Society', 'Help to Buy' the 2010 campaign slogan 'Change', and broad themes such as 'reluctant support' and 'positive negatives'. This 'reluctant support' for the UK Conservative Party and problematic nature of rivals particularly Ed Miliband's Labour Party seems to alleviate the negative imagery, traditional associations and remaining questions connected to the UK Conservative brand. However, these associations are not recognised as part of the UK Conservative long-term 'brand reputation' and instead reveals current-past 'brand image' (Argenti and Druckenmiller 2004; Lewellyn 2002; Mahon 2002; Marwick and Fill 1997; Perez 2015). Future research would have to be conducted to collect additional images and representations to ascertain whether these inconsistent associations become consistent visualisations over-time and part of the UK Conservative brand reputation.

Therefore, this study concurs that brand image and brand reputation are allied yet distinct. *Brand image* can be conceptualised as current-immediate associations, perceptions and imagery connected with a brand from the perspective of external stakeholders. *Brand reputation* on the other hand, can be defined as a collective representation or aggregate of images associated with a brand over-time (Argenti and Druckenmiller 2004; Fetscherin and Usunier 2012; Gotsi and Wilson 2001; Gutman and Miaoulis 2003; Lewellyn 2002; Mahon 2002; Perez 2015; Veloutsou and Moutinho 2009).

Further, this study supports the idea that in order to uncover a brand's reputation *both current and past* brand images must be captured, which would reveal consistencies and contradictions with the brand and highlight potential opportunities to make strategic management adjustments to the brand if required (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Balmer and Greyson 2003; Dowling 2001; Harris and de Chernatony 2001; Marwick and Fill 1997). Consistent representations should reveal a brand's reputation whereas incoherent *current* and *past* associations are not recognised as long-term 'brand reputation' and instead reveal current 'brand image' (Argenti and Druckenmiller 2004; Lewellyn 2002; Mahon 2002; Marwick and Fill 1997; Perez 2015).

Subsequently, this study addresses the confusion and complexity surrounding existing brand image and brand reputation research (Abratt and Kleyn 2012; Davies and Mian 2010) and puts forward a simple process of how to capture and understand brand reputation. Despite the revealing qualities of qualitative projective techniques in exploration of political brand image *and* political brand reputation, several limitations of this study must be recognised. Firstly, we do not profess that qualitative projective techniques can be used to 'track' conclusive changes or measure a brand's image-reputation. Nor can the tools be used to produce generalizable propositions as this is not the nature of exploratory research (Barbour 2007; Ramsey *et al.* 2006). The unique elicitation capabilities of qualitative projective techniques provide opportunities to capture rich insight into the current and past perceptions, attitudes and feelings

associated with a brand (Boddy 2005; Porr *et al.* 2011). If future researchers endeavour measuring changes to image-reputation appropriate data collection methods-tools would have to be developed and the same participants would have to be targeted to ‘track’ conclusive changes (Gummeson 2005). Secondly, due to time constraints there were fewer participants in this study [25 to 46] compared with Pich *et al.* (2015). However, the same methodological approach [qualitative-interpretive] was adopted. Further, this study provided additional detail into the analytical and interpretive process in the ‘research approach’ compared with Pich *et al.* (2015) and this strengthens the methodological approach.

6.1 Conclusion

This research demonstrates that qualitative projective techniques are essential applications to capture, deconstruct and understand current image *and* long-term reputation of political brands. This strengthens the proposition that deep tacit insight may remain hidden if traditional data collection methods are used in isolation without the implementation of qualitative projective techniques (Boddy 2005; Hutcheon 2010; Porr *et al.* 2011). Further, this study answers the explicit calls for more insights and understanding in this ‘increasingly important’ area of brand reputation (Argenti and Druckenmiller 2004; Barnett *et al.* 2006; Perez 2015; Veloutsou and Moutinho 2009). This paper outlines a ‘duality’ to the UK Conservative Party brand reputation. On the one hand, the political brand has strengthened the reputation for economic responsibility and on the other hand, the political brand reputation remains wedded to undesirable connotations. This duality with the UK Conservative Party brand reputation may prove problematic for the political brand as it may have an impact on its clarity, credibility and consistency and electoral success (Gurau and Ayadi 2011; Pich *et al.* 2015; Smith and French 2009).

The findings have implications not only for political parties but also for politicians, candidates and other political entities. Organisations and brands including those beyond the political context will be able to use this paper as a guide on how to capture external current-immediate associations, perceptions and imagery linked to a brand but also how to understand an aggregate of reflections associated with a brand over-time. This in turn will generate a deeper understanding of brands and offers organisations the opportunity to address discrepancies and utilise positive associations as a competitive advantage. This research also makes a theoretical contribution to the body of knowledge as key distinctions have been identified between the concept of brand image and brand reputation. Future research should build on this study and assess the usefulness and operationalisation of qualitative projective techniques in new settings and contexts within and beyond the confines of brand image and brand reputation.

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