

KRAKOW UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS

Field of Science: Social Science

Scientific Field: Management and Quality Sciences

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**THE IMPACT OF BRAND MANAGEMENT IN POLITICS
ON CANDIDATES' COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE
IN THE U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS**

Doctoral Dissertation

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Cracow, 2024

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INCTRODUCTION

There is a consensus among management scholars on the role brands play in contemporary management: Brands are viewed as important strategic assets that significantly contribute to developing a competitive advantage. Although most management scholars agree on the critical role brands perform for today's organizations – both for-profit and nonprofit - there is still much confusion as to what exactly constitutes a brand. What is a brand? What is strategic brand management? What is brand orientation? Even though only 40 years have passed since the publication of important – and seminal – academic texts on the strategic importance of the brand, branding has quickly attained prominent disciplinary status (Allen et al., 2008, p. 781). As Chris T. Allen, Susan Fournier, and Felicia Miller claim, “As recognition of the strategic value of branding has increased, the scope of application of branding insights has expanded in kind. Branding has extended beyond consumer goods and services to include business-to-business domain, countries, and people. Inside the firm, Chief Branding Officers have emerged, granting marketing a coveted boardroom voice. With intangible assets now accounting, on average, for 75% of the value that investors place in firms, we have entered what may be called the Golden Age of Brands” (Allen et al., 2008, p. 781).

There is no doubt that branding, as a management phenomenon, “has come to characterize various facets of our life, and politics is no exception. It has reshaped the political equations and has made its presence felt during elections” (Kumar & Dhamija, 2017, p. 19). According to numerous brand scholars, “brands often provide the primary points of differentiation between competitive offerings, and as such they can be critical to the success of companies. Hence, the management of brands must be approached strategically” (Wood, 2000, p. 662). According to Susan Fournier, who enjoys undisputed authority in the field of strategic brand management and consumer psychology, “a brand is first and foremost a repository of meanings for consumers to use in living their own lives...” (Allen et al., 2008, p. 782). A brand, as Arvind Sahay posits, in its broadest sense “encapsulates the sum total the entire customer experience: everything from the logo, the website, the product or service use experience to the social media experiences, the way the firm answers the phone, the after-sales service, the word-of-mouth impressions and the way customers experience [brand's] employees – all of this as it exists in the mind of the

customer. In short, the brand is the way customer perceives the product and/or the firm. It is the lived experience of the customer. It is critical to be aware of the customers' brand experience and have a plan to create the brand experience that the firm wants to present. After all, a good brand doesn't just happen. It is a carefully considered strategic plan, well implemented over time" (Sahay, 2022, p. 4). A well-articulated fact emerges from these various aforementioned brand definitions: brands are important because consumers forge emotional relationships with them. This emotional relationship between customers and brands is called 'brand equity' in the brand management literature. Brand equity has profound implications for strategic brand management. Although several scholars proposed numerous definitions of brand equity, an elegant classification of the different meanings of brand equity can be offered:

1. Brand equity refers to the total value of a brand as an intangible asset that adds value beyond the product or service. This value is derived from the degree of brand recognition a company/brand owner has, as well as how positively or negatively customers view the brand ("What is brand equity", n.d.).
2. Brand equity is "a measure of the strength of consumers' attachment to a brand" (Wood, 2000, p. 662).
3. Brand equity refers to "a description of the associations and beliefs the consumer has about the brand" (Wood, 2000, p. 662).

The first category is traditionally studied under the rubric of brand valuation or brand value and is mostly used by financial valuers and accountants. The second category is an important one due to the fact that the consumers' level of attachment to a brand – often called brand strength – determines the overall brand loyalty. The third category refers to the nature of the mental associations – positive, neutral, and negative – that constitute the brand image or the so-called brand description. As Lisa Wood asserts, "Brand value may be thought to be distinct as it refers to an actual, or notional business transaction, while the other two focus on the consumer. There is an assumed relationship between the interpretations of brand equity. This relationship implies the casual chain [...] brand description – brand strength – brand value" (Wood, 2000, p. 663).

As was already mentioned, branding has entered the political marketplace and fundamentally reshaped the ways political actors communicate with their constituents. In

today's fast-paced and highly branded world, voters can be conceptualized as consumers. Looking from this perspective – and following the argument proposed by Amit Kumar and Somesh Dhamija - it can be argued that “Any product which has got the ability to satisfy the wants and demands of the consumer could be labeled as a brand as long as it fulfills on the brand promise. It is not as if only a physical product qualifies as a brand. A service, a person, a place, and organization, an idea, a cause, an event, anything and everything can be branded as long as consumers identify with them” (Kumar & Dhamija, 2017, p. 20). As such, political actors – both political parties and politicians – can use the principles of strategic brand management to effectively seek to differentiate themselves from their competitors and – in the process – forge emotional relationships with their constituents. According to Christopher Pich and Dianne Dean – two scholars considered to be the preeminent experts on political branding – “The notion of a political brand and the rhetoric of branding have been widely adopted by many political parties as they seek to differentiate themselves, and this has led to an emerging interest in the idea of the political brand” (Pich & Dean, 2015, p. 1353).

A growing number of scholars – both in management and political sciences – are subscribing to the idea that various market entities, ideas, countries, ideologies, religions, and individuals can be branded using the principles of strategic brand management (Torres-Spelliscy, 2019, p. 11). Gareth Smith and Alan French – two political science scholars who are outspoken proponents of the use of the rules of strategic brand management in the political environment – claim that “Branding is increasingly used in non-traditional, social markets such as politics. For example, branding has been considered in such ‘unlikely’ organizations as the London Metropolitan Police, the Roman Catholic Church, and universities. In fact, ‘branding principles have been applied in virtually every setting where consumer choice of some kind is involved, e.g., with physical goods, services, retail stores, *people, organizations, places or ideas*’. It is axiomatic that political parties are organizations where politicians (*people*) seek to exchange *ideas* and promises for electoral support. Unsurprisingly, therefore, there has been a steady stream of papers that have accepted political parties and or politicians as brands. [...] We ...argue that political parties are brands because they act as brands to consumers. A brand is defined as ‘A name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them which is intended to identify the goods

or services of one seller or a group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors' (AMA, 1960). Political parties clearly satisfy this definition. The electorate have a high level of recall of their names (e.g. Republican, Democrat, New Labour, Conservative) and (to a lesser extent) their symbols (the elephant, donkey, red rose and tree respectively). Critically though, voters attach meaning to these party names and symbols over time and this allows them to differentiate and vote for one party over another at an election" (Smith & French, 2009, pp. 2010-2011).

Elaborating on the concept of political branding, Marcus Phipps, Jan Brace-Govan, and Colin Jevons assert that "The branding concept has expanded considerably from the fast moving consumer goods industries in which it was first used. Branding is relevant to a broad range of entities in consumer culture including banks, colleges, pop stars, entertaining identities, countries, and even an organization's employees. If a marketer can convince consumers that "all the product offerings in a category are not the same and that meaningful difference exist" then products in that category can be branded [...]. The brand image of individual politicians is influenced by the corporate brand of the political party and the political climate, but as people they still have an element of control over their personal brand image through how they service their electorate. [...] However, it has been shown that brands are ever-changing social entities that can take on a life of their own, and a significant amount of their brand identity and equity is customer-based. At one extreme, consumers can reject a brand's communicated image and independently create their own as shown, for example, in the anti-Nike, anti-sweatshop culture that has developed in response to the Nike corporate brand. It is suggested that through manipulation, consumers can mold a brand so that it fits their own personal identity, or create their own brand meaning, as distinct from the owner's brand meaning" (Phipps et al., 2010, p. 497).

It can be argued then that political brands play an important role in the political marketplace. Traditionally, brands are confused with images. There is, however, a fundamental difference between a brand and an image. According to Alex Marland, "The word brand is now commonly used in political discourse and popular vernacular. In political science, it tends to be used as a surrogate for party labels, packaging, personalities and valance issues in a manner that does not suggest academic familiarity with the brand construct. A brand is a fuller concept than image. An image is the evoked impression for

an entity formed from the recall of all communication impressions; a brand is an evoked image that resonates on an emotional level, and which stimulates customer loyalty” (Marland, 2013).

There is no doubt that the political product is a complex, intangible, and multidimensional entity. However, it can be posited – following the arguments of numerous management scholars – that the political product “embodies a certain level of promise about the future, where the satisfactions derived are not immediate but long-term, vague and uncertain” (Phipps et al., 2010, p. 498). A strong brand offers a well-articulated and well-understood promise to consumers. A brand promise is firmly grounded in the brand’s values, convictions, beliefs, and its intended future. A brand promise sells an emotional connection. A brand promise is an intangible value, which is probably why it is so difficult to develop.

Brands have transcended their initial market responsibilities and functions – e.g., identification function – to become complex neuro-psycho-socio-cultural phenomena. Brands have become cultural symbols representing the values, concepts, lifestyles, and moral norms of certain cultural groups (Smith & Speed, 2011, p. 1309).

Despite the fact that political branding has been gaining traction among management and political science scholars, there seems to be a pressing need for comprehensive and interdisciplinary case studies depicting the development, positioning, and management of political brands. The author of this dissertation has embarked on a research project aimed at filling the gap in the political branding literature. By studying the development of the political brands of presidential candidates the author wishes to make a scientific contribution to the existing body of political branding theory and practice.

This research aims at filling the cognitive gap of the dynamic interplay between political brand dimensions and voters’ perceptions of the candidate, drawing heavily on the concepts which emerge from the discipline of management. Therefore, this research project contributes to science by attempting to prove that well managed select components of the political brand promote political candidates’ advantage in the elections. Objectives of this dissertation are:

1. Proving that the application of brand management principles and strategies in the U.S. electoral politics increases the incidence of success in presidential elections.

2. Proving that existence of voting-consumption analogy justifies the application of brand strategies in the U.S. electoral politics.

The aforementioned objectives are going to be attained by responding to the following research questions:

1. Does Brand Equity in politics lead to electoral competitive advantage?
2. Does Strategic Branding in politics facilitate a politician's long term career growth?
3. What are the success factors in Political Branding?
4. Can the conceptualization of voters as consumers (voting-consumption analogy) facilitate the use of Strategic Brand Management principles in politics?

In order to address the above research questions the author of this dissertation posed the following research hypotheses:

1. The use of the Strategic Brand Management principles is necessary for the U.S. presidential candidate to successfully appeal to voters.
2. It is necessary for the U.S. presidential candidate to develop Brand Identity, Brand Authenticity, Brand Logo, and Brand Positioning in order to attract voters' support.
3. Brand Identity, Brand Authenticity, Brand Logo, and Brand Positioning have impact upon voters-consumers' perceptions of the US presidential candidate.
4. A number of select essential components of the Political Brand Strategy have the greatest impact upon voters-consumers' brand perceptions:
 - a. Brand naming strategy significantly affects voters-consumers' brand perceptions.
 - b. Logo considerably affects voters-consumers' brand perceptions.
 - c. Appearance (Visual Brand Identity System) has an important impact upon voters-consumers' brand perceptions.
 - d. Brand Authenticity is an important driver of brand loyalty.
 - e. Brand Positioning facilitates voters-consumers' positive brand perceptions.
5. The conceptualization of voters as consumers justifies the application of Strategic Brand Management principles in politics.

Given the nature of the research inquiry of this dissertation, namely, the identification and analysis of the political brand strategy employed by select presidential candidates during the presidential elections in the USA, the author's personal philosophical position (research paradigm) that defines the entire direction of the research undertaken is

closer to the qualitative methodological paradigm. However, considering the importance of triangulation, the author has decided to embrace the mixed methods research paradigm. As Jennifer Byrne and Aine M. Humble argue: “Mixed methods social inquirers choose from a full repertoire of methodological options at any number of multiple points in an inquiry process – purpose, overall design, methods, sampling, data recording, analysis, and interpretation. A truly mixed methodology incorporates multiple approaches in all stages of the study; however, the researcher may choose certain points of contact as well” (Byrne & Humble, 200).

The primary research method employed in this dissertation is a case study. Other – supplementary – research techniques employed in this dissertation include a quantitative survey, observational method, comprehensive literature review, and document analysis.

Given the nature of the research objectives and questions, the author of this dissertation chose the social constructivist approach as the more appropriate for this dissertation. As described in the dissertation objectives, the study attempts to explore the development and management of the political brands within the context of the presidential elections in the U.S. The research required the author to be part of the social context within which the presidential candidates would build their political brands. Hence, this deemed the positivistic approach ineffective and irrelevant.

The author of this dissertation examines several case studies and one specific bounded case – the development of the political brand during the 2020 presidential elections in the U.S. - and provides an in-depth analysis of the phenomena. This case study is extensive and draws on multiple methods of data collection and involves multiple data sources. The ideas in this dissertation derive from current research by leaders from multiple disciplines. Despite its seemingly unrelated origins, this knowledge is of paramount importance for understanding and managing political brands.

The author – as a researcher – has located this dissertation predominantly within the social constructivist paradigm. The author is acutely aware of the fact that there are multiple realities through which one can make sense of the world, and he constructs his reality from his unique experiences, and his standpoint on his reality is valid. This worldview is deeply embedded in the qualitative approach that the author has decided to undertake. For the author, “the experience of the inquiry is a process of interpretation and

of making sense of the phenomenon under study” (Yin, 2002, p. 12). Nevertheless, the author also recognizes the importance of quantitative, positivist philosophy, and how it can significantly enrich this research project, and, thus, contribute to triangulation.

While coming to irrefutable, empirically verifiable conclusions about implications is beyond the scope of this research, implications questions nonetheless inspire and motivate this research. Thus, a critical component of this dissertation is thinking through existing literature on strategic brand management, advertising and media studies, competitive advantage, consumer and voter psychology, political science, cognitive neuroscience, and consumer anthropology and considering how electoral process – and voters’ perceptions in particular – is affected by strategic brand management principles and techniques born of the commercial realm.

The methodology employed in the production of this dissertation includes empirical, interpretive and positivist (quantitative and qualitative) approaches. In addition to (1) a broad and deep comprehensive literature review (CLR) of strategic brand management, advertising and media studies, competitive advantage, consumer and voter psychology, political science, cognitive neuroscience, and consumer anthropology literatures, the following research methods are employed in the dissertation: (2) a quantitative survey conducted among 600 citizens of the United States who voted in the 2020 presidential election, (3) an observational method (4) a document analysis, the core of this research project involves (5) case study’s analysis. Achieving deep understanding in case study research requires the use of several research techniques across multiple time periods. Triangulation is often achieved through direct observation by the researcher within the environment of the case, and analysis of written documents and other sources of information occurring within the case environment (Woodside, 2017, p. 7).

The author of this dissertation has employed a quantitative research method – survey research – to collect relevant data from the set of 600 citizens of the United States who voted in the 2020 presidential election. For the purpose of this research study, the author selected the mall intercept method (MIM) to administer a standardized questionnaire to respondents. The mall intercept method (MIM) is said to bolster participation. Also, the mall intercept method (MIM) has been praised for minimizing the inconvenience and the

personal "cost" to respondents by keeping the questions as concise and pithy as possible" (Rice & Hancock, 2005, p. 4).

Given the nature of this research project, the author's selection of the structured survey research is justified based on the mixed methods research paradigm adopted in this dissertation.

The organization and structure of the thesis highlights the logical and sequential process and cross mapping. Chapter One is grounded in understanding brands as complex neuro-psycho-socio-cultural phenomena and issues related to consumer neuropsychology. This Chapter sets the stage for the rest of the dissertation and attempts to partially answer three out of four research questions: Does Brand Equity in politics lead to electoral competitive advantage? Does Strategic Branding in politics facilitate a politician's long term career growth? Can the conceptualization of voters as consumers (voting-consumption analogy) facilitate the use of Strategic Brand Management principles in politics?

The author of this dissertation believes that political branding literature lacks comprehensive studies addressing and analysing brand-building processes and key components of successful political branding strategies. This research, therefore, aims at filling the cognitive gap of the dynamic interplay between political brand dimensions and voters' perceptions of presidential candidates. To that end, Chapter One offers a systematic overview of various facets of the brand concept for further analysis - and understanding - of political brand strategy components and voters' perceptions of presidential candidates. It is imperative that each concept be thoroughly analyzed, and the critical attributes identified and comprehended before delving deeper into the related concepts, processes, strategies, and empirical evidence. This Chapter partially contributes to the overriding objective of this research project by providing an in-depth understanding of brand concept and brand context and exploring the neuropsychological underpinnings of consumer-voter behavior.

Chapter Two presents a comprehensive overview of the managerial aspects of brand strategy leveraged within the context of the U.S. electoral politics. To that end, Chapter Two discusses the evolution of the political branding concept and its ties with political marketing. This Chapter addresses two research questions: Does Brand Equity in

politics lead to electoral competitive advantage? What are the success factors in Political Branding? Chapter Two contributes to the overriding objective of this research project by zeroing in on the comprehensive and multidisciplinary analysis of the select aspects of brand strategy formulated and executed within the context of electoral politics. Organized in five thematic sections, Chapter Two offers an exhaustive portrait of political brand strategy through its essential concepts, ranging from positioning and authenticity to identity, image, and loyalty. These key brand strategy concepts are particularly relevant to subsequent discussions about political brand strategy and the formation of voters-consumers' perceptions, preferences, and convictions. These key brand concepts also play a critical role for understanding the empirical evidence obtained by the author of this dissertation using quantitative research and presented in Chapter Five. Chapter Two, therefore, acts as an indispensable theoretical linchpin buttressing the empirical findings introduced and analyzed in Chapter Five.

Chapter Three presents the concept of competitive advantage and outlines the linkages between branding and the quest for sustainable competitive advantage. The purpose of Chapter Three is to comprehensively address two research questions: Does Brand Equity in politics lead to electoral competitive advantage? Can the conceptualization of voters as consumers (voting-consumption analogy) facilitate the use of Strategic Brand Management principles in politics? This Chapter is an attempt to understand the dynamic interplay between a brand and competitive advantage. While there has been considerable research on competitive advantage, it is still a challenging task for both scholars and practitioners to unambiguously identify the factors that lead to competitive advantage. It has been argued that competitive advantage cannot be easily observed but only inferred from the performance of the organization. The aim of Chapter Three is to provide an in-depth overview of the concept of competitive advantage and the range of factors that contribute towards the development of competitive advantage. This Chapter latches onto an insight that to outperform direct and indirect competitors, one needs differentiators that would develop a strong competitive advantage. The ultimate objective of a brand is to create differentiation that would enable a brand owner to reveal, emphasize, and communicate its idiosyncratic qualities to attract voters and consumers. These idiosyncratic qualities create a connection with voters-consumers by offering something

distinct. By positioning themselves uniquely in the minds of voters-consumers, brands can create a perception of superiority or added value. A brand – if created properly – cannot be duplicated, and that’s a cardinal tenet of the competitive advantage theory.

Chapter Three also dives deeper into the voting-consumption analogy and its implications for strategic political brand management. The exploration of the applicability of the voting-consumption analogy to political brand management seems necessary, since both concepts - brand management and consumption – originated in the commercial context. The voting-consumption analogy has a long tradition in the American political science and electoral politics. This should not surprise us given the highly competitive nature of the American elections. The analysis of the voting-consumption analogy indicates that understanding consumer behavior can ultimately – and fundamentally - contribute to our understanding of how voters form perceptions of presidential candidates’ brands and how political actors can leverage the principles of strategic brand management to better communicate their messages to voters and drum up their support, involvement, and enthusiasm. This Chapter – therefore – considerably contributes to the overriding objective of this research project by providing theoretical underpinnings of the principles of strategic brand management within the context of electoral politics.

Chapter Four analyzes the psychological and emotional factors that influence consumer behavior and decision-making processes related to brands. This Chapter is an attempt to better tackle one research question: Can the conceptualization of voters as consumers (voting-consumption analogy) facilitate the use of Strategic Brand Management principles in politics? Chapter Four acts as an important steppingstone in the achievement of the overriding research objective. Individuals make numerous choices among various alternatives throughout their life spans. Human decision-making is strongly influenced by unconscious mental processes. Decision-making is unquestionably among the most fascinating, complex, and essential human behaviors that scholars from different academic disciplines are only beginning to decode and understand. It has been recognized that several factors influence decision making. These factors – including emotions, cognitive biases, sociocultural factors such as peer pressure and social norms, and personal values - influence what choices people make. This Chapter is an attempt to understand some of the cognitive and affective states that act as determinants of decision-making. By exploring

human behavior and decision-making processes, Chapter Four partially contributes to the overarching objective of this research project. This Chapter provides an extensive review of recent research in cognitive psychology, emphasizing its impact on various facets of human cognition, behavior, perception, and decision-making. Practical applications in the field of branding and electoral politics are discussed, underscoring the relevance of cognitive psychology in addressing political branding issues.

Chapter Five presents new empirical data collected with the purpose of understanding the identified phenomena in greater detail. The prime objective of this Chapter is to empirically answer three research questions: Does Brand Equity in politics lead to electoral competitive advantage? Does Strategic Branding in politics facilitate a politician's long term career growth? What are the success factors in Political Branding? This chapter also attempts to offer actionable insights for practitioners to facilitate their decision making. This section acts as the missing link between data and practice. The scope of the employed research methodologies in this Chapter ranges from comprehensive literature review, case study, document analysis to observational method and quantitative survey of 600 citizens of the United States who voted in the 2020 presidential election.

The (still) limited political branding literature is replete with explicit calls for research projects focused on how political actors build and communicate their brands to the electorate, and how this is interpreted by voters-consumers. This dissertation is an attempt to understand how political brand strategy – and its subsequent execution – is perceived by, and aligned with, voters-consumers' expectations. In other words, the overarching purpose of this research project is to further explore the composition of presidential candidates' brands and the relationship between political brands and voters-consumers.

The findings of this research project suggest that numerous political actors in the U.S. Presidential Elections successfully leverage the principles of strategic brand management to drum up voters-consumers' support, enthusiasm, and loyalty. The findings also point to the existence of essential components of an effective brand strategy. These essential components are identified, analyzed, and illustrated with real-life example of a presidential candidate whose brand strategy was meticulously formulated and executed during the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election.

The author of this dissertation is of the opinion that being a professional politician – whose career is characterized by longevity and popularity - is the most important variable in determining the electoral success of presidential candidates in the United States. The vast majority of the U.S. presidential candidates vanish quickly from the collective memory upon completion of the election process. Staying relevant in politics – and maintaining public support – is in and of itself an achievement in the U.S. political environment.

CHAPTER 1. THE IMPORTANCE OF BRANDS IN THE SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT

1. 1. Brands As Complex Neuro-Psycho-Socio-Cultural Phenomena

In order to address the overarching objectives of this research project and showcase that well managed select components of the political brand strategy have the capacity to establish presidential candidate's competitive advantage in the elections, it is imperative to understand what brands are and what role they play in voters-consumers' lives. To that end, this subchapter introduces the concept of brand and looks at it from multiple viewpoints to showcase the multifaceted nature of brands. This subchapter also presents the concept of political brand and briefly explains why a brand is a useful explanatory concept for analyses of voter behavior within the context of electoral politics.

At its most rudimentary level, a brand is an entity that is “instantaneously recognizable and immensely trustworthy” (Kumar et al., 2016, p. 48). For centuries, brands have been playing an important role in developing strong relationships between organizations and consumers. Brands have always acted as important social and cultural artifacts facilitating consumer loyalty, attachment, and dedication, and, in the process, assuring profitability for brand owners (Bracíníková & Matušínská, 2020, p. 29). Brands are not creations - as many like to think - of modern capitalistic societies. When people think about brands, Coca-Cola tends to enter the mind as one of the first brands characterized by a highly distinctive ornamental logo design with cursive font and white swirl, but this is a highly flawed perception; brands are as old as our history.

The term *branding* has its origins in the ancient Norse language; the word *brandr* means *to burn*. Initially, a brand was a burning piece of wood. By the 1500s, *branding* became associated with the “scarring of flesh with a hot iron to produce a scar or mark with an easily recognizable pattern for identification purposes” (Danesi, 2006, p. 8). Ranchers marked their livestock with hot irons to identify their cattle. Moreover, ranchers with “high-quality livestock were able to distinguish themselves from those ranchers with inferior animals” (Millman, 2012, p. 10). Right from the beginning, branding revolved around concepts such as distinctiveness, ownership, recognizability.

An abundance of research studies clearly demonstrates that a brand plays a critical role in consumer decision making and choice behavior. For example, research conducted by Daliborka Blazeska and Natasha Ristovska clearly demonstrates that the brand has the biggest role in making the decision to purchase a product/service (Blazeska & Ristovska, 2015, p. 256). According to many scholars, “clarity and credibility of brands as signals of product positions increase perceived quality, decrease consumer perceived risk and information costs, and this increase consumer expected utility” (Erdem et al., 2006, p. 34).

As stated by the *American Marketing Association*, “A brand is a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller’s goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers” (“American Marketing Association”, n.d.). According to Phillip Kotler and Kevin Keller, a brand “is a product or service with additional dimensions, which in a certain way set them apart from other products and services designed to satisfy the same need” (Ćatić & Poturak, 2022, p. 84). These two definitions highlight the aforementioned aspects related to distinctiveness, ownership, and recognizability. In other words, one of the primary functions of a brand is to protect the owner of the trademark from infringement and imitation. Other, somewhat similar, definitions offered by scholars conceptualize brand in terms of a bundle of tangible and intangible attributes, which collectively boost attractiveness of a product/service beyond its functional and utilitarian qualities. These different views capture the utilitarian value of a branded object, and the role trademarks play in strategic brand management (Farquhar, 1989).

But recent studies in neuroscience, neuropsychology, and anthropology indicate that a brand is so much more than that. A brand can best be defined as “the unique set of [mental] associations that an organization aspires to create and maintain. These [mental] associations are the essential characteristics and attributes of the brand that can lead to perceived brand personality and brand relationships with consumers” (Phillips et al., 2014, p. 320). When consumers are exposed to specific brand touchpoints or interact more directly with the brand through, for example, brand website, conversation with the customer service representative, watching the brand’s commercial, reading brand’s posts on social media, being exposed to visual and audio stimuli such as logos, colors, designs, typography, jingles, advertising music, overall brand’s aesthetics, and many other brand elements, these associations are becoming more dense, more vibrant, more vivid, and more

easily accessible, recalled, and – ultimately – more conscious, and better remembered. Or, to put it differently, a brand resides in the associative memory in the human brain. A brand can, therefore, be defined “as a constellation of values and experiences that forge a special relationship with customers” (Czerniawski & Maloney, 2010, p. 5).

Many scholars have described brands as clusters of values, “multidimensional constructs, social objects that are personally owned and embraced by the consumer. Hence, brands imbue powerful symbolic values which create loyalty and, more importantly, emotional attachment” (Pich et al., 2016, p. 101). Due to the fact that brands operate within distinct cultural contexts - imbued with values, rituals, rites of passage, myths, traditions, customs, and symbols - brands must also be conceptualized as cultural codes “aligned with a cluster of symbolic attributes” (Kravchenko, 2020, p. 325). Grant McCracken – one of the most revered anthropologists, known for his academic explorations deep into meanings concealed in cultural trends – blatantly states that “At their most powerful, *brands actually make culture* [emphasis added] ... Nike changed the way we thought about exercise, fitness, bodies, and diet in the 1970s and 80s [...]. A cluster of brands and industries after World War II helped create ‘mid-century modernism’ which in turn shaped how Americans lived and thought of themselves in a very fluid moment. Brands were minting fundamental ideas of who we were, what we cared about, and how we lived. In the present day, Uber and AirBnb are changing the way we think about travel and tourism. Netflix is changing the way we think about TV and storytelling [...]. The brand that creates culture becomes a kind of navigational satellite in our world. It becomes one of the places from which we draw our ideas of selfhood and in the Herman Miller case, the workplace ... Creator brands are meaning makers. They help make the meanings that in turn make us” (McCracken, 2024). McCracken’s sagacious observation points to the fact that brands have the capacity to create, influence or even fundamentally re-shape the way people think, live, act, and experience the world around them. Exceptional brands can almost single-handedly introduce cultural trends and promote them aggressively to the point where they become deeply embedded within the culture. A prime example of a brand that successfully created culture is Coca-Cola’s idiosyncratic image of Santa Claus as a convivial, red-nosed, bearded old fellow in a fur-trimmed red suit. Another noteworthy example comes from the hi-tech industry, where Apple brand’s idiosyncratic and visionary design aesthetic has

shaped the entire hi-tech industry, influenced popular culture and given rise to very specific design trends. Perhaps the most vivid example of a brand that changed culture is De Beers' 1947 campaign that created a new behavior, one that has subsequently become deeply embedded in the heart of the American shared culture. In the 1930s, few American men proposed with a diamond ring. *A diamond is forever* brand campaign, which first rolled out in the US - and subsequently in other parts of the globe - effectively created the revered tradition of gifting a diamond ring to a loved one when popping the question. This brand campaign – created by the advertising agency N.W. Ayer - aimed to make diamonds synonymous with commitment, eternal love, and devotion. The idea behind this campaign was surprisingly simple: A diamond, like your love, is eternal, unbreakable, and invaluable. These days, most Americans think this is an age-old tradition dating back hundreds of years. De Beers' brand campaign crafted – and disseminated – the myth that the engagement ring needs to cost the equivalent of two months' salary. This myth was encapsulated in the advertising copy: *How else two months' salary last forever?* According to Franky Farmer, “Before this campaign, it was highly unusual to give the gift of a diamond ring when proposing marriage. In 1940, only 10% of first-time brides were receiving diamond engagement rings; by 1990 that number had skyrocketed to 80%. The results are evident: between 1939 and 1979, DeBeers' wholesale diamond sales in the US alone increased from \$23m to \$2.1bn. The company's advertising budget increased from \$200,000 to \$10m a year. Of course, changing Americans' social attitudes to embed a belief that their marriage is incomplete without a diamond is one thing, but DeBeers had to complement this social manipulation with monopolizing the diamond mining market and restricting supply, this creating scarcity of product” (Farmer, 2022). This brand campaign fundamentally changed the American culture by shifting the consumer focus from the design of the ring to the emotional and tradition-bound value attached to it. Moreover, the brand – De Beers – became linked to a constellation of cultural associations such as engagements, marriage, two months' salary, eternal love, anniversaries, and weddings. By associating diamonds with eternal love, commitment, and devotion, De Beers triggered a powerful psychological ripple effect: Whenever Americans thought of marriage, love, celebration, anniversary, diamonds would naturally pop into their minds. This cultural association became so strong that it had led to a cultural seismic shift where diamonds –

and De Beers brand – became the only acceptable choice for expressing love. The campaign instigated a cultural revolution, and its influence persists even today: De Beers fundamentally transformed the way Americans viewed diamonds and engagement tradition.

The brand's symbolism is said to be implicit. One can lucidly observe this phenomenon in the luxury industry. Any bag can carry one's belongings, but only luxury brand bags communicate implicitly wealth, taste, style, and status. Consumers who buy luxury brand bags don't explicitly talk about these objects; the brand itself communicates these attributes tacitly. Numerous scholars from different academic disciplines adopt this socio-anthropological perspective and view brands as a cluster of social meanings shared by a group of individuals who use them as symbols in sociocultural interactions. Scholars who subscribe to this school of thought tend to emphasize the role of the sociocultural meaning and social symbolism of brands, "particularly for consumers' self-concept and social identity. Brands provide an important role in identity creation, and consumers often decide whether to accept or reject brands on the basis of their symbolic value" (Vallaster et al., 2006, p. 3). More and more brand management scholars are prone to accept the postmodern conceptualization of brands emphasizing the active role of the consumer in the creation of brands. Several research studies have showcased that brands – and their meanings - are created within the communities of brand zealots – consumers who passionately believe in the chosen brand, frequently engage in brand-related activities, and aggressively promote the brand to others. According to Christine Vallaster, Hans Mühlbacher, Eva Thelen, and Andrea Hemetsberger, "Consumers are actively creating lively brandscapes and brand cultures. In getting involved in such interactions, consumers' cognitions are continuously (re-) shaped" (Vallaster et al., 2006, p. 3). Consumers' zeal and devotion to brands are not unusual social phenomena. Some scholars attribute this increased brand loyalty and creation of brand communities to the rise of online social media. It must be noted, however, that these social phenomena reflect a more fundamental seismic shift in branding practice, intertwined with insights from neuroscience, social psychology, anthropology, and behavioral economics. Every form of interaction between a brand owner and consumers – regardless of geographical location and type of environment (online vs offline) – is now widely accepted to be shaped by the social nature

of brands (Egol et al., 2012, p. 3). The brand that embodies these socio-cultural phenomena is Harley-Davidson. From 1973 to 1983, Harley-Davidson's market share in the U.S. dwindled from 78% to 23%. The major cause of this dramatic decline revolved around the invasion of Japanese brands that entered the U.S. market with high quality, reasonably priced motorcycles. As a consequence, by 1983 Harley-Davidson found itself on the verge of extinction. To save the company, President Ronald Reagan introduced the Memorandum on Heavyweight Motorcycle Imports ordering a 45% tariff on heavyweight bikes imported to the United States. This political gimmick certainly saved the company from the looming extinction, but it also forced Harley-Davidson leadership to re-think the company's business strategy. The organization's top brass realized that the company was in dire need of another source of competitive advantage in an increasingly competitive world of motorcycles and demanding – and savvy – consumers. The decision was made to focus on strategic brand management and to use the emotional appeals in brand communication. This new strategy paid off handsomely: “Twenty-five years later, the company boasted a top-50 global brand valued at \$7.8 billion. Central to the company's turnaround, and to its subsequent success, was Harley's commitment to building a brand community: a group of ardent consumers organized around the lifestyle, activities, and ethos of the brand” (Fournier & Lee, 2009). To understand the impact of brand communities, it is of paramount importance to explore the dynamics of their formation and operation. A critical aspect to consider is the need to belong – the intrinsic human motivation to affiliate with others and be socially accepted. This sense of belonging fosters shared identity, which in turn acts as a foundation of brand communities. It has been observed by anthropologists that individuals who identify with a particular brand form communities characterized by shared beliefs, values, interests, and worldviews. The notion of belonging emphasizes the socio-psychological need to feel affiliated, understood, and appreciated within one's cultural milieu. The visceral feeling of belonging to a community of like-minded individuals who share similar values, interests, and passion for a particular brand is the cornerstone of every community that brings – and binds – people together. It is widely acknowledged by psychologists, neuroscientists, and anthropologists that belonging to a group of like-minded individuals makes people feel good, fulfilled, satisfied, and valued. The individual enacts his/her identity, aspirations, needs, desires, and fantasies through belonging to a

community whose members share similar – if not the same – values, worldviews, needs, and interests. Exploring the sense of belonging and shared consumer identity within a brand community has significant implications for the brand and its ardent consumers. According to research conducted by SEFIANI – which analyzed understandings and experiences of brand belonging in over 1000 Australian employees and consumers – 92% of employees and 62% of consumers actively seek to experience a sense of belonging with a brand. Achieving a sense of *brand belonging* is very important for people who participated in this study (Sefiani, 2023). Harley-Davidson’s leadership decided to concentrate on building – and leveraging – brand community to foster consumer loyalty and profitability. According to Susan Fournier and Lara Lee, Harley-Davidson’s success story illustrates the potency of the brand community strategy: “Following the 1985 leveraged buyback that saved the company, management completely reformulated the competitive strategy and business model around a brand community philosophy. Beyond just changing its marketing programs, Harley-Davidson retooled every aspect of its organization — from its culture to its operating procedures and governance structure — to drive its community strategy. Harley management recognized that the brand had developed as a community-based phenomenon. The “brotherhood” of riders, united by a shared ethos, offered Harley the basis for a strategic repositioning as the one motorcycle manufacturer that understood bikers on their own terms. To reinforce this community-centric positioning and solidify the connection between the company and its customers, Harley staffed all community-outreach events with employees rather than hired hands. For employees, this regular, close contact with the people they served added such meaning to their work that the weekend outreach assignments routinely attracted more volunteers than were needed. Many employees became riders, and many riders joined the company. Executives were required to spend time in the field with customers and bring their insights back to the firm. This close-to-the-customer strategy was codified in Harley-Davidson’s operating philosophy and reinforced during new-employee orientations. Decisions at all levels were grounded in the community perspective, and the company acknowledged the community as the rightful owner of the brand. Harley’s community strategy was also supported by a radical organizational redesign. Functional silos were replaced with senior leadership teams sharing decision-making responsibility across three imperatives: Create Demand, Produce Product, and

Provide Support. Further, the company established a stand-alone organization reporting directly to the president to formalize and nurture the company-community relationship through the Harley Owners Group (H.O.G.) membership club. As a result of this organizational structure, community-building activities were treated not solely as marketing expenses but as companywide, COO-backed investments in the success of the business model” (Fournier & Lee, 2009).

There is overwhelming scientific evidence that a strong brand community significantly increases customer loyalty, lowers marketing costs, makes the brand more authentic, and opens up dialogue with brand’s consumers (Lewis, 2022). Shep Hyken strongly argues that brand communities also facilitate brand differentiation: “Beyond price and product, which are often similar to the competition’s, the community can create emotional connection. People like to belong to something. When they love a company and its products and find others who think and feel the way they do, they naturally gravitate toward the community. Once people join, they are participating at a higher level of brand engagement and their connection to the business is deepened by this connection” (Hyken, 2023). Hyken also emphasizes the role brand community plays in fostering brand loyalty: “Loyalty is an emotional connection. Creating a community is a powerful way to drive loyalty” (Hyken, 2023). Harley-Davidson doesn’t sell motorcycles; the mission statement prominently displayed on Harley-Davidson website proudly proclaims: “More than building machines, we stand for the timeless pursuit of adventure. Freedom for the soul [...]. Desirability is a motivating force driven by emotion. Harley-Davidson has long been associated with igniting desirability – it’s in our DNA and embedded in our vision; it is at the heart of our mission and it is part of our legacy. To enhance our position as the most desirable motorcycle and lifestyle brand in the world, we will:

- Design, engineer and advance the most desirable motorcycles in the world – reflected in quality, innovation, and craftsmanship
- Build a lifestyle brand, valued for the emotion reflected in every product and experience for riders and non-riders alike
- Focus on our customers, delivering adventure and freedom for the soul” (Harley-Davidson, n.d.).

Harley-Davidson's business philosophy reflects an outstanding understanding of the principles of strategic brand management and the neuro-psycho-socio-cultural nature of brands; a brand is a cultural artefact – a tangible public and cognitive representation of a cluster of meanings and ideas – conceptualized as mental associations - shared by the members of a specific cultural milieu. Brand meaning is the product of socio-cultural consensus, but not all attempts at creating intended cognitive associations with a brand can be deemed successful. Rather – as Carlos Torelli and Shirley Cheng contend – “consensual understanding of what a brand represents is achieved through a collective effort – marketer's delivery of meaningful brand messages through mass communication and consumers' interpretation of the abstract brand meanings carried by these messages [...]. [B]rand can acquire cultural meanings and become associated with the abstract characteristics that define a cultural group (e.g., MANGO is associated with the defining quality of sensuality in Spanish culture). A brand's cultural symbolism can be defined as perceived consensus of the degree to which the brand symbolizes the abstract image of a certain cultural group. People with some direct or indirect experiences with a certain culture will develop a cognitive representation of it – a loose network consisting of a central concept (e.g., American culture) and its associated attributes (e.g., individualist values of freedom and self-reliance). As part of this loose cultural network, a culturally symbolic brand not only connects to the central concept (e.g., Coke's symbolism of American culture), but also to the various elements in the knowledge representation of the culture (e.g., American cultural values of freedom and independence). For this reason, a culturally symbolic brand embodies consumers' abstract, consensual view of the cultural group the brand symbolizes, and hence becomes a tangible, public representation of the meanings and ideas shared in the culture” (Torelli & Cheng, 2011, pp. 252-253).

According to Matthew Egol, Mary Beth McEuen, and Emily Falk, “The value of a brand is linked to the relationships it fosters: the social connections among people who buy the product or service” (Egol et al., 2012, p. 3). Following this line of thought, it can be argued that brands should be conceptualized as complex sociocultural phenomena characterized by the dynamic “interplay between various brand components and social actors, who continuously develop brand meaning. Such conceptualization has to consider (1) a socially relevant system of brand meanings and brand manifestations, and (2) the

dynamic development of those meanings and manifestations emerging from ongoing interaction processes within a social entity of interested individuals and organizations” (Vallaster et al., 2006, p. 4).

It has been well recognized - and acknowledged - by anthropologists and social psychologists that people buy products not only for what they provide in terms of the functional qualities, but also for what the product means within the cultural milieu. Thus, brands can be conceptualized as cultural symbols that are incorporated into the individuals’ identities and value systems (Torelli et al., 2010, p. 114). “People use the symbolism in brands to communicate to others who they are or who they aspire to be. The social identity function of brands facilitates expressing to others one’s central values and self-concept. Based on social identity theory, the self can be conceptualized as comprising a personal identity and a group identity. Attachment to brands and products is conceptualized as reflecting consumers’ desires to reinforce either type of identity depending on the product and the context. A consumer may feel attached to his Harley-Davidson because it communicates to others a rugged personality, whereas another consumer may like his Ford pick-up truck because it reinforces his national identity” (Torelli et al., 2010, p. 114). Looking from this social identity vantage point, it can be posited that brands act as extension of self. This phenomenon is well described and explained by psychology scholars who dubbed it *psychological ownership*. According to Harvard Business Review seminal paper - *How Customers Come To Think Of A Product As An Extension Of Themselves* - penned by Colleen P. Kirk – “That’s when consumers feel so invested in a product that it becomes an extension of themselves. Companies that encourage psychological ownership can entice customers to buy more products, at higher prices, and even to willingly promote those products among their friends [...]. This occurs when customers believe they know every facet of a product or brand so well that they have a special, unique relationship with it [...]. Star Wars fans are notorious for their psychological ownership of a film franchise they know intimately. Recently, a group of these fans even launched a campaign to entirely remake the latest sequel – *The Last Jedi* – because they disliked what it did with “their” brand” (Kirk, 2018). Plenty of evidence exists that the usage of a brand associated with an in-group (a group of people who share interest, values, and identity) can fundamentally enhance the psychological affiliation with the group and strengthen subjective perceptions

of belongingness to the group (Torelli et al., 2010, p. 114). It has also been confirmed that “desirable group identities are better signaled by means of distinctive product choices that can unmistakably communicate the identity” (Torelli et al., 2010, p. 114). This clearly indicates that consumers use certain brands – and their shared cultural meanings – to create, communicate, and manage their personal and social identities. Brands have become important identity creation tools for people. By selecting certain brands – and rejecting others – individuals communicate to the external world personal characteristics and group membership. The symbolic function of brands is one of the most critical roles of the brand: the brand is the extension of self and communicates something specific about the consumer. Through brand symbolism, the brand provides the individual with a subtext to a product usage: *I’m at the vanguard of fashion*, or *I am a liberal*, or *I love technology*. Brands have a unique ability to be used as a vehicle for social connection and communication. Harriet Posner posits that people often choose certain brands – for example fashion brands – to express their unique identity and group membership: “Individuals often choose to dress in a specific and recognizable style so that they can express their ideas visually and signal membership to a like-minded group, joining what is known as a style tribe. This is a term for a collection of people who dress in a common distinctive style. They may not actually know each other directly but might share similar values and cultural attitudes; by adopting a specific mode of dress, tribe members can shape their identity and gain a sense of belonging” (Posner, 2015, pp.30-32). Brands are not just about bombastic logos or celebrity-packed advertising campaigns. Brands foster a meaningful social connection, a sense of community and belonging that, in turn, makes consumers engaged, loyal, and satisfied.

Despite the fact that strategic brand management has emerged as a legitimate academic discipline, some marketing scholars hold a simplistic view of branding. According to Ciara Torres-Spelliscy, “Branding works through repetition, repetition, repetition. Branding is the process of purposefully repeating a word, concept, or logo until it gets stuck in the minds of the public. As the data crunchers over at Nielsen have found, “[p]ractice (repetition) indeed makes perfect – and can help create durable memories.” One of the oddities of advertising is that some customers associate repetitive ads with higher-quality

products. Objectively, this is somewhat absurd since a heavily advertised item could be poorly constructed, carcinogenic, or additive. But, nonetheless, this is a measurable phenomenon: repetition of an ad may signal to consumers that the brand or product is a good buy, or a quality product. This is sometimes referred to as signaling theory. In 1975, University of Wyoming researchers Anthony McGann and Raymond Marquardt found that ads with high rates of repetition tended to also be rated as high quality in Consumer Reports. And even more disturbingly, the more an ad is repeated, the more viewers will believe it (even if the claim that is being repeated is not true). Studies suggest that repeated statements are perceived as more truthful than statements made less frequently, presumably because repetition imbues the statement with familiarity. In simple terms: frequency breeds familiarity, and familiarity breed trust. Brands that are emotionally comforting are easier to sell” (Torres-Spelliscy, 2022, p. 1733).

This reductionist approach to strategic brand management is greatly misguided due to the fact that a rich body of evidence demonstrates that strategic brand management is a legitimate academic discipline predicated on a plethora of validated theories and frameworks buttressed by an impressive body of research.

Peter Drucker, a notoriously influential management scholar, once famously remarked that “the aim of marketing is *branding* [emphasis added], which makes selling superfluous and the brand itself desirable. In other words, it is the strength of the brand that makes it possible to sell certain products without any attempts needed to persuade customers with marketing strategies” (Lee et al., 2014, p. 1).

People connect and associate the brand with a set of brand characteristics, attributes, benefits, impressions, memories, moments, symbols, and emotions. According to Chase Giovanni Lovett, “A brand can be defined as the psychological representation of a product or organization. This can be boiled down further into one’s experiences with, perceptions of, emotions toward, and attachments to a product or company. One’s feelings about different brands are subjective and exist within each individual’s mind. We filter brands through our own set of life experiences and attitudes” (Giovanni Lovett, 2018, p. 7). Neuroscience corroborates this view of a brand by demonstrating that individuals who are emotionally invested in any specific outcome – partisan voters, sports fans, loyal brand consumers, jingoistic citizens – lose the cognitive ability to objectively ascertain reality.

Numerous studies have revealed that their brains experience a temporary form of damage akin to aphasia. There is irrefutable evidence that the human brain is hardwired to filter out millions of bits of information every second focusing instead on processing carefully selected pieces of data (Dumitrescu & Dumitrescu, 2021, p. 40).

Looking from the neuroscience and cultural anthropology perspectives introduced and briefly touched on in this section, a brand should be conceptualized as a complex neuro-psycho-socio-cultural phenomenon: an associative cognitive network residing in the human brain (discussed in greater detail in the subchapter 1.3), a symbol which acts as a trigger to remind people in the specific cultural milieu of its rules, beliefs, identities, and values, and a cultural artefact that contains significant information about the people and the culture within which they live their lives. The role cultural worldviews and identity motives play in consumption and voting behavior is profound and widely acknowledged within the academic milieu (Andreass et al., 2023).

Identity values, cultural symbols, need for affiliation – phenomena inextricably intertwined with brands – have been recently identified as major predictors of *consumption and voting behavior* [emphasis added]. Numerous studies have also revealed that the impact of identity values, cultural symbols, and the need for affiliation is significantly higher than that produced by socio-economic motives or even political values long recognized as the most important predictors of voting behavior. Cultural symbolism has been found to influence identity motives which, in turn, directly influence voting and consumption behavior (Andreass et al., 2023). These issues – directly related to brands and strategic brand management – constitute the very focus of this dissertation.

Following the presented evidence in this subchapter, it can be proposed that if brands have the capacity to influence human behavior, political actors should leverage the principles of strategic brand management to drum up voters' support, loyalty, and dedication. Building a robust brand within the political environment can help political actors better connect with voters, win elections, and/or secure their long-term political career. A political brand refers to how the voters perceive a political actor (e.g., a presidential candidate); it is what sets one political actor apart from the competition and makes them recognizable, likable, and compelling. Creating and managing a solid political brand can be deemed essential for any political actor who wants to achieve long-lasting

success (being a professional politician – whose career is characterized by longevity and popularity - is the most important variable in determining the electoral success of presidential candidates in the United States).

A political brand refers to a constellation of perceptions – cognitive associations – and assumptions that a political actor wants to create and embed in the voters' minds. The outcome of brand building activities is the creation of so-called brand equity – the value of a brand determined by the voters-consumers' perceptions of its attractiveness and desirability. Brand equity is a function of voters-consumers' perceptions and experiences with the brand. Positive brand equity allows a brand to enjoy above-average popularity that translates to its success – whether it is profitability within the commercial environment or long-term career within the political context. Brand equity, therefore, can become the ultimate source of competitive advantage (discussed in Chapter Three) for political actors vying for public support. The presented in this sub-chapter evidence also indicates that similar fundamental psycho-cultural motives drive consumer as well as voter behavior. Voters, therefore, should be conceptualized as consumers of political brands. This conceptualization can significantly help scholars and practitioners in understanding political campaigns and voter behavior and crafting successful political brand strategies allowing political actors to better connect with their intended audiences.

This subchapter's primary objective was to showcase brands as complex neuro-psycho-socio-cultural phenomena. This subchapter also sets the stage for the rest of the dissertation and attempts to partially answer three out of four research questions: Does Brand Equity in politics lead to electoral competitive advantage? Does Strategic Branding in politics facilitate a politician's long term career growth? Can the conceptualization of voters as consumers (voting-consumption analogy) facilitate the use of Strategic Brand Management principles in politics? Based on the presented evidence, it seems that the fragmentary answers to these questions are affirmative: (1) Brand Equity in politics can lead to electoral competitive advantage due to the fact that brand equity – by definition – has a direct impact upon the success of the brand; voters-consumers gravitate towards brands that have the capacity to elicit positive emotions and reflect their cultural values and identities, beliefs, convictions, aspirations, and concerns. (2) The conceptualization of voters as consumers (voting-consumption analogy) can fundamentally facilitate the use of

strategic brand management principles in politics due to the fact that voters' and consumers' behaviors and decisions are driven by a similar set of psychological motivations. When it comes to casting a vote, understanding consumer motivation can mean the difference between a successful political campaign and an unmitigated disaster. (3) Strategic Brand Management has the capacity to facilitate a politician's long term career growth due to the fact that the sole purpose of strategic brand management is to support a brand owner in improving brand recognition, boosting positive voter-consumer perceptions, creating a constellation of advantageous mental associations in the minds of voters-consumers, and eliciting positive emotion. By developing a strong brand, a political actor's career can be secured and – subsequently - characterized by longevity and popularity. This subchapter partially contributes to the overriding objective of this research project by providing an in-depth understanding of brand concept and brand context and exploring the neuropsychological and socio-cultural underpinnings of consumer-voter behavior.

1.2. Selective Perception And Decision-Making Process

At any given moment, the human brain is bombarded by all sorts of external stimuli received through the five senses (touch, smell, sight, taste, hearing). The eyes are constantly monitoring the external environment. The ears are continuously receiving diminutive auditory stimulations. The olfactory system takes in all the odors constantly present in any given environment. The human body is permanently embedded within the physical space detecting temperature, moist, and textures. The gustatory system provides invaluable information about the taste of food being consumed. In other words, even each singular sensory system is constantly exposed to, and must process, an enormous amount of data. With such an intense and continuous deluge of stimuli, how does the human brain manage to effectively categorize, prioritize, and process input coming in from the external environment? The answer: selective perception.

The human brain is programmed to pay attention to a very limited proportion of that input, filtering out much of it away. Selective perception is a well-researched cognitive phenomenon that allows us to listen, see, and focus our attention on a stimulus based on

individual – and subjective – expectations, values, beliefs, convictions, and experiences, without taking into consideration the rest of the information. Selective perception is a very effective cognitive mechanism that allows the human brain to cope with information overload by focusing on information in the external environment that is “congruent with and confirms current attitudes in order to avoid or reduce cognitive dissonance” (Williams et al, 2016). Selective perception plays a critical role in decision-making process as it draws together existing preconceived ideas, expectations, interests, desires, values, beliefs, convictions, and fears regarding events, situations, outcomes, and objectives to arrive at the final decision that is far from being objectively optimal but is personally relevant and aligned with current attitudes and values. The end result is a highly subjective, biased, and one-dimensional interpretation of reality. Or, to put it differently, selective perception optimizes cognitive recourses by shifting them towards information that the human brain expects to process. Frank Luntz, one of the most venerated political communication strategists in America, stated very clearly in his seminar book *Words That Work: It’s Not What You Say, It’s What People Hear*, “You can have the best message in the world, but the person on the receiving end will always understand it through the prism of his or her own emotions, preconceptions, prejudices, and preexisting beliefs” (Luntz, 2008, p. xiii).

For decades, political science scholars have promulgated the concept of “retrospective economic voting as a means by which citizens capably exercise democratic accountability, despite their overall inattentiveness to politics, and susceptibility to elite manipulation” (Freeder, 2019, p. 1). According to this view, voters’ political knowledge, acumen, sophistication, attention, engagement, and interest required to actively – and prudently - participate in the political process are simply inadequate. However – as many political scholars posit – a voter does not require an overly elaborated – and seemingly esoteric – political knowledge to decide how to cast a vote. A fairly critical judgment of current events can allow voters to quickly ascertain whether things are going well or badly. As stated by a political scientist Morris Fiorina, “voters typically have one comparatively hard bit of data: they know what life has been like during the incumbent administration” (Freeder, 2019, p. 1). Voters can quickly ascertain whether the quality of their own lives have gone up or deteriorated under the incumbent politician. Based on this not-too-difficult analysis, voters can keep the politicians in office by voting for them, or they can punish

them by voting for other candidates. Retrospective economic voting is, by no means, an optimal accountability system though, but it does force politicians to focus on the economy and attempt to improve the well-being of voters-citizens. Countless studies conducted by political science scholars indicate that “incumbent vote share is at least partially determined by economic performance – as James Carville’s famous quote goes, *it’s the economy, stupid*. Scholars generally consider the state of the economy to be second only to partisan identity in determining vote choice in presidential elections, and economic indicators (most commonly the year-to-year change in real disposal income) feature prominently in most election prediction models” (Freeder, 2019, p. 2).

Notwithstanding the evidence that suggests that voters pay attention to the overall state of the economy, there is a compelling proof that voters’ selective perception of political candidates’ positions acts as a powerful mechanism that allows them to keep “cognitive consistency between their own position on issues and their candidate preferences” (Sherrod, 1971-1972, p. 554). Selective perception directly contributes to a number of perceptual distortions that, in turn, affect the way people make decisions. The most critical perceptual distortions are:

- Selective Exposure,
- Selective Attention,
- Perceptual defense.

Selective exposure refers to a mental process whereby people avoid information that contradicts their existing values, beliefs, convictions, and attitudes.

Selective attention refers to the idea that an individual’s interests, opinions, expectations influence the nature of the information to which they attend.

Perceptual defense can be described as a process by which certain stimuli are unconsciously labeled as potentially threatening and offensive and are either discarded or distorted due to their attitude-incongruent nature (Williams et al, 2016).

There is abundant evidence that interests, opinions, beliefs, values, religious convictions, political affiliation influence individuals’ exposure decisions. People pay more attention to information that is personally salient. Partisans, die-hard sport fans, and every person who is emotionally and cognitively invested in a certain outcome share one thing in common – the inability to perceive reality in an objective and unbiased manner.

Selective perception explains why people cannot perceive reality in an objective manner. Selective perception enables an individual to perceive only what she/he desires, wants, believes in, values, and filters out other viewpoints and perspectives. There are two major categories of selective perception: perceptual vigilance and perceptual defense. Perceptual vigilance revolves around the process whereby the person's unconscious detects and processes the stimuli in the external environment due to the fact that this stimulus is deemed important to him/her in some way. Perceptual defense refers to the process whereby the individual's unconscious erects a barrier whose purpose is to filter out every stimulus that contradicts the individual's values, beliefs, and convictions. Perceptual defense acts as a filtering mechanism allowing a person to maintain homeostasis.

In electoral politics and strategic brand management, selective perception plays an important role. This can clearly be seen in political communication. Political actors who follow the principles of strategic brand management tend to cater to their base audience through selective perception. Strategic brand management can be boiled down to a battle of perception, not tangible products or detailed political programs. An example that captures the essence of selective perception is childbirth. When a woman gets pregnant, she immediately starts seeing – and noticing - other pregnant women. After childbirth, the woman stops noticing other pregnant women and starts noticing babies and toddlers. In general, people are more likely to notice a stimulus that relates to a current desire or need, is congruent with their expectations, and closely corresponds with their cultural values, beliefs, and convictions. Selective perception allows scholars and strategists to understand voters-consumers' internal mapping circuitry and how different target groups process, decode, filter out, and use information. The mapping results in a blueprint of internal mechanisms that is critical to voters-consumers' voting decision making. For political actors who want to use the principles of strategic brand management, selective perception is about customizing communication to increase voters' brand recall and recognition. It has long been recognized that people seek consistency in their political behavior by voting for candidates with whom they identify. The voting paradox lies in the fact that people may support candidates whose positions are discrepant with their own, either because they are not familiar with the candidate's position, or because of ideological affiliation or social pressure (Sherrod, 1971-1972). Selective perception is essential to understand how voters-

consumers make their way through the deluge of information they come across daily, particularly in the digital age. Selective perception acts as the cognitive gatekeeper, monitoring, filtering out, and deciding what information makes it through the crowded information landscape to our conscious awareness. In a world where an average voter-consumer is bombarded with 10,000 persuasive messages every day, the ability to cut through the media clutter and capture voter-consumer attention has become an imperative for any successful brand-building endeavor.

Selective perception in electoral politics means creating content that resonates emotionally, not just visually, but contextually with the members of the target audience. Selective perception allows voters-consumers to interpret information in a way that is congruent with their cultural values, beliefs, convictions, desires, and aspirations. Political actors and political strategists must realize that most of their messages are systematically filtered out by voters-consumers. This places more importance of ensuring that political brand communications are tailored to potential voters-consumers who already are susceptible to certain ideological messages. Political actors – and political strategists – should embrace and leverage selective perception to their advantage. Political brand communication should be tailored to connect with what the target audience is already thinking about or considering significant.

1.3. Knowledge Structure And Cognitive Associative Network

In order to understand the dynamic interplay between brands, consumers-voters, and political candidates, it is necessary to explore the nature of the knowledge structure. Understanding the factors that influence consumer and voter behavior is key to political success and can have a profound impact on the long-term development of a political career. One of the research questions posed in this dissertation is: Does Strategic Branding in politics facilitate a politician's long term career growth? This subchapter attempts to partially answer this question by employing a neuroscience perspective to explain how brands are formed and how they exist in the brains of voters-consumers. It must be emphasized at the outset that the consumer-voter decision environment is experiencing a seismic shift caused by an incredible fast pace, both in social and technological milieus.

This seismic shift has a profound impact on the way people interact, communicate, how they relate to brands, consumption, political participation, and decide to support certain brands and reject others. People currently live in a socio-technological setting where decision-making is much more intricate and multidimensional than before. This is the so-called dispersion era, in which 83% of Americans use a second device while watching TV. These devices can include anything from a smartphone to a tablet, e-reader, or laptop. “Second-screen use while watching TV doesn’t mean that these viewers are disengaged from what they are viewing – many of them use their devices to more actively research what they see on their television screens, or discuss the content through social media” (Karrer, n.d.). From this research project perspective, these profound changes are very important since the way brands - both commercial and political – connect with consumers-voters have become more fluid through the plethora of touchpoints. This subchapter uses insights from neuroscience to better understand consumer-voter behavior and showcase how this understanding can help political actors in building strong brands that in turn can help them grow their long-term political careers.

For decades, understanding the intricacies of the knowledge structure has been the focus of researchers from a diverse range of scientific disciplines. There is no doubt that specifically brand scholars have been particularly interested in the impact of the knowledge structure on consumer behavior. According to Thorsten Teichert and Karja Schöntag, “Particularly in the case of branding, identifying and eliciting encoded and recallable information in the customers’ minds has been of utmost interest ‘because it can create the differential response that makes up customer-based brand equity’ ... different types of brand knowledge, such as brand image, brand attitude, and brand personality, shape the consumer-brand relationship, which is a key component in the creation of brand equity” (Teichert & Schöntag, 2010, p. 370).

The human brain contains approximately 90 billion nerve cells, called neurons. Neurons are connected to other neurons through synapses – small junctions between adjacent neurons. When a neuron becomes active it emits an electrical impulse, which, in turn, activates the release of a neurotransmitter – a chemical molecule that traverses the synapse and activates an electrical impulse in the adjacent neuron. This process is inherently electrical-chemical-electrical-chemical, etc. Individual neurons have between

600 and 15.000 synapses – connections with other neurons. As Wendy Gordon explains, “Neurons form circuits, circuits form networks, networks form systems, systems form super-systems and super-systems combine to form the equivalent of galaxies. The total super-system is in continuous development. Neurons grow new attachments, and connections between neurons either increase in strength or weaken and fade away. *Neurons that fire together are wired together* is a much-quoted sentence in brand science writings. It is now widely known that the brain is plastic and its connective structure changes through experience. This is why the brain can store and process information in a way that a computer is unlikely to be able to do” (Gordon, 2006, p. 283).

Following the latest advances in cognitive neuroscience and neuropsychology, it has been widely acknowledged and accepted that knowledge structure can be construed as a metaphorical network of interconnected and interdependent informational nodes – cognitive concepts, such as products, objects, ideologies, brands, political candidates, patriotism, religion, cultural values, etc. (Teichert & Schontag, 2010, p. 370). This network is referred to as the associative cognitive network and describes the ability of the human brain to collect, organize, retain, and retrieve relationships between concepts, and not just the singular concepts themselves. Associative cognitive networks represent and explain key features of human memory. According to many scholars, “such networks, which consist of associations like product features, logos, and usage situations, and associative links, show the unique value of branded goods and services to consumers” (Brandt et al., 2011, p. 187). When two concepts – for example, *Popcorn* and *Movie Night* - are systematically paired together, they may become deeply ingrained in memory. Subsequently, when an individual thinks about *popcorn*, *movie night* is very likely to be recalled as well. As was noted above, associative networks are composed of informational nodes – cognitive concepts – interconnected by links. These links reflect the strength of associations between pairs of cognitive concepts. To put it differently, “the strength of connection represents the length of links. The longer the link is, the more remote the connection is. The shorter the link is, the closer the connection is” (Chen, 2011, p. 916). The cognitive network theory assumes that activated associative network can reveal the “inherent relationships between the associations and the brand as represented in a person’s memory” (Brandt et al., 2011, p. 189).

The cognitive network theory has adopted Quillian's theory of spreading-activation. Ross Quillian proposed his theory in the 1960s. This theory views "memory search as activation spreading from two or more concept nodes in a semantic network until an intersection is found" (Collins & Loftus, 1975, p. 407). The major tenet of the spreading activation theory is the proposition that "connections in the human brain are of varying strengths (in neurobiological terminology, the neurotransmitters are fired off more easily by the presynaptic neurons and let in more easily by the postsynaptic neurons" (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009, p. 270). In other words, the process by which memories and other information are recalled is possible "through the activation of one node and this activation spreads from that node to other nodes connected to it in memory. The spread of activation depends on the distance and the strength of the link" (Brandt et al., 2011, p. 189). This theory addresses a myriad of assumptions about the structure of the human semantic memory and the process of information retrieval. For example, it appears that people can generate almost an infinite amount of information related to any given concept. By using qualitative mapping techniques, such as Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), one can reveal "the inherent content (concepts and their associations) and relationships (links between concepts and associations) represented in a person's mind" (Brandt et al., 2011, p. 190). Moreover, concepts that are being consciously thought about are considered *active*. These *active* concepts trigger activation of other associated concepts in the cognitive network. "When an external stimulus triggers one node, the effect ripples across these multiple memory files (nodes) and elicits associations. Thus, brand associations may be thought of as consisting of all the information stored in a consumer's mind that he/she connects with a brand" (Rashid et al., 2020, p. 99). According to this theory, by activating certain well-defined cognitive concepts, other concepts can be activated in people's minds. "The closer the connection is, the faster the activation is. Therefore, to improve the memory, more clues for retrieval should be established. In the spreading activation model, the knowledge structure is compared to the circuit board, and the activation connecting the nodes is regarded as a kind of electrical energy or chemical activity" (Chen, 2011, p. 916).

As was already mentioned, a brand resides in the associative memory in the human brain; as such, a brand can be described as a cognitive entity. A brand, says Wendy Gordon, "is a dynamic and complex network of associations built up through past experience. This

means that the brand association network that one person has in his brain will be completely different from that which is coded to someone else's brain. The two will probably share elements if the brand is familiar and has been consistently communicated but there will be more differences than similarities. Thoughts are never separate from emotions and emotions never separate from thoughts; this is a neuro-scientific fact. Brands are coded in memory on a cognitive (thinking, analytical, considered) and emotional (somatic) basis. These two elements of brand encoding are inextricably linked, and it is emotional coding rather than reasoned argument that determines whether or not people take notice of the stimuli related to the brand, such as direct communications. This is because the emotional brand 'believes that its reactions are true' based on experiences of the past whereas the rational brand makes provisional decisions, modifying evaluations when new information arrives. The rational brain pauses for thought and analysis, the emotional brand reacts instinctively" (Gordon, 2006, p. 285).

People connect and associate the brand with a set of brand characteristics, attributes, benefits, impressions, memories, moments, and emotions. Therefore, it follows that brand strategist's major objective is to systematically create associations between brands and well-defined characteristics, attributes, features, benefits, and values in consumers' minds. It can be posited then that a brand is only as strong as the quality, density, and vividness of mental associations. If the brand's objective is to exert its influence on consumer behavior, "brands have to be integrated into the mental lexicon – "dictionary of mind" – of the consumer – from their connections in the lexicon – and have to achieve a very unique position in it" (Kovács, 2019, p. 99). Countless research studies have demonstrated that strong brands are built through the development of associations among and between well-selected concepts. Brand associations emerge when some attributes, traits, and benefits become deeply embedded in the minds of consumers. This process is predicated on linking the brand with positive attributes – "luxury", "fun", "safe", "creative", "rebel", "reliable", "presidential", "visionary" and so on. Thus, the activation of the associative brand network is dependent "on the relative strength of the connection between search cues and that brand rather than competing brands" (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009, p. 271). So, for example, the Republican Party in the United States may be viewed as an information node to which other nodes may be linked such as its current leader, Mitch

McConnell (and associations linked to him, like his physical appearance, strong leadership, his well-known political cunning, etc.); that it is the party that focuses on protecting the nation from international threats, the party that promotes a strong economy, the party of the financially well off, low taxes, strong military and so on. Seeing Mitch McConnell on the television (or hearing his name/reading about him) acts as a trigger, producing spreading activation from memory to other – peripheral – associations in the associative network, such as those already mentioned above. It follows then that any association when triggered (via other associations) has the potential to trigger – and activate – other brand nodes that reside in the memory.

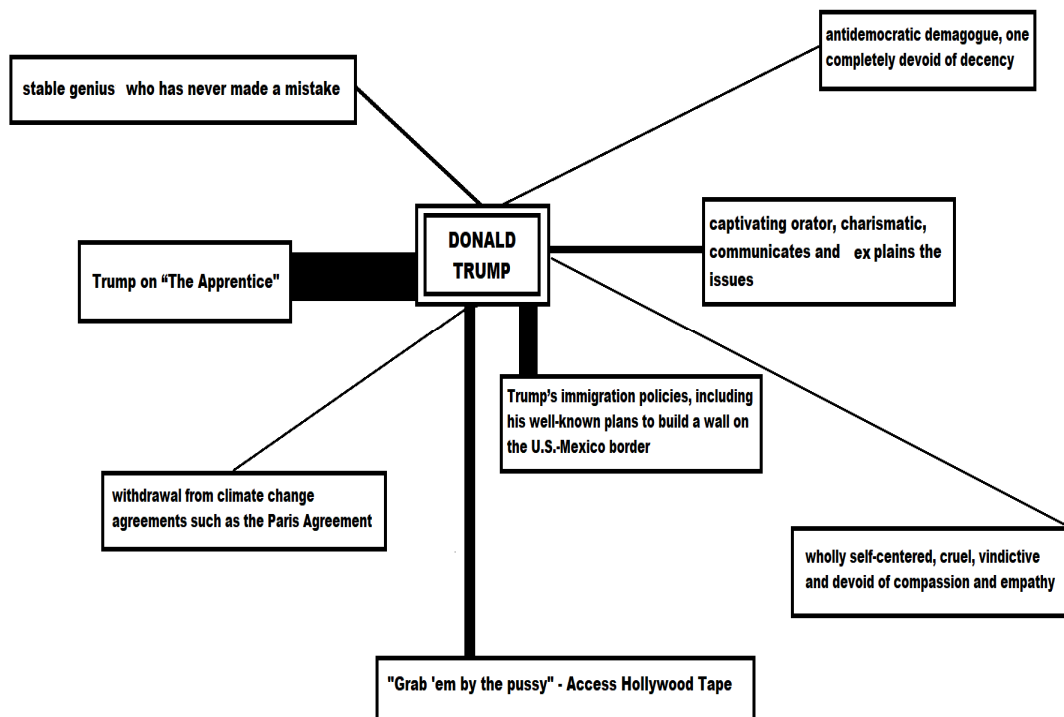


Figure 1. Example of the associative brand network of Donald Trump
 Source: based on author's conversations with a sample of American citizens who voted in 2020 Presidential Election

It is no exaggeration to posit that mental associations should be regarded as one of the most valued assets of brands. There is substantial evidence that brands are developed

through a plethora of interactions that contribute to the richness, density, and complexity of associative cognitive brand networks. Every new encounter and interaction with, and exposure to a brand are immediately incorporated into our preexisting perceptions. More precisely, every contact between consumers and brands triggers, shapes, and/or modifies the associative brand network. Numerous researchers emphasize the importance of brand associations, arguing that “brand associations contribute to the differentiation of competing brands, to the success of marketing communication ... moreover, they contain information about positioning, brand image, the brand’s competence” (Kovács, 2019, p. 99). Research studies conducted by Low and Lamb demonstrate that “for familiar brands the brand association measures are multidimensional but may be unidimensional for lesser-known brands. In other words, the more associative linkages of a brand the consumer has in his/her memory bank, the better he/she will be able to remember it and the higher would be the probability of loyalty towards the brand when the associations are positive” (Rashid et al, 2020, p. 100). It follows then that developing a network of positive brand associations in people’s minds is a powerful strategy aimed at setting oneself apart from competitors. Positive brand associations are a function of brand strategy, expertise, leadership, transparency, differentiation, brand’s ability to elicit positive emotions, espoused values, and communication. While an abundance of research focuses on the importance of brand associations, it must be noted that brand associations vary in importance and strength. “Brand associations are not equal; they have different strengths, which means that some associations are more characteristic of the brand while others are less so” (Kovács, 2019, p. 100). Hence, a brand must carefully communicate its intended image as anything related to the brand directly contributes – either positively or negatively – to people’s perception of the brand. There is no doubt that every company’s objective is to increase brand associations and improve brand’s public perception; this will provide the company with the competitive advantage over competitors. Many empirical studies demonstrate that positive brand associations have a profound impact on people’s emotions. There is strong evidence that “emotional confidence is a consequence of consumers’ emotional responses, bonding, and attachment towards a brand and, along with brand associations, is an important factor that needs to be monitored in relation to brand loyalty” (Rashid et al, 2020, p. 99). It has been shown that emotional influence is caused by deliberately selected and

well-communicated brand associations. Brand associations lead to so-called brand image which can be defined as a mental amalgamation of the associations, beliefs, and emotions the consumer has about the brand. “Based on this concept, anything that comes into the customer’s mind concerning the brand is relevant as an image element” (Susanti et al., 2019, p. 186). As postulated by Giovanni Lovett, “brand associations become a running tally of positive and negative feelings or thoughts toward a company or product, directly influencing the overall brand image” (Giovanni Lovett, 2018, p. 8). The importance of brand associations cannot be overstated. If a brand can create strong, positive, and idiosyncratic associations that resonate with consumers, i.e., if consumers can easily recognize, identify, and distinguish them from other brands, a highly differentiated and unique brand has been created. There is a consensus among brand researchers that “stronger associations are preferred to weaker ones because they are easier to elicit and influence the brand’s perception more than weak ones can” (Kovács, 2019, p. 100).

An extension of the associative brand network theory is the *core associations* concept. There is no doubt that brands have different meanings to different people, but successful brands seem to mean very precise things to a lot of people. As posited by Franzen and Moriarty, “the core associations determine the accessibility of brand elements in memory and are the associations that first come to mind when given a certain cue – when it comes to cream cheese, many people think first of the Philadelphia brand [...]. Connections between memory elements have a strength that determines their accessibility. A high relative accessibility denotes the more salient associations” (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009, p. 272). For example, when Americans think of the former president Bill Clinton, the core associations tend to revolve around several concepts, such as: an ‘idea politician’; the candidate of youth, whose age “served as a powerful metaphor for a change of attitude and direction in politics ... who had a distinct ideological identity – as a centrist policy innovator willing to distance himself from liberal special interests both symbolically and substantively” (Harris & Haberman, 2014). According to Steve Lombardo and Jackie Cooper, two political science researchers who focus on political branding, the Democratic Party in the United States enjoys a very strong and well-articulated constellation of brand’s core associations. “The Democratic Party emerges as far stronger than the GOP in several key areas, including: “offers a *hopeful* vision of the future,” “*cares* about people like me,”

“clearly explains how its actions will *benefit* me,” “*understands* issues facing the middle class,” “works to bring about *change*,” “honest and *ethical*” and “smart and *innovative*.”... hopeful, caring, beneficial, understanding, changing (for better), ethical and innovative. These are the brand signals that are currently owned by the Democratic Party” (Flows, 2012). They undoubtedly form the core of the cognitive associative Democratic Party brand network.

The purpose of strategic brand management is to influence what people – voters-consumers – think, feel, do, and say about the brand. Cognitive associations refer to what people think about the brand when they are exposed to the brand’s manifestations, such as a logo, name, advertising campaign, visual appearance, jingle, etc. – online or in person. Cognitive associations are the words and feelings created and – subsequently - attached to the brand based on the experience voters-consumers have had with the brand’s communication. The human brain decodes brand communications and pairs the brand with certain descriptors. These descriptors – says Jonathan Greene – “can range from positive terms – like elegant, rich, or warm – to less glowing ones, like flimsy, cheap, or inauthentic. You don’t get to choose your cognitive associations. they become associated with your brand based on the experiences you provide across the customer journey” (Greene, n.d.). The ultimate objective for brand strategists is to create a positive – and instant – impression of the brand without effortful thought on the part of voters-consumers. Brands that are able to create instantly relevant meaning and elicit positive emotions in voters-consumers enjoy a major advantage over their rivals. Barack Obama’s messages of hope, change and community were communicated through everything he did. As a consequence, a constellation of well-thought-out cognitive associations were created and deeply embedded in the minds of American voters-consumers. Donald Trump is also one of the few political actors who diligently and methodically uses the principles of strategic brand management to create vivid and compelling cognitive associations in the minds of American voters-consumers. According to Sian Rees – an expert on public relations and branding and an associate professor at the Swansea University – “Trump is a very different kind of politician, one who *relied on his businessman brand* [emphasis added], rather than a political background, to win the White House. From the very beginning of his campaign, he has used *commercial branding principles* [emphasis added] to create loyalty and desire

around strong brand values. Even before announcing he would run, Trump trademarked the slogan “Make America Great Again” and has already trademarked “Keep America Great” for a re-election campaign. Trump has always been good at branding. Building on the success of his father’s real estate business, Trump made his name focusing on luxury tower blocks in Manhattan, including the iconic 58-floor Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue. In 1987 he published *THE ART OF THE DEAL*, which cemented him as a celebrity businessman. This fame was later bolstered by his hosting of US television programme *The Apprentice*, as well as other frequent media appearances. *FORBES* now estimates Trump’s net worth to be US\$3.2 billion with his brand business – which license the Trump name to buildings and other products for a fee- worth US\$170m of that. To be successful, a brand must be two things: visually ubiquitous and “authentic”. Logos, symbols and names must be repeated in physical environments and communications that build the brand’s authenticity. An obvious example is Trump’s Make America Great Again slogan being embroidered on red trucker hats, which he himself models frequently at political rallies, which makes his branding seem more genuine. The ability to be perceived as authentic comes from avoiding a traditional, polished approach. Instead, authentic brands are more transparent, show “warts and all”, and are imbued with personal meaning. Consumers will see a brand or product as authentic when they feel they can identify with it, and when they feel that there has been creativity and sincerity in the process of its creation. For Trump, this authenticity is frequently bolstered through his language and impulsive use of social media. Whether we agree with his sentiments or not, there is an authenticity to Trump’s brand voice. What you hear is what you get. Trump is a master of short, sharp phrases – “drain the swamp” and “build the wall”, for example – which are easily memorable and appeal directly to the patriotic, protectionist ideology of his middle American voters. This type of simple, of-the-people language has continued into his presidency too. Trump’s January 2018 State of the Union address was a rousing, yet straightforward, speech that focused on a core brand message of American patriotism: “This is your time. If you work hard, if you believe in yourself, if you believe in America, then you can dream anything, you can be anything, and together, we can achieve anything.” This theme was repeated later that year in his address to the United Nations, where he withdrew from a number of UN initiatives, emphasising that “America is governed by Americans” (Rees, 2019).

This subchapter partially contributes to the overriding objective of this research project by providing an in-depth understanding of the neuropsychological underpinnings of consumer-voter behavior. To that end, this sub-chapter shows that brands with instant meaning and positive cognitive associations can get into the voters-consumers' brains fast, allowing them to make quick and effortless decisions and keep rival brands from even being considered. Building instant relevant meaning must be the key objective for political brands. Brands can forge positive relationships with voters-consumers through all the contacts that voters-consumers have with brands, such as physical and sensory experience, brand communication, news, word-of-mouth, and publicity. These combined experiences can build brand cognitive associations that subsequently influence voters-consumers' voting decisions. Brand associations – as was already explained – are composed of thoughts, feelings, meanings, and conative intentions that voters-consumers derive from any aforementioned brand stimuli – from logos, brand names, jingles and other proprietary brand sounds, to colors, signature styles, taglines, tone of voice, endorsements, advertising, etc. Selecting and supporting one brand over another depends on the strength and quality of those associations. Our brains work by bringing together associations quickly each time we encounter a stimulus, thereby giving us maximum flexibility in how we deal with threats and opportunities in our environments. This means that relatively small differences in the stimulus can create big differences in what comes to mind. Only the most silent associations will affect our decisions unless we make a deliberate effort to retrieve other thoughts and memories. When a brand name is not obviously salient or distinctive, additional cues help to access desirable associations for a specific brand. Brand associations help shape consumer attitudes – which have a strong impact on decisions and behaviour (Staplehurst, 2019).

CHAPTER 2. THE MANAGERIAL ASPECTS OF BRAND STRATEGY IN ELECTORAL POLITICS

2. 1. The Importance Of Political Brand Loyalty In Achieving Competitive Advantage

Brand associations are critical in decoding consumer-brand relationships and brand loyalty. A brand's path to success can be considerably accelerated if it has the ability to foster loyalty; as stated by Mersid Poturak and Lejla Ćatić, "loyalty is a key factor in creating this kind of success" (Poturak & Ćatić, 2022, p. 83). It must be noted at the outset, however, that success – and competitive advantage – within the political context can be differently interpreted by different scholars. The author of this dissertation is of the opinion that being a professional politician – whose career is characterized by longevity and popularity - is the most important variable in determining the electoral success of presidential candidates in the United States. The vast majority of the U.S. presidential candidates – who unsuccessfully run for office - vanish quickly from the collective memory upon completion of the election process. Staying relevant in politics – and maintaining public support – is, in and of itself, an achievement in the U.S. political environment. Unlike the Olympic Games, where the first-, second-, and third-place finishers in each sporting discipline receive Olympic medals: gold, silver, and bronze, respectively, the United States presidential election celebrates only one victor. Therefore, narrowing the definition of competitive advantage – and political success within the context of the United States presidential elections - to the Presidential election's victory seems too limiting and short-sighted. The nature and role of competitive advantage in electoral politics is analyzed in-depth in Chapter 3.

One of this dissertation's hypotheses is that the conceptualization of voters as consumers justifies the application of strategic brand management principles in politics. The objective of this subchapter is to present and analyze the dynamic interplay between commercial and political brand loyalty. As the presented evidence indicates, understanding the nature of brand loyalty within the commercial environment can significantly help in establishing a strong brand and competitive advantage within the political environment.

This, in turn, suggests that thinking about voters as consumers allows political actors to make better decisions regarding their long-term political careers.

There is no doubt that establishing a loyal voter-consumer base is pivotal for long-term success within the context of electoral politics in the United States. Brand loyalty stands out as a critical pillar among the numerous strategies and tactics brands – both political and commercial – can leverage to thrive. Brand loyalty transcends simple consumer-voter preference; it captures the emotional connection and dedication consumers-voters develop towards a particular brand, and the dynamics of identity development (Parker, 2023). Despite the growing interest in brand loyalty, it is widely reported that the concept of brand loyalty is grossly misunderstood among political strategists and marketers. Marketing literature is replete with many overly convoluted definitions of brand loyalty. These definitions are so vague that they betray a widespread confusion as to what brand loyalty actually is. Additionally, the definitional problem is exacerbated by the sheer fact that loyalty is not a quantifiable behavior. As a result, it cannot be easily measured. Numerous researchers have emphasized the importance of behavioral loyalty, which can be described as a proclivity to purchase the brand regularly and continuously. However, this definition is too limited to consider brand loyalty in the political environment. It is now well recognized that “behavioral loyalty offers too simplistic a view of the loyalty construct and does not capture the multidimensionality and richness associated with it [...]. In fact, loyalty based solely on repeat purchase behavior has been termed as ‘spurious’ loyalty” (Ahluwalia & Kaiki, 2010, p. 64). According to David Aaker – who is often regarded as a founder of modern strategic brand management – brand loyalty refers to “a relationship between the customer and a brand where customers become attached to the brand and prefer and buy it over a period of time and in the face of competition” (Rashid et al, 2020, p. 98). This definition broadens the scope of behaviors, processes, and actions associated with brand loyalty and paves the way for a considerably more multidimensional concept of brand loyalty. Attitude-based loyalty has been widely recognized and accepted as a more accurate representation of brand loyalty. According to this perspective, attitude-based loyalty refers to “the psychological attachment or commitment of the consumer to the brand ... Increasingly, researchers are defining loyalty as ‘stickiness to the brand’, which is a combination of attitudinal commitment and overt

loyalty behaviors” (Ahluwalia & Kaiki, 2010, p. 64). In other words, brand loyalty can be described as the extent to which consumers are emotionally, cognitively, and socially committed to supporting, buying, defending, and using the brand. Brand loyalty can also be defined as a sum total of all consumer attitudes, emotions, and impressions about the brand from previous encounters with the brand. Looking from this perspective, brand loyalty can manifest itself in repeated purchases, casting a vote for a favorite political candidate (political brand), or brand evangelism. According to Toni Ann Cestare and Ipshita Ray, “brand evangelism results from consumers feeling so deeply committed to a brand they consistently and repeatedly advocate for the brand with the intention of persuading other consumers” (Cestare & Ray, 2019, p. 10). Brand loyalty then can be construed as a long-term strategic objective that can lead to brand success. In the commercial environment, “brand loyalty is measured by the probability that consumers in the following period will continue to use products belonging to a certain brand, ‘regardless of changes in market circumstances and marketing efforts of competitors, who offer the same product category’ ... this dimension refers to consumers' intention to be loyal to a particular brand, so that their primary choice will always be to purchase the same brand. In this way, a difference is made between loyal and disloyal consumers” (Poturak & Ćatić, 2022, p. 85). It is highly plausible to argue that attitudinal factors are perfectly suited to distinguish brand loyalty from repeat buying. Attitudinal factors are predicated on stated beliefs, preferences, emotions, commitments, and/or purchase intentions of the consumer, thus highlighting the cognitive nature of brand loyalty.

There are several researchers who argue that attitude-based loyalty acts as an antecedent to so-called defensive processing. As Ahluwalia and Kaiki explain, “defensive processing, which is triggered by a motivation to protect or defend existing attitudes toward favorite brands, implies a significant change, and at times, even a reversal of the natural information processing tendencies of people. For instance, although there is a natural tendency of individuals to give more weight to negative as compared to positive information about brands, given the higher perceived diagnosticity of the former, this negativity effect is known to be eliminated, and at times even reversed, for brands [and political candidates] that consumers are committed to” (Ahluwalia & Kaiki, 2010, p. 65). Defensive processing revolves around seeking out, attending to, encoding, interpreting, or

elaborating attitude-relevant information to support, confirm, or protect one's brand preference and loyalty. Defensive processing involves actions such as avoiding attitude-inconsistent information and seeking out attitude-consistent information. Moreover, defensive processing involves evaluating attitude-inconsistent information in a highly critical manner in order to refute and discredit it (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2018). Defensive processing enables voters-consumers to screen out and/or ignore unfavorable brand information. As a consequence, voters-consumers process stimuli most relevant to their identities, cultural values, beliefs, convictions, and needs. Defensive processing activates cognitive, emotive, and conative resources to receive – and process – brand-positive stimuli.

According to Catherine Needham – the preeminent authority on political communication – “the choices voters make at election time are analogous to the choices consumers make between commercial products or services” (Needham, 2006, p. 178). Needham's assertion clearly indicates that consumers' and voters' motivations and attitudes towards brands – both political and commercial – are similar if not identical. Following this line of thought, it can be stated that brand loyalty in the political context parallels brand loyalty in the commercial context. Moreover, several studies suggest that brand loyalty has become a phenomenon linking political and commercial contexts. Some scholars present evidence that indicates that consumers-voters express their loyalty toward brands – both commercial and political – only if there is an alignment between their values and the values espoused by the political and commercial brands. These scholars clearly suggest that political issues have become a significant part of consumers' lives. “Indeed, most adult U.S. consumers self-identify as being either conservative or liberal (with few people in the middle), and the majority of consumers believe that companies should take a stand on social and political issues” (Ordabayeva et al., n.d.). Consumption and voting have become inextricably intertwined. FlexMR's 2019 large-scale study on consumption, voting, and brand loyalty found that 62.2% of consumers-votes prefer commercial brands that agree with their political beliefs (FlexMR, 2019, p. 15). Consumers-voters expect commercial brands to take a stand on social and political issues. An extensive survey conducted by Edelman revealed that 71% of respondents expect commercial brands to take political actions. These expectations in turn influence consumers-voters' decisions,

extending to neural choices like selecting political candidates, choosing social media platforms, and encouraging voter participation. 71% of respondents also believe that commercial brands need to address social and political issues to meet consumer expectations. 60% of respondents claim they support or avoid commercial brands based on political views. These findings clearly corroborate Needham's assertion that voters' and consumers' motivations and psychological underpinnings have become intertwined, interconnected and interdependent (Bureau, 2024).

According to FlexMR – one of the leading global providers of market research reports and industry analysis – brand loyalty is a multidimensional construct revolving around identity – both self-identity and social identity. FlexMR's 2019 large-scale research study on consumption, voting, and brand loyalty explores the ways in which political, social and brand decisions are made by consumers-voters and challenges traditional assumptions of consumer and voter loyalty. As FlexMR's researchers contend, brand loyalty – within both commercial and political contexts – is a function of an individual's identity, which in turn is heavily influenced by the groups surrounding an individual. "The groups surrounding an individual have a high degree of influence over political, social and consumption decisions" – say FlexMR's researchers (FlexMR, 2019, p. 4). The research study showcases how the individual and group-based identity is fundamental to the actions an individual takes and the values, beliefs, and convictions he/she projects onto the world around them. In an active capacity, identity is constructed and manifested through the political, social and consumption decisions. "The religious ideology a person associates with, the way in which they interact with a political system and the purchases they make are all building blocks that underpin both an internal view of the self and a projected version. Though rarely spoken about in marketing departments, let alone boardrooms, understanding the interplay between a brand and the relevant facets of an audience's identity is what determines success or failure. *The same is true of political campaigns* [emphasis added] and social relationships – even if these mechanisms are primarily subconscious. Society relies on individual identity to function; to form and dissolve groups, to determine the winners and losers in the commercial battleground and to collectively distribute power across social institutions" (FlexMR, 2019, p. 4). The FlexMR's researchers posit that the desire an individual holds to be part of a group is a much more

significant measure of loyalty than traditionally considered behaviors alone. They follow – and corroborate - Cova’s, Kozinets’ and Shankar’s ideas presented in their seminal 2007 book *Consumer Tribes* and contend that consumers-voters’ identities constitute the very foundation of voting and consumption behaviors. Consumers and voters are people – assert Cova, Kozinets and Shankar – “but people who live in a specific social and historical situation. This places them in a co-dependent relationship with commercial culture, one where industrial and post-industrial information economies create not only things, but critical elements of cultural, social, and self-identity, and where those identities are at both the bottom and the top of the proverbial economic-industrial-political pyramid. So let’s be content for the moment in stating that consumers are consumers primarily in that they take commercial identities as important aspects of themselves and their collectives, that they use these identities to relate to themselves, to other people, and to the world around them through lenses that incorporate a vast range of commercial and commercially produced pursuits, objectives and definitions of the self” (Cova et al., 2007, p. 4). In the contemporary world, a tribe refers to a group of people who share belief systems, political ideologies, and brand preferences. It is this desire to share a common identity that drives much human behavior. People have a tendency to build their identities around the political, societal and consumption decisions they make daily. Once an idea, a brand, a political ideology become deeply embedded within an individual’s identity, they become important – and personal – reflections of the self (FlexMR, 2019, p. 11). Most importantly though, the connections to reference groups – groups of people that influence an individual’s identity, actions, thoughts, feelings, values, convictions, morality – have a profound impact on an individual’s identity and conceptions of self. It has been recognized that “the most important aspect to a person’s identity is their family and friends, followed closely by their hobbies or interests (FlexMR, 2019, p. 13). A study conducted by Nielsen corroborates these findings – 92% of consumers trust brand recommendations from family and friends (Samuel, 2021). Gabriel Lenz - an expert in political psychology and the author of *Follow The Leader? How Voters Respond To Politicians’ Performance And Politics* – claims that “Many people follow a political party as they would a football team. Values may be less important in shaping allegiance than *family tradition or the shared identity* [emphasis added] and social pressures of a community” (Lempinen, 2020). This means that people

form their brand preferences and loyalty – both political and commercial – based on interactions with the members of the respected reference groups, such as family and friends. These findings unambiguously suggest that a social identity perspective could be appropriate in describing the dynamic interplay between consumption, voting and brand loyalty. Brand loyalty is a function of consumers-voters' identity motives - specifically self-expression, self-enhancement, and self-esteem. Indeed, the importance of identity in developing loyalty towards a brand – both political and commercial – stresses an individual's psychological and social desire to feel connected and accepted within a well-defined reference group.

It must be noted, though, that numerous researchers have also linked brand loyalty to the concept of self-signaling (which in turn is associated with social identity and self-identity). Self-signaling has emerged from behavioral economics and refers to actions taken by an individual aimed at reinforcing ideas about oneself. “Research on self-perception and self-signaling suggests that people infer from the option they choose what kind of person they are” (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2012, p. 16). It follows then that the intensity of a self-signal is predicated not only on a person's final selection but also on the alternatives he/she rejected. Every time people purchase a brand or cast a vote for a political candidate, they reassure themselves that they, too, possess similar qualities and/or share similar values as the brand they buy or the candidate they vote for (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2012, p. 16).

Catharine Needham is of the opinion that “There are several characteristics of a brand that render it a useful explanatory concept for analyses of voter choice. First, brands simplify choice and reduce dependence on detailed product information, in much the same way as party label relieve voters of the need to familiarize themselves with all the party's politics. Secondly, brands provide reassurance by promising standardization and replicability, generating trust between producer and consumer, much as parties emphasize unity and coherence in order to build up voter trust. Thirdly, brands, like parties, are aspirational, evoking a particular vision of the good life or holding out the promise of personal enhancement. Fourthly, to be successful, brands must be perceived as authentic and value-based, necessitating congruence between the internal values of the product or company and its external message. In the same way, successful parties must link their

external presentational strategies to a set of core values, if they are to retain voter support. In political and the marketplace, voters and consumers must negotiate the conflicts between loyalty to trusted brands and the novelty of the new, while making sense of complex and conflicting product information. For fast-moving consumer goods such choices must be negotiated on a daily basis, whereas political choices are more infrequent. However, even within the political marketplace there is diversity: the big purchases every four to five years at a general election; the second-order purchases of local ...elections; and the regular choices about which party's version of events or policy options should be accepted and endorsed. Conceiving political parties [and other political actors] as brands helps to explain two aspects of voter decision making. First, party brands provide a basis for *long-term loyalty* [emphasis added] in an environment where products (policies) are fairly fluid. Initial patterns of support – for political parties as for other infrequent purchases such as financial products – are likely to be shaped by family, but the process of detachment from these formative social settings appears to be intensifying ... Many supporters remain loyal though dissatisfied through fear of taking a risk with the unknown, turning out at elections to back a party for which they have little enthusiasm. A barrier to loyalty in politics, as in the marketplace, is the proliferation of new products. Consumers and voters have more choice than in the past.” (Needham, 2006, p. 180).

Political brand loyalty refers to a voter's consistent preference for one political brand over all others, whether due to social context affiliation and identity, values, beliefs, and convictions the brand espouses, or emotional attachment to the brand. This loyalty can manifest through systematic support, favorable word-of-mouth and brand evangelism, and active resistance to switching to other political brands. According to Yale University political scholars Milan Svolik and Matthew Graham, American voters prize *political brand loyalty* [emphasis added] over democratic principles. This seemingly shocking discovery sheds light on the importance of brand loyalty within the American political marketplace. The study conducted by Svolik and Graham - and published in the *American Political Science Review* in 2020 - found that only 3.5% of U.S. voters cast ballots against their preferred candidates as punishment for undemocratic behavior. This means that 96.5% of American voters exhibit inordinate degrees of political brand loyalty. The researchers' findings expose the powerful impact brand loyalty has on voters' behaviors

and attitudes. For the most part, voters-consumers are overwhelmingly loyal towards political brands who share their values, identities, and goals, even if that means “condoning undemocratic behavior” (Cummings, 2020). Brand loyalty is thus inextricably intertwined with defensive processing and selective perception. Voters who are loyal towards a political brand are characterized by the tendency to actively avoid stimuli that question – or attack - their existing brand preferences. These stimuli cause emotional discomfort and instigate defensive processing.

Political actors who skillfully and consistently build strong personal political brands achieve almost cult-like loyalty. “He needs to win. He is really the best. He is like a political messiah. Bernie Sanders is a rockstar,” a Nevada voter told the author of this dissertation. Numerous qualitative interviews with Sanders’ supporters conducted by the author of this dissertation capture the fierce loyalty of his zealous supporters. These Sanders loyalists “feel the Vermont senator is channeling their frustration about the injustices foisted on the working class. They are bound to Sanders through a covenant of trust that he will be their unwavering, unchanging champion [...]. That bond with Sanders, rooted in the constancy of his ideas over many decades, is a striking contrast to the indecision and uncertainty one often hears from voters at the events of other 2020 candidates” (Reston & Krieg, 2020). “Bernie is the only candidate with a heart. I have faith in him. I know that he cares about the future of this country and the future of this planet. I trust him, and I will support him no matter what,” another Sanders’ supporter in Nevada told the author of this dissertation. Brand loyalty also characterizes Donald Trump’s supporters. After his unsuccessful 2020 presidential race, only 15% of Trump’s 74.1 million voters say Biden’s win was legitimate. Numerous scholars see a loyalty to Trump so intense and so unshakeable that it exerts a cult-like gravity. According to Jennifer A. Chatman, an influential scholar of leadership and organizational cultures and associate dean at the UC Berkeley Haas School of Business: “Trump has claimed that he’s the ‘chosen one’. He’s said he’s super-smart, a genius. He has established his image as the leader who is cleaning up Washington and the savior of the common person so convincingly that none of his supporters are looking beyond that to see that, in fact, many of the things he’s doing are exactly the opposite” (Lempinen, 2020). Chatman claims that craftful use of storytelling techniques can significantly boost voters’ loyalty: “Research has

shown that people can be persuaded by the stories that leaders tell. If a leader makes an appealing promise, people will remain loyal, even if the leader doesn't deliver. Trump has framed a narrative that says, 'I'm the turnaround guy. I'm going to drain the swamp. I'm going to blow Washington up.' And so, anyone who was disaffected about government, which turns out to have been a lot of people, like that narrative. A person's immense loyalty to a cult is a result of small escalations of personal commitment. People begin to identify with the group and feel accountable to its members and especially to the leader. They fear that defection would let others down, or that they could be rejected by this group with which their identity has become deeply connected. So, when Trump doesn't release his taxes, or has a dalliance with a porn star, or abuses his power, his allies develop a supportive rationale and *remain ardently loyal* [emphasis added]" (Lempinen, 2020).

Following the presented evidence in this subchapter, it can be posited that brand loyalty within the political environment runs deep in the American society. Political brand loyalty can be described as the devotion to and identification with a political brand. Political brand loyalty entails forgoing other values and ideals and systematically supporting one political brand with whom one wishes to identify. This subchapter partially contributes to the overriding objective of this research project by providing an in-depth understanding of brand loyalty concept and exploring the socio-psychological underpinnings of consumer-voter behavior. Political brands that voters-consumers perceive as sharing their values, beliefs, and convictions are being rewarded with brand loyalty. As Alistair Mackay observes: "The level of loyalty and emotional investment that political parties in this country [United States of America] get out of their supporters is staggering, especially when you consider that they are only allowed big advertising campaigns once every five years. If private sector brands could illicit such customer loyalty, their marketing directors would retire at 40 – rich, happy and fulfilled. So how do they do it? How do our political brands get such fervent support, even in the absence of tangible products and services and, in some cases, poor or skewed records of delivery? There are a number of reasons for it and some, such as our oppressive past and a lingering sense that politics is a zero-sum game, are awful and not particularly helpful for marketers. But I believe that there are two things political parties do that other brands can learn from,

things that connect with our emotions and make us willing to forgive shortcomings, rather than jump ship:

1. Political parties inspire us through storytelling, and
2. They show that they are on our side.

Storytelling, as a discipline, has been getting a lot of attention recently but there are still very few brands that get it right. It requires the storyteller to give up talking about product features unless they support or add to the narrative. Even more difficult for brands, storytelling requires conflict. Good stories are not just a sequence of happy marketing jingles: they have obstacles, and heroes who triumph over them. Political parties weave grand, elaborate stories that capture our imaginations and give a sense of history and importance to our lives. Whether it's a national democratic revolution, a fight for economic freedom, or a battle to restore the dreams of 1994, political brands are stories about overcoming injustice and oppression. As a citizen and voter, it's almost impossible not to be drawn in. But political parties do more than that — they cast the hero in their stories as you. The fight is to improve your life; the struggles they talk about are the struggles you face every day. And that is where the real marketing magic lies. It is a simple principle, but so often forgotten by marketers — be on your customers' side. Have your customers' interests at heart [...]. Political brands are powerful forces to be reckoned with. They do a much better job at earning and holding loyalty than most other brands, largely because we love the stories they tell, because they understand our worries and frustrations and, most importantly, because we believe they are fighting in our corner for us" (Mackay, 2014).

Mackay's eloquent – and succinct - account of brand loyalty within the political context indicates that several political actors in the U.S. – and presidential candidates in particular – successfully leverage the principles of strategic brand management to their advantage. The evidence presented in this subchapter is an attempt to decode the psychosocial underpinnings of brand loyalty and set the stage for further analysis of political brand strategies used by American presidential candidates. This subchapter also suggests that the conceptualization of voters as consumers could facilitate the use of strategic brand management principles in electoral politics. The presented evidence showcases that establishing a loyal voter-consumer base is pivotal for long-term success within the context of electoral politics in the United States. Understanding the

underpinnings of brand loyalty within the commercial environment can significantly increase the chances of establishing a competitive advantage in the political environment. This subchapter partially contributes to the overriding objective of this research project by presenting compelling evidence indicating that by leveraging the principles of strategic brand management, one can considerably boost the voters-consumers' loyalty towards a political brand and secure a long-term political career growth.

2.2. Political Brand Positioning As A Catalyst In Making Authentic Connections With Voters-Consumers

One of this research project's hypotheses is that brand positioning facilitates the development of voters-consumers' positive brand perceptions. This subchapter is an attempt to provide compelling – yet fragmentary - evidence supporting this hypothesis. Chapter 5 will provide further evidence - based on an empirical study – showcasing the impact of brand positioning on the development of voters-consumers' positive brand perceptions.

According to many brand researchers – including Aaker, Anang, Diallo, Dirsehan, Kurtulus, Arif, and Santos - “a strong brand must have a strong position. A strong positioning will make a brand more embedded in consumers' memories. When the brand is increasingly embedded in consumers' memories, an image will be created in the minds of consumers. Brand image is created when a strong and unique brand is connected in the minds of consumers because brand knowledge is seen from the perspective of consumer memory. Brand image is represented by all perceptions formed from past experiences. Therefore, perceptions formed from the past result in a person having repurchase intentions because the brand must make a person have a good and meaningful emotional experience” (Pratisthita et al., 2022, p. 182). It is unequivocal that commercial brands, companies, religious organizations, sports teams, artists, musicians, museums, financial institutions, political parties and candidates actively seek to construct images that convey leadership, trust, reliability, experience, compassion, empathy, and success. Researchers label the image attributes that strategists seek to embed in people's minds ‘intended positioning’.

The difference must be emphasized between ‘intended positioning’ and ‘actual positioning’, which refers to the image attributes that currently exist in people’s minds. As many researchers contend, “the distinction between intended and actual positioning is important because it allows us to recognize that communication is not only a two-way negotiated process between communicator and audience, but that the set of image attributes that end up in peoples’ minds are not mere facsimiles of those image attributes that ... marketers seek to place there” (Baines et al., 2014, p. 172). Even though 50 years have passed since the term *positioning* entered the marketing parlance, many marketers still have fuzzy understanding of this now iconic concept. The term *positioning* was first introduced in 1972, in a series of articles entitled “The Positioning Era Cometh” by Al Ries and Jack Trout, published in Advertising Age magazine. *Positioning* continues to be an important concept in brand management, marketing, and political science, and is believed to act as the basis for brand strategy. Despite having been around for several decades, positioning still seems to be veiled in elusiveness and misperception. According to Maloney and Czerniawski, “managers will still state that positioning is your target audience, or your benefit, or, perhaps, what you want customers to think about you (such as the image), or what you say in your advertising ... and so forth” (Czerniawski & Maloney, 2010, p. 2).

While most marketers and political strategists have some vague understanding of positioning, few acknowledge the benefits and importance of this revolutionary concept. Al Ries and Jack Trout describe positioning as follows: “Today’s marketplace is no longer responsive to the kind of advertising that worked in the past. There are just too many products, too many companies, too much marketing “noise.” To succeed in our over-communicated society, a company must create a “position” in the prospect’s mind. A position that takes into consideration not only its own strengths and weaknesses, but those of its competitors as well” (Kompella, 2014, p. 4). In other words, positioning can be defined “as the way we want customers to perceive, think and feel about our brand versus competition” (Czerniawski & Maloney, 2010, p. 4). Al Ries posits that “positioning is the process of looking inside consumers’ minds and trying to find an ‘open’ hole. You don’t start with your brand; you start with the minds of your prospects. Then if you can’t find an open hole, you try to change your brand in order to facilitate the positioning process”

(Kompella, 2014, pp. 4-5). Hence, brand positioning boils down to owning a highly unique position in the mind of the target consumer.

Following this line of reasoning, it can be argued that brand positioning is developed through perceptions, images, knowledge, experiences, impressions, emotions, and how consumers compare the brand with competing brands. This last point deserves to be highlighted: brand positioning is constructed relative to competitors' brands in a way that conveys differentiation. Moreover, and as stated by Maloney and Czerniawski, "brand positioning asserts the reason-for-being for the brand against competitive products, or services, among select customers" (Czerniawski & Maloney, 2010, p. 5). As Ries contends, most people have a limited ability for abstraction in thought process; people think in words. In order to build a strong and successful brand, a well-chosen word- or concept – must be associated with the brand. "When you can preempt a word, you can own that word for decades to come. A simple position can be the basis for building a world-class brand that can live almost forever. Volvo owns "safety". BMW owns "driving" Mercedes-Benz own "prestige". Three words built three powerful brands" (Kompella, 2014, p. 5). When discussing the political brand of Barack Obama, Keith Reinhard - Chairman Emeritus at the DDB Worldwide Communications Group LLC, a worldwide marketing communications network owned by Omnicom Group, one of the world's largest advertising holding companies – famously said: "Barack Obama is three things you want in a brand – new, different, and attractive. That's as good as it gets" (Zavattaro, 2010, p. 123). The analysis of Obama's brand positioning clearly demonstrates that it revolved around a well-articulated singular message embodied in his slogans – "Change We Can Believe in" and "Hope" – and the sun-with-rays logo (Zavattaro, 2010, p. 123).

One of this dissertation's hypotheses is that brand positioning facilitates the development of voters-consumers' positive brand perceptions. Brand positioning within the context of electoral politics in the United States enables a political brand to efficiently and effectively communicate and reach the desired target audience with the singular, easy-to-grasp, compelling statement. An example of successful political brand positioning is Bernie Sanders' core message. Sanders has consistently described himself as a democratic socialist and an admirer of aspects of Nordic social democracy, while also building a movement to fight for economic, racial, social, and environmental justice for all. In his

speeches, Sanders would consistently repeat that his agenda of single-payer health care, a \$15 minimum wage and free public college went from *too radical, too extreme*, to something viewed by many Americans as a compelling message. In 2016, his signature *Medicare-for-all* health care plan had become a foundation of his brand positioning and would end up as one of the defining issues of the 2020 primary. His brand positioning had viscerally resonated with voters-consumers for whom Sanders' core messages were evocative, compelling, patriotic, and transformative. November 2019 polls conducted by The Wall Street Journal also showed that Bernie Sanders' base was *more loyal and dedicated* [emphasis added] than that of any other 2020 Democrat (Collins, 2019). Ultimately, Sanders did not emerge as the Democratic nominee in either of his two presidential bids, but his brand positioning has fundamentally reshaped the Democratic party's politics and policy in significant ways (Detrow, 2020).

Another example illustrating well-formulated political brand positioning is Elizabeth Warren's signature initiative and top priority addressing political corruption, which she (still) sees as the connective tissue linking many social issues. Warren's brand positioning had exclusively been predicated on the message of power and corruption in the U.S. Government. In one of her speeches, she argued that "beginning in the 1980s, Washington's focus shifted from policies that benefit everyone to policies that benefit a handful of elites, both here at home and around the world" (Yglesias, 2019). Warren's brand positioning had revolved around a handful of core messages: a plan to crack down on corruption in defense procurement, reproductive rights agenda, breaking up big technology companies, free college and student debt cancellation, and a big new tax on large, accumulated fortunes. These simple – yet easy to grasp – messages resonated with voters-consumers for whom Elizabeth Warren would become a warrior fighting for their future. "I feel Warren is the only candidate realizing that big businesses and Washington lobbyists are putting profits above the well-being of hard-working American families. I understand her message...it's plain and simple," said one Nevada voter in the conversation with the author of this dissertation. Warren's brand positioning was one-dimensional, laser-focused, and easily understandable by voters-consumers. "Billionaire corporations have gotten a free ride in America for too long. It's time to stop letting giant corporations cheat the system – they should pay taxes just like everyone else. My Corporate Profits Minimum

Tax would help put an end to tax-rigging schemes and raise billions in revenues so we can make real investments in American families,” said Senator Elizabeth Warren in one of her speeches (warren.senate.gov, 2021). Warren consistently and vigilantly would paint the wealthy, big corporations, chains and banks as the biggest, most important problems in the United States: “Big Tech companies continue to misclassify workers as independent contractors, excluding them from accessing abortion-related benefits. @RepCori and I are fighting to ensure big corporations can’t get away with exploiting this loophole any longer” said Warren in one of her Twitter posts (Marks, 2022).

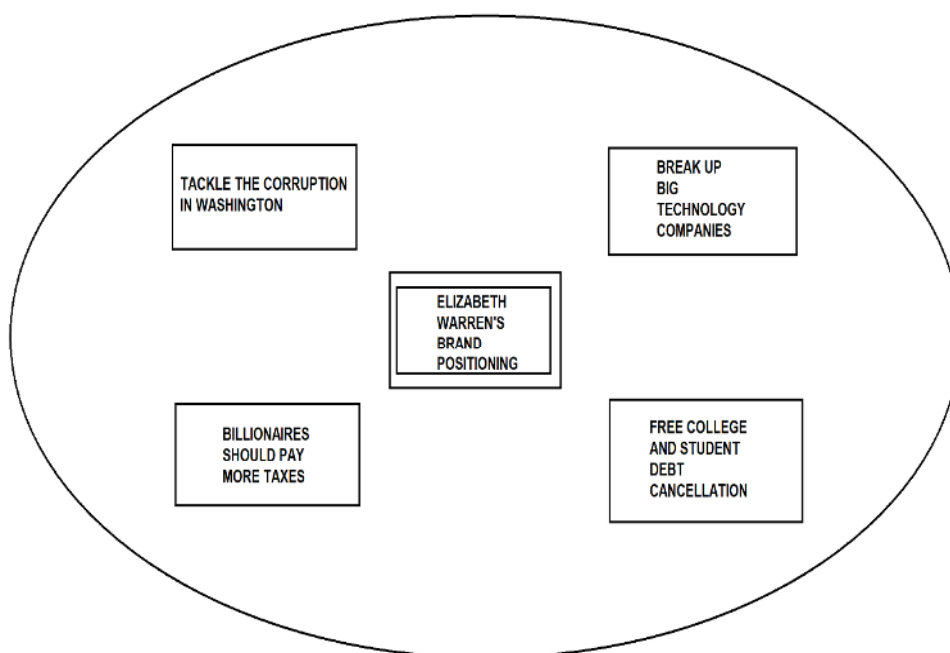


Figure 2. Example of the brand positioning of Elizabeth Warren

Source: based on author’s conversations with a sample of American citizens who voted in 2020 Presidential Election

Her brand positioning was palpable throughout her campaign: “I’ve been talking for years about how Big Tech has too much power over our economy and our democracy. I’m going to keep making the case for my plan to break up Big Tech and put power back in the hands of the American people – whether it’s at SXSW, a town hall in Iowa or a billboard in the heart of Silicon Valley” – wrote Warren in an email to The New York Times (Bowles, 2019).

A clear, well-formulated, laser-focused, and concise brand positioning effectively breaks through the clutter of media noise. Brand positioning plays a vital role in the process of establishing a strong brand in the minds of voters-consumers and acts as the foundation upon which success is built. By carefully formulating the brand positioning strategy, a brand can create a compelling narrative that resonates with the target audience and establishes an emotional connection. Voters-consumers want easy – yet emotionally compelling – messages and narratives. They want to know easily and quickly who to trust. Consciously and subconsciously, brand positioning triggers an emotional response from the target audience (Perez, 2023).

This subchapter has focused on and analyzed the concept of brand positioning and its role in electoral politics. It has been shown that brand positioning can significantly boost a political actor's career and popularity. This subchapter is also an attempt to answer one of the research questions, namely: Does strategic branding in politics facilitate a politician's long term career growth? The presented evidence suggests that brand positioning – an important element of strategic branding – can fundamentally contribute to the development of a strong political brand, and – in the process – facilitate a political actor's long term career growth. Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Barack Obama, Donald Trump are paragons of how brand positioning is effectively leveraged within the context of electoral politics in the U.S. Their vibrant political careers, immense popularity, and public influence serve as testimonies of the usefulness of strategic brand management in politics.

2.3. Political Brand Authenticity As A Strategic Vehicle For Showcasing Brand Overarching Values, Vision, And Transparency

It is now widely accepted within the academic milieu that marketers and political communicators devise compelling and emotionally evocative narratives to position their brands. It is no exaggeration to say that we live in an age where people become absolutely overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information they encounter on a daily basis. It seems that brands that “convey authentic meaning gain the upper hand over their competitors”

(Södergren, 2021, p. 645). Joseph C. Nunes, Andrea Ordanini, and Gaia Giambastiani unambiguously emphasize the importance of authenticity in contemporary consumer culture: “Consumers crave authenticity – so much so that their quest for authenticity is considered one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing. This has created an enormous challenge for the field, considering that marketing itself is typically considered inherently inauthentic. To overcome consumer cynicism, it has been argued that firms must learn to understand, manage, and excel at rendering authenticity” (Nunes et al., 2021, p. 1). One of the hypotheses of this research project is that brand authenticity is an important driver of brand loyalty. Brand loyalty has already been thoroughly analyzed in subchapter 2.1. This subchapter aims to serve as a blueprint explaining the intricacies and the role of brand authenticity within the context of electoral politics. Chapter 5 will delve deeper – using empirical studies - into the evidence supporting the argument that brand authenticity significantly contributes to the development of a long-term political career. This subchapter, thus, partially contributes to the overriding objective of this research project by providing a comprehensive anatomy of brand authenticity and how it ties in with other brand concepts, such as brand loyalty, brand identity, and brand positioning.

Consumers are increasingly determined to systematically scrutinize brands against the well-defined criteria of morality, authenticity, demanded transparency, and the sensitivity of brand custodians. As explained by Jenny Caven, “customers are increasingly using social media to articulate their dissatisfaction with companies that fail to live up to best practices and make efforts that are intended to influence other consumers’ purchase decisions [...]. Authenticity of brands means ensuring that the external perception of the brand aligns with organizational purpose, values and culture” (Caven, 2022, p. 35).

There is a palpable sense of growing attention among communication scholars towards research on brand authenticity. This “makes intuitive sense from a cultural, consumer and market perspective, as the level of focus on authenticity is closely correlated with the rise in popularity of social media platforms and web-based online review forums, such as; Google Reviews in 2002, Facebook in 2004, Yelp in 2004, YouTube in 2005, Twitter in 2006, WhatsApp in 2009, Instagram in 2010, Snapchat in 2011 and TikTok and Instagram Stories in 2016. In 2020, three new social media platforms launched that are already garnering significant usage, Clubhouse, Twitter Spaces and Instagram Reels. With

the advent, high usage, and growth of these online review and social media platforms, consumers could now, in real-time, communicate with brands” (Campagna, 2022, p. 129). Numerous research studies clearly demonstrate that brand authenticity considerably contributes to the generation of trust and loyalty. It is well recognized that more brands are currently facing scrutiny and increased expectations. Brands that fail to live up to their promises “will not survive dissonance between what they promise in terms of values and ethos and how they are perceived to behave and uphold that promise” (Caven, 2022, p. 35). The brand strategy literature offers an abundance of brand authenticity definitions. According to Jonatan Södergren, “Over the last 25 years, we have seen a steady increase in the discourse on what constitutes authenticity in consumption, not only through popular culture, media coverage and political debate but also through marketing praxis and scholarship. Brand authenticity is now believed to be a core asset in mainstream marketing, yet confusion surrounds the nature and usage of the term” (Södergren, 2021, p. 645). While it is a fact that brand narratives are aimed at creating authenticity revolving around the brand, they have recently also entered the branding mainstream. As a result, they have permeated many social domains, including business, politics, and religion. Even though there is no doubt that the sole purpose of carefully devised narratives is to “persuade consumers to preferentially select a particular brand, many are seen as inauthentic and subsequently discounted or ignored” (MacInnis & Park, 2015, p. 2). Countless research studies have recently demonstrated the growing importance of brand authenticity for consumers. “Recent research conducted by The History Factory showed that 80% of baby boomers, and 85% of generation X, cited brand authenticity as a significant factor when deciding which brands to support consumers. The percentages for millennials and generation X came in at 90%. A study by Fabrik Brands showed how brand authenticity helped brands rise above the immense uncertainty, unease, and “noise” during the pandemic by forging powerful, emotional bonds with consumers, thereby driving brand loyalty” (Campagna, 2022, p. 129). According to Euromonitor International, a market research firm, *‘Striving for Authenticity’* has been identified as one of the top 20 megatrends that will transform consumer markets through 2030 (Moulard et al., 2021, p. 96). Rubab Abdoolla, consultant at Euromonitor International, asserts that “Authenticity and reputation are key. Brands must demonstrate genuine commitment to the cause. It’s

impossible to satisfy everyone but brands must accept both the potential risks and rewards associated with tackling a controversial issue” (Euromonitor, 2023).

Another study, conducted by Deloitte Digital and published in April 2021, indicates that brand authenticity is on the rise: “In uncertain times, characterized by a global pandemic, poverty, inequality, youth unemployment and climate change, people feel a loss of available identity anchors and a loss of orientation. In this context, they face the challenge of finding points of reference for their own identity construction. To meet this challenge and to develop a sense of continuity and belonging, people are increasingly looking for *authenticity in their daily lives* [emphasis added]. Authenticity conveys a sense of genuineness, truthfulness and satisfies a fundamental human aspiration. The use of authentic brands combines inner satisfaction with the external expression of one’s own self. A growing importance of nonmaterialistic attributes also increases the appreciation of authenticity. This does not seem to occur as a fad, but rather as an attempt by consumers to change the socio-cultural characteristics of consumption [...]. Authenticity can neither be copied nor permanently faked. Just declaring that one’s own brand is authentic can have the opposite effect. *If the rhetoric of a brand does not correspond to the actual brand experience, the brand loses its authenticity* [emphasis added]. Brand authenticity is not only promoted, it is lived every day and at all brand touch points. At its core, this requires a relationship between word and deed [...]. Brand authenticity shows highly significant impact on brand trust, image and purchase intention [...]. Brand authenticity accounts for 92% of the brand trust [...]. Brand authenticity creates trust. The importance of brand authenticity for brand differentiation is therefore growing continuously. The high interchangeability of many brands reduces their credibility. Brand authenticity, as a factor upstream of trust, becomes a “guarantor” for the “authenticity” of the brand promise and justifies the building of trust” (Deloitte Digital, 2021, pp. 3-7). Another study conducted by STACKLA in 2021 suggests that consumers increasingly look for authentic and personalized experiences from brands. 88% of respondents expressed the sentiment that authenticity is important when deciding which brands they like and support. 59% of respondents expressed the opinion that user-generated content is the most authentic type of content for brands (STACKLA, 2021). Consumer 2024 Report by WorldMetrics.org paints a similar picture: survey data reveals consumer trust and loyalty towards authentic brands.

82% of consumers said they would continue to buy from a brand they consider authentic, even in times of economic difficulty. 91% of respondents worldwide are likely to reward brands for their authenticity and talk about the brand with others. 86% of respondents say authenticity is a key factor in determining which brands they like and support. Authentic brands are also 2.1 times more likely to inspire consumer trust than non-authentic brands. 83% of respondents believe that it is important for brands to take a stand on social and political issues. Alexander Eser, WorldMetrics.org co-founder, blatantly states that “In a world where *authenticity is the new currency* [emphasis added], it seems like everyone is craving the real deal more than ever before. According to recent statistics, a whopping 91% of consumers are ready to roll out the red carpet for authentic brands, with 63% placing their trust in them over traditional counterparts. From inspiring trust to fostering brand loyalty, authenticity clearly reigns supreme in the hearts and minds of consumers [...]. With 82% of consumers pledging allegiance to brands that stay true to themselves, it seems the currency of trust is the new gold standard [...]. [C]onsumers crave genuine connections with the brands they support. From inspiring trust to establishing loyalty and even influencing purchasing decisions, authenticity is the secret sauce that turns ordinary transactions into meaningful relationships. In a landscape where transparency reigns king and discerning consumers can spot a fake from a mile away, it's no wonder that being true to one's values and purpose has become not just a nice-to-have but a must-have for any brand looking to thrive in the modern marketplace. So, remember, in a sea of sameness, authenticity is your North Star – follow it, and you may just find yourself not just surviving, but thriving” (Eser, 2024).

It can be said that in an era of politainment, political polarization, fake news, and ever-changing social media content, authenticity has emerged as a trait highly desired by voters-consumers. The concept of authenticity is difficult to decode and can be interpreted in different ways depending on the scholar's academic orientation. In politics, however, to be authentic is to say what you mean and to be true to oneself regardless of who is watching. Authenticity in the political environment is indeed a rare trait. According to Lori Turnbull, “The combination of an omnipresent media, party discipline, and human fallibility can seriously limit politicians' willingness to embrace authenticity in their presentations to the public. This is true even for political leaders who are more powerful than most. There is an

understandable desire to avoid looking stupid, tone deaf, or out of the loop, so politicians err on the side of being overly scripted as opposed to speaking honestly and from the heart. When they break away from this tendency, though, the results can be positive” (Turnbull, n.d.). Paul R. Brewer, Lindsay H. Hoffman, Ruby Harrington, Philip Edward Jones, and Jennifer L. Lambe very clearly declare that “Public perceptions regarding presidential candidates’ personality traits play important roles in shaping vote choices. Though a range of traits can matter, some popular accounts and scholarly works point to *authenticity – or the lack thereof – as a key trait by which citizens judge political candidates* [emphasis added]. For example, commentators have speculated that President Ronald Reagan’s perceived authenticity helped him gain votes from citizens who disagreed with him ideologically. On the opposite side of the coin, observers have suggested that an “authenticity gap” damaged 2012 Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney’s campaign. Conventional wisdom also holds that candidates should strive to present authentic messages that resonate with their own political image. Thus, understanding when and why citizens perceive presidential candidates and their messages as (in)authentic may help explain voter decisions. Yet little research has systematically investigated such perceptions” (Brewer et al., 2014, p, 743).

Several political actors contend that authenticity is a powerful brand instrument that can significantly help political candidates build trust and credibility with voters-consumers, and drum up their support. Robb Ryerse posits that, “When candidates are genuine and honest about their beliefs, experiences, and motivations, they can connect with voters on a deeper emotional level and inspire them to take action. On the other hand, candidates who try to be someone they are not, or who compromise their values and principles for political gain, risk losing the trust and respect of their supporters” (Ryerse, 2023). Ryerse’s account is a relevant one due to the fact that as a political-actor-turned-political-strategist, he intimately understands what makes voters tick. He admits that authenticity has become an extremely important trait in electoral politics: “During my campaign, I quickly realized that being authentic and genuine was the best way to connect with voters. People want to see that you’re a real person with real values and convictions. They want to know that you’re not just spouting talking points or making empty promises” (Ryerse, 2023). Despite its rising cachet, authenticity is a highly nebulous concept. According to Paul R. Brewer,

Lindsay H. Hoffman, Ruby Harrington, Philip Edward Jones, and Jennifer L. Lambe, “Many journalists, pundits, and even politicians argue that authenticity plays an important role in presidential campaigns, but they do not always agree among themselves on what the concept means. Some suggest that it has become *a code word for chimerical perceptions of simple American values and a simple, even rural middle-class American life*, conveyed through signifiers such as casual attire, plain language, and even bowling prowess. Others argue that it is *really just a label put on self-validation*, under which principles and policy details take a back seat to the need to say ‘there, there—I understand’ to the voters. Still others suggest that the term has gradually lost any meaning through its frequent and varied use. Scholarly efforts to develop a clearer theoretical definition of authenticity in the context of political campaigns have focused on how candidates present themselves to the public as well as the processes by which they work to construct perceptions of authenticity” (Brewer et al., 2014, pp. 743-744).

The word *authenticity* “derives from the Greek words ‘autos’ (self) and ‘hentes’ (‘doer’, ‘being’), ‘authenikos’ implies ‘someone acting on their own authority’ or ‘made by one’s own hand’. But in Greek mythology, it also had another meaning. The literary critic Lionel Trilling noted that ‘authentēs’ was “not only a master and a doer, but also a perpetrator, a murderer” (Szalai, 2016). There is no doubt that “what we consider to be real and authentic has changed over time and has varied according to whom you ask. For Freud, our authentic selves wanted to sleep with our mothers and murder our fathers, and it was civilization and psychoanalysis that kept our murderous ids in check. For Rousseau, authenticity was man’s blissful state in nature, before he was corrupted by society” (Szalai, 2016). Originating in the Romantic belief in a true intrinsic self, authenticity has been an ideal of western thought at least since the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau” (Södergren, 2021, p. 646). The modern meaning of *authenticity* revolves around trustworthiness, reliability, truthfulness, transparency, and responsibility.

“This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man”. *Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3.*

These words, written by Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, surely encapsulate the idea of brand authenticity in a modern, brand-driven, political environment. But authenticity has a long tradition in the political environment. Already in the 17th century, Montesquieu – and later,

in the 18th century, Rousseau – described authenticity as the foundation of a meaningful and virtuous life. As Gaden and Dumitrica explain, “Authenticity meant knowing yourself, being true to yourself, and having the opportunity to do so. This new political ethic centered on authenticity sought to reconcile freedom, happiness and the ideal of a democratic polis. Importantly ... the imperative of being *authentic* (i.e., being true to your nature by refusing to buy into the constraints of social conventions) could only be fulfilled “through political activity and involvement”. Berman further referred to this as ‘the politics of authenticity’: the freedom to be whomever you want could only be accomplished in a polis based on equality and freedom for all” (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015).

In their comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the concept of brand authenticity, Josph C. Nunes, Andrea Ordanini, and Gaia Giambastiani delineate the components of brand authenticity and offer an overarching definition of this concept. The scholars define brand authenticity as “a holistic consumer assessment determined by six component judgments (accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency) whereby the role of each component can change according to the consumption context. By placing our definition in the context of consumption, we provide a conceptual understanding of authenticity that is *indigenous* and *organic* to marketing. This definition of authenticity stems from our conceptualization of authenticity as a composite formative construct, which is an entity defined entirely by its components. The reasoning for conceptualizing authenticity this way is as follows. First, the rationale underlying why authenticity is conceived of as a formative rather than reflective construct is straightforward. Consumers make multiple judgments (e.g., Is this original? Is this accurate?) that correspond to the indicators we identify (e.g., originality, accuracy). These judgments are not interchangeable (e.g., originality is not a substitute for accuracy); it is only a combination of these judgments that jointly determines whether consumers consider a consumption experience more or less authentic. When changes in a construct depend on changes in its indicators, as opposed to vice versa, the construct is formative as opposed to reflective. Second, authenticity is conceived of as a composite rather than causal formative construct. As a composite construct, authenticity is defined entirely by its components instead of existing on its own as a latent construct. This means *the indicators, as a group, jointly determine the conceptual and empirical meaning of the construct* rather than simply

providing a way of gauging the degree to which it is present. This is consistent with “authenticity” linguistically being a “dimension word,” its specific meaning uncertain until one knows which of its dimensions are being discussed. The critical point is that, for consumers, authenticity derives its full meaning from its dimensions. In fact, when they describe what makes something authentic, they do so only through some combination of the six components we identify. An example of a composite formative construct in marketing is brand equity, a construct made up of brand awareness, brand associations, brand quality, brand loyalty, and other proprietary assets. The fact that composite indicators can consist of dissimilar variables that do not need to have “conceptual unity” (i.e., direct correspondence) except in the loosest sense of the word has two implications for our conceptualization. First, composite indicators need not covary, allowing for potential trade-offs between them (e.g., originality entails deviating from the mainstream, while legitimacy entails adhering to certain standards or norms). Second, composite indicators can contribute differently in different contexts (e.g., proficiency may be more important when assessing the authenticity of hedonic products than utilitarian products). Thus, our approach helps explain and integrate the fragmented literature in which researchers frequently have selected one or more components of authenticity to investigate separately in different contexts” (Nunes et al., 2021, p. 2).

Many political strategists and communication practitioners have recently jumped on the authenticity bandwagon. In 2018, Jesse Ferguson, former Hilary Clinton spokesperson, wrote in *Time* magazine: “[M]y best advice for candidates in 2018 is: Be yourself” (Colton, 2018). When asked about his campaign strategy, Michael Starr Hopkins - who campaigned in 2018 for the Senate seat in New Jersey – replied: “The blueprint is already there. It begins with authenticity” (Colton, 2018). And Melvin Carter III, St. Paul Mayor, famously stated in 2016: “the American people would elect a total buffoon who they consider authentic over a genius who they consider manufactured” (Colton, 2018).

According to Gilpin, Brody, and Palazzolo “authenticity is ... a central concept of political discourse and the public sphere, where institutions and citizens engage in both mediated and unmediated discourse. Institutions are expected to meet ‘standards of reasoned accountability through which the actions of the state come to be made subject to critical scrutiny and debate in public arena. Political figures and institutions need to

communicate the rationale for decisions and actions, without giving the impression of being far removed from or insensitive to constituencies” (Gilpin et al., 2010, p. 259). The notion of authenticity has transformed the way scholars, strategists, and communicators think about brands and political candidates. As noted by Carroll, Cadet, and Kachersky, one of the most valuable brands in the world – Apple – has based its phenomenal success on “being true to its ideals, true to its promises and true to itself – on other words, by cultivating brand authenticity” (Carroll et al., 2022, p. 378). Apple has established a well-defined brand aesthetics and tone of voice by introducing the now iconic ‘Think Different’ slogan, which – over time – has become the embodiment of the Apple brand authenticity. Apple has also been cultivating the image of a company unwilling to succumb to the rules of the mainstream consumer culture. In the commercial environment, the increasing importance of authenticity “has created a consumer movement. Gilmore and Pine recognized this movement by stating that ‘authenticity has overtaken quality as the prevailing purchasing criterion, just as quality overtook cost, and as cost overtook availability’” (Carroll et al., 2022, p. 378). It has been well documented that brands that are collectively perceived as authentic and trustworthy are “likely to elicit a stronger affinity to and attachment from stakeholders. Authenticity ... articulates the consumers’ desire to discover meaning and purpose in their lives and is a process of living out one’s set of strongly held personal attachment with the brand” (Caven, 2022, p. 35).

According to Johnson, Thomson, and Jeffrey, there is a conventional belief that “to be truly authentic, brand narratives must be perceived as literally true, historically precise, or entirely factual” (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 3). The issue regarding the characteristics that distinguish the authentic from the fake is an important one, particularly in an age of fake news and – as Arendt asserted – “the death of truth in the political landscape” (Södergren, 2021, p. 667). Cultural anthropologists, social psychologists, and semioticians agree now that “there is a range of ‘creative license’ within which brand managers can operate when constructing brand narratives. Another way of saying this is that the typical consumer knows, yet does not care, that all brand stories are constructed and fictional, where fiction means made up or not necessarily true as opposed to ‘definitively inaccurate’” (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 4).

It is well accepted that contemporary consumers are increasingly marketing-savvy and recognize the profit motives behind a plethora of commercial practices, such as branding, marketing, persuasion, promotions, and sponsorships. This last point is a relevant one as it shifts our attention to the fact that “people generally accept that stories have an author and that the ‘power of the narrative is not diminished by the readers’ or viewers’ knowledge that the story is invented’. Consumers, in the same spirit as when reading books or viewing movies, understand that brand stories are created and will generally ‘go along’ with stylized versions of the truth” (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 4).

A systematic review of the literature provides a perplexing picture of the brand authenticity concept and definition. Different researchers offer different definitions of brand authenticity, contributing as such to the confusion of what brand authenticity really is. The scope of proposed definitions include: “uniqueness in craft, being genuine and the ‘real’ thing, having a unique identity, consistency, essence and self-authentication, self-congruency, and defining brand authenticity from a six-dimensional perspective (accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency), in which the application of the specific dimension can change depending upon the context” (Campagna, 2022, p. 138). According to Grayson and Martinec, a distinction must be made between being authentic and the concept of brand authenticity. “Authenticity is part of the ongoing search for meaning and belonging in life. As traditional sources of meaning in our culture such as family and religious institutions have lost their pull on younger consumers, they turn to consumer products and communities instead. Brand authenticity has been defined as ‘the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful and true toward itself and its consumers, and to support consumers being true to themselves’” (Södergren, 2021, p. 667).

It is widely accepted now that voters’ subjective perceptions of political candidates have a profound and decisive influence on their voting decisions. Countless research studies conducted in numerous countries around the world very clearly demonstrate that the results of elections overwhelmingly depend “on the images of political candidates among voters” (Luebke & Engelmann, 2022, p. 1). According to many media pundits, authenticity of political candidates is particularly important in an age of social media environment and can have profound implications on “whether and how voters decide to cast their ballot” (Grow & Ward, 2013). According to Azari, “the subject of ‘authenticity

is a standard fixture of presidential election coverage. To political scientists, it represents the worst of conventional media wisdom: candidate-centric, hard to define, and almost certainly an impossible standard. It also possesses very little relevance for winning the party nomination, much less for governing” (Azari, 2015).

There is no doubt that the aforementioned candidate-centric paradigm has fundamentally changed the political environment. Countless research studies conducted by political science scholars, journalism studies researchers, and voting behavior experts demonstrate the rise of the personalization of politics. Some political science scholars assert that a distinction must be made between two major categories of personalization: *individualization* and *privatization*. According to Hopmann, *individualization* “refers to a process of increasing attention to individual political actors rather than political parties or governmental institutions. This dimension both includes an increasing focus on political versus institutional actors and an increasing focus on political leaders, sometimes labeled a *presidentialization* of politics. The second process of personalization, *privatization*, refers to a process of increasing attention to the “human side” of politicians. This dimension includes both an increasing focus on the private lives of politicians, e.g., their family life, as well as an increasing focus on non-political personal traits of politicians, e.g., their morality” (Reinemann, 2014, p. 219). It is clear that these two concepts - *individualization* and *privatization* – squarely overlap with the concept of brand authenticity. As Luebke and Engelmann assert, “this increased centrality of individual politicians in political campaigns and political discourse at the expense of political groups is generally referred to as political personalization. The personalization of politics no longer applies only to presidential election systems, in which candidates have traditionally been a deciding factor for voters, but also to parliamentary systems” (Luebke & Engelmann, 2022, p. 1). Contemporary political candidates operate in the world of fragmented media, where every action, gesture, and grimace is being scrutinized by sensation-seeking voters-consumers. People demand to know everything about political candidates; what they wear, who they date, where they spend vacations, what they eat, etc. As the old adage goes, ‘*show me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are*’. In 1972, Sargent Shriver, the Democratic political candidate running for the vice presidency, met with his supporters - mostly steelworkers – at the bar in Youngstown, Ohio. The vast majority of those who attended the meeting ordered beer.

When it was Shriver's turn to order something to drink, he jovially shouted "*Make mine a Courvoisier*". As a result of this unmitigated blunder, Shriver dropped out of the race (Szalai, 2016). This one, seemingly innocuous, utterance was enough to deem him as inauthentic. Hence, brand authenticity must be considered negotiable and susceptible to all sorts of interpretations. In other words, brand authenticity "is derived from the individual's subjective experience. From the experiential perspective, brand authenticity does not revolve around the real origin of the brand's signified meaning but whether consumers feel as if they are in touch with themselves and the outside world" (Södergren, 2021, p. 653).

It must be acknowledged that brand authenticity within the political environment has been preceded by many other concepts – thoroughly studied by political science scholars – that act as antecedents to brand authenticity. Concepts such as "a candidate's impression management, political style and self-presentation are relevant to electoral political campaigns" (Grow & Ward, 2013).

The major objective of authenticity – and authentic brand narratives – is to differentiate a brand from rivals and to establish emotional connection with voters-consumers. As Johnson, Thomson, and Jeffrey assert, "good brands delve into the 'province of drama', going beyond objective truth to persuade consumers of their merits" (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 4). Research to date has demonstrated that authenticity is a highly desirable attribute of brands and people actively search for perceived authenticity to experience withdrawal from "the phoniness, shallowness, and artificiality of modern-day life" (Napoli et al., 2016, p. 1202). An increasing number of political science researchers corroborate the notion that "people seek out experiences (e.g., tourism), products (e.g., coffee), and figures (e.g., influencers) that meet their demand for authenticity" (Luebke, 2020). There is a growing awareness among political science scholars of the increased role of personalized politics in the face of the hegemony and pervasiveness of social media. As Luebke and Engelmann posit, "more personalized political communication adapts to the media logic and, together with the news media's focus on individual politicians and their personalities, contributes to the growing role of candidates and their traits in public discourse and as relevant criteria for political decisions. A specific candidate trait that has recently received considerable attention is the authenticity of politicians. Political commentaries depict political elections as 'authenticity elections' or reduce election

campaigns to ‘battle[s] for authenticity’, whereas scholars consider authenticity as ‘an increasingly important criterion by which citizens judge politicians’ and as ‘the best way of winning votes’ (Luebke & Engelmann, 2022, p. 1). Many political media pundits subscribe to the idea that certain politicians are incapable of generating authenticity while others exude highly compelling and captivating authenticity. According to David Maraniss, Hillary Clinton was not just a “”phony”, but a ”phony, phony”” (Colton, 2018). As a consequence of her inability to generate authenticity, she became highly vulnerable to Donald Trump’s perceived authenticity. Numerous political commentators have indicated that Hillary Clinton’s biggest challenge was her authenticity problem. “She seems forever “at pains”, as a reporter for CNN put it, “to convince Americans that she is a real person”, to prove that she actually means it when she says she regrets her vote on the Iraq war, or when she says she opposes the Trans-Pacific Partnership and cuts to Social Security. To listen to her critics, the real Clinton is a shapeshifter, with any avowals of authenticity dismissed as the expedient work of a conniving opportunist. Trump, on the other hand, has polled as one of the most authentic candidates in this election, despite statements and behavior that might also be called brazenly inconsistent” (Szalai, 2016). Other politicians enjoy high levels of authenticity, such as Senator Bernie Sanders, “who has been described as a ‘humorless aging hippie peacenik Socialist from Brooklyn’ with the reputation for ‘no-nonsense authenticity”” (Colton, 2018). There is a consensus now among political science scholars that authenticity “constitutes a prominent narrative in modern political communication” (Luebke, 2020, p. 636).

Despite the critical role authenticity plays in politics, many questions – by and large – remain unanswered. Can any political candidate who is considered *authentic* win? Who gets to be *authentic*? What does being *authentic* mean in the political and social media context? Many political communications practitioners claim that “One of the first steps of being authentic in your social media communication is to find, establish and maintain your voice” (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015). According to the literary scholar Lionel Trilling, “the authentic individual can be both ‘sincere and authentic, sincere *because* authentic’ – meaning that if you can only present who you actually are, you’ll tend to say what you actually think” (Colton, 2018).

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges concerning brand authenticity in the political context is the fact that authenticity cannot be objectively measured. Authenticity boils down to a subjective perception – albeit shared collectively by a group of consumers-voters. There is a widespread consensus among scholars that authenticity cannot be considered an absolute or intrinsic attribute of an object or a person. Authenticity reflects “the perception of any combination of attributes such as authority, fidelity, origin, credibility, sincerity, and historical accuracy” (Gilpin et al., 2010, p. 259). The label *authenticity* is applied arbitrarily. When political communications experts advise politicians to emphasize their authenticity - by sharing personal information, hobbies, interests, family life pictures; by using an informal vernacular, unscripted opinions - they hope to build political brands predicated on the perceived honesty about what their clients-candidates stand for. Political brand authenticity is somewhat intertwined with the *Green Lantern theory* proposed by Dartmouth University political scholar Brendan Nyhan. The major tenet of this theory is “that by virtue of the realness of their personalities and convictions, ‘authentic’ politicians like Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders will be able to change the political system. Their intolerance for nonsense and pretension will strip away the obstacles of a Madisonian system and produce results!” (Azari, 2015). According to Nyhan, his theory revolves around “the belief that the president can achieve any political or policy objective if only he tries hard enough or uses the right tactics” (Political Dictionary, n.d.). This theory, however, has major flaws, as Dan Cassino so eloquently described: “Americans want someone to fix things. The president is someone, so they want him to fix things. The problem is that there just isn’t a lot that any president can actually do about most of these issues” (Political Dictionary, n.d.).

As Julia Azari claims, authenticity encapsulates all sorts of aspects related to gender and race (including stereotypes). To return to the Hilary Clinton case, many voters accused Clinton of not being gritty and gutsy enough, but any sign of rock-ribbed attitude on her part would result in a harsh critique of her unfeminine and abrasive behavior (Azari, 2015). Barack Obama experienced a similar problem with his authenticity. He was – by and large – perceived as “the great prophet of hope and change; an arugula-loving, Whole Foods-shopping elitist ... the nation’s food-stamp president” (Szalai, 2016). Many political media pundits applauded Obama’s *authentic* image by calling it “an utterly distinctive”

(Friedman, 2008). According to Michael P. Jeffries, the author of *Paint the White House Black: Barack Obama and the Meaning of Race in America*, “the president’s most vociferous critics have drawn on notions of authenticity, trying to undermine his legitimacy by making racially coded insinuations and casting doubt on his religion and his birth certificate. ‘They kept saying, ‘Who is the *real* Barack Obama?’ Implicit was that the result of that search would be a lazy, lying, shiftless predator” (Szalai, 2016). However, what really elevated Obama’s authenticity in the collective perception was – as Friedman asserts – the fact that Obama “increased his credibility on the world stage by incorporating his real past into his discourse in a natural, transparent way. We and many throughout the world see him as real because he is playing out his own history in a way that makes sense to us; his public persona and aspirations fit as a coherent self-presentation. To most observers, he’s not faking it. It’s the real man and his story, and his hopes, that we see, and so it’s easy to believe” (Friedman, 2008).

It follows then that authenticity is a function of inherent attributes of an object/person and subjective perception of the spectator. As posited by Napoli, Dickinson-Delaporte, and Beverland, “individuals construct an authentic experience by blending object-based cues that connect with their lived experiences and aspirations with fantastical elements that inspire their imagination. Such conceptualizations suggest that authenticity is not only an attribute inherent in an object, but also something that is highly subjective and changeable – created by a particular evaluator in the context of the object” (Napoli et al., 2016, p. 1203). It may seem that authenticity within both the commercial and political environments denotes the essence of the object or the individual political candidate; the ‘real’ thing. However, managing a so-called ‘authentic voice’ is considered a strategic imperative in order to achieve success, become admired, liked, and – even - loved. Looking from this perspective, *authenticity* - as articulated by political consultants and brand strategists – should be viewed as a powerful tactic aimed at developing strong, attractive, and appealing brand. As stated by Gaden and Dumitrica, “‘Strategic authenticity’ reinforces a consumerist attitude, where the individual presents herself ... in order to be ‘consumed’ by others” (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015).

Given the increasing role of digital media in public communication, political candidates – and other political entities, such as parties and NGOs – are forced to convey authenticity

to allow interpersonal dialogue between and among voters-consumers and media pundits. It is now widely acknowledged by political science scholars that digital media have become a primary means for electoral campaigns to engage and communicate with voters-consumers. Other – considered more traditional – means of interactions with citizens - such as TV and radio ads, print media, town hall meetings – have diminished in importance. There is no doubt that Barack Obama’s 2008 Presidential campaign, “which made use of social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to communicate with his supporters, was a vital and visible example of how social media can be used in electoral political campaigns and showed that its strategic use may help win elections” (Grow & Ward, 2013). According to the conventional belief, digital media – and particularly social media – allow us to interact and communicate with each other, “thus becoming both more intimately tied together and more knowledgeable of each other and of the world” (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015). Political candidates have discovered and understood the profound role digital media play in transmitting authenticity to voters-consumers (Grow & Ward, 2013). There is widespread agreement among political science scholars that politicians, candidates running for office, political parties, and other actors whose objectives are fueled by a well-articulated political agenda (for example, NGOs) are overly focused on whether – and how – they are covered and depicted by the media. Political actors – both individuals and institutions – constantly “employ PR-strategists and so-called spin-doctors, they stage special media events (such as press conferences), they publish material directly addressed at journalists (such as press releases), they write letters-to-the-editor, they choose mediagenic spokespersons to let them represent their cause, they impose rules on journalists how to cover them (such as balance rules), they may even interfere directly with the work of journalists - or, if they have the necessary funds, establish their own media outlets. All these activities are aimed at generating and shaping the news media coverage they receive” (Hopmann, 2014, p. 216). Digital media allow political candidates to embrace quasi-transparent communication, since “even the dubious collective label — *social media* — alludes to the alleged core purpose of these technologies: communication aimed at creating and strengthening social bond, usually by making yourself known to others. The assumption behind the imperative “share and connect” is that sharing personal details leads to tighter social ties, as well as intimate and relevant knowledge of significant

others (friends, family, or organizations we care about) and of the world. The impetus of ‘share and connect’ becomes an expectation and a norm in such online environments, not unlike the early practices of blogging, further entrenching personality, connectivity, and immediacy as central values of SNS (Social Networking Services)” (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015).

Understanding the critical role digital media plays in politics and communicating brand authenticity, Gilpin, Brody, and Palazzolo proposed a model of authenticity in “public sphere discourse” (Gilpin et al., 2010, p. 259). Their model of authenticity is composed of four dimensions of authenticity: authority, identity, transparency, and engagement.

Authority can be defined as the level of knowledge, expertise, and experience in a particular domain demonstrated by the political actor. Without such a demonstrated expertise, the political actor cannot be deemed credible in the public’s perception. Authority can be established through consistency, clarity of communication messages, credible opinions, candor, and empathy. Authority can be built internally or bestowed by an external entity. Gilpin, Brody, and Palazzolo contend that “Building trust, a central element in authenticity ... also requires the perception of open and verifiable communication, or transparency” (Gilpin et al., 2010, p. 261). The authors also suggest that all four dimensions of their authenticity model are highly overlapping. They present irrefutable evidence that corroborates their claims. For instance, “online communities, showing engagement, can bolster an organization’s perceived authority. Likewise, the degree to which an identity is believed genuine may depend on its apparent transparency” (Gilpin et al., 2010, p. 261).

Transparency can be viewed as essential in an age of increased scrutiny, fast-paced 24-hour news cycle, and truncated attention span. There is no doubt that transparency has recently been elevated to the latest buzzword of the 21st century liberal democracies. According to Grow and Ward, transparency plays a critical role in the authenticity-building process within the political context due to the fact that “it gives constituents the opportunity to know what happens within an organization” (Grow & Ward, 2013). At its most rudimentary level, transparency refers to being open and honest. As Gilpin, Brody, and Palazzolo claim, “recent media trends ... have extended this auditing culture and increased pressures toward greater transparency even in professional contexts. Organizations and

institutions voluntarily subject their operations to public scrutiny to meet accountability expectations, as well as to gauge responses and tailor their activities and messages accordingly” (Gilpin et al., 2010, p. 265). The growing importance of transparency is advocated by many scholars and legislators who claim that “organizations are increasingly pressured by stakeholders who demand greater transparency, openness and responsibility from organizations, and that all these are factors of authenticity” (Grow & Ward, 2013).

Engagement refers to the psychological state of voters-consumers “when interacting with a brand – specifically [their] ‘positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions” (Scarpi, 2021). Gilpin, Brody, and Palazzolo assert that high levels of engagement may directly contribute to authenticity, as the “willingness to engage directly with constituents, or to provide places where these may interact with each other with minimal restrictions, may increase the perceived authenticity of the communicative space” (Gilpin et al., 2010, p. 267). Research also indicates that high levels of engagement allow voters-consumers to internalize the brand’s values, ideology, and brand’s intrinsic attributes, which, in turn, can lead to self-construal adjustments (Scarpi, 2021).

Identity is a function of self-presentation, brand building efforts, impression management, and public image. All these ingredients of political identity have long been recognized as critical in electoral politics. Gilpin, Brody, and Palazzolo imply that political science focuses mostly on individual identity, neglecting the identity issues related to organizations and institutions. This is a relevant point, since the branding literature can easily fill this void by offering numerous existing and well-researched frameworks and theories concerned with organizational, corporate, and brand identities. According to Dahlberg “identity ... develops via multiple signifiers, including language, writing style, graphics, and other elements of interactions” (Gilpin et al., 2010, p. 264). Grow and Ward posit that the concept of identity is similar to the concept “of a voice, which is a phenomenon constitutive of ethical and emotional dimensions that make it a dialogic event. In socially mediated conversation, ‘power structures are more closely tied to the ability to create a voice than in real life’. This close relationship between voice and identity shows that there may be a relationship between identity and authority, which are two main concepts of authenticity” (Grow & Ward, 2013).

The framework proposed by Gilpin, Brody, and Palazzolo is of particular importance to the political brand development process. In an age of dispersion, authenticity has become a prized commodity. Authentic brands have the capacity to become trusted partners and sources of pride for their voters-consumers. Voters-consumers demand authority, identity, transparency, and engagement from political leaders. Authenticity means embracing these four dimensions. Authenticity matters within the context of electoral politics because it:

- builds trust. It has been observed that authentic brands are perceived as more trustworthy, more likable, and able to drum up voters-consumers' support and loyalty.
- creates emotional connections with voters-consumers. Authenticity fosters genuine connections and emotional resonance with voters-consumers.
- contributes to brand differentiation. Authenticity sets the brand apart from competition and showcases the brand's unique identity (Gutierrez, 2023).

This subchapter focused on brand authenticity and its role in impacting voters-consumers' perceptions of political brands. The presented evidence clearly indicates that voters-consumers are increasingly turned off by brand communications that feel inauthentic or phony. Moreover, authentic political actors are considered more credible, more likable, and able to galvanize the people they aspire to lead. Authenticity is also considered an important variable that moderates voters-consumers' trust, commitment, and loyalty. Despite the profound influence of authenticity in politics, little research has explored the factors that contribute to perceptions of political brand's authenticity. If authentic commercial brands can profoundly affect consumers' trust, commitment, and loyalty, it can be posited that authentic political brands can do the same with their supporters. "Barack Obama was the first internet-era national candidate to capture our imagination and raise massive amounts of small donations and media attention from the web. The outside maverick Barack Obama defeated the more experienced public servant, Hillary Clinton. Then Donald Trump, who didn't even need money to run because his antics generated billions of dollars of free media also defeated the same 'establishment' candidate that Obama beat. Both *benefited from our search for more authentic leaders* [emphasis added] representing different experiences than the political norm" (Cohen, 2019).

Political brand authenticity can be seen as the unabashed realness and consistency of the way political brands present themselves to and communicate with the voters-consumers. To appear authentic, political actors must appear to behave and speak in an unscripted, uncensored, and unconstrained fashion. Brand authenticity entails communicating in an outspoken manner, using an informal – personal – voice, and providing personal opinions, thus giving the impression that one is honest about what one stands for. The ‘real’ self and ‘authentic’ voice must be sustained over time in order to build a strong brand and preserve success (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015). Authenticity is not necessarily about behaving true to the facts, but about being true to oneself (Luebke and Engelmann, 2023). Research has shown that voters-consumers’ perceived authenticity of political brands considerably increases their likability, credibility, and generates voters-consumers’ loyalty toward them. This subchapter attempted to explain the intricacies and the role of brand authenticity in developing a strong political brand and generating voters-consumers’ loyalty. Chapter 5 will delve deeper – leveraging empirical studies - into the evidence supporting the argument that brand authenticity significantly contributes to the development of a long-term political career.

2.4. Political Brand Identity System Versus Political Brand Image

Identity is an exceptionally important concept in strategic brand management and – by extension – in political branding. Unfortunately, brand Identity is a frequently misunderstood and misused concept and – as a consequence – appears to be a confusing one. Part of the reason for this confusion stems from the fact that many practitioners and business journalists – and even some scholars – use this term in an inconsistent manner. The word identity has its origins in Latin words *idem* – which means ‘the same’ – *entitas* – which means ‘the being’ and ‘existence’ – and *identidem* – which can be translated into ‘time and again’ (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009, p. 110). It can be inferred then that the word identity points to something that exists by staying the same. As Franzen and Moriarty suggest: “An entity has an identity if it remains the same over a certain period ... repetition, continuity, and consistency are needed in order to establish an identity” (Franzen &

Moriarty, 2009, p. 110). The objective of this subchapter is to introduce and dissect two critical brand concepts: 1) brand identity (the physical-social-mental representation of a brand, and 2) brand image (the dynamic constellation of mental associations, emotions, perceptions, and imagery linked to a brand in the minds of voters-consumers). One of the hypotheses of this research project is that brand identity has an important impact upon voters-consumers' brand perceptions. This subchapter delves deep into the concepts of brand identity and brand image and presents compelling evidence supporting the proposed hypothesis. Chapter 5 will explore this hypothesis in greater depth by analyzing empirical data collected by the author of this dissertation.

Although the concept of identity is a nebulous one, identity can be described as a construct that defines who one is in relation to others within a network of social relationships. It must also be mentioned that according to cognitive neuropsychologists, there is a dynamic interplay between identity and emotions. Emotions have a profound impact on the development of perceptions and behaviors whose impact on identity formation, in turn, has been recognized to be of particular importance (Zarbe et al., 2017, p. XV). Identity tends to elicit many connotations and associations. According to the Oxford Learners' Dictionary, 'identity' refers to: who or what somebody/something is; the characteristics, feelings or beliefs that make people different from others; character, existence, integrity, name, coherence, distinctiveness, uniqueness, self, singular character (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, n.d.). In the psychology literature, identity is defined as those traits, characteristics, attributes of an individual that are perceived as central, distinctive, and enduring. Identity revolves around beliefs, values, convictions, ideals, morals, ethics, and cultural socialization that help shape and direct a person's behavior. It can be said then that identity is the individual's understanding of these traits, characteristics, and attributes rendering an understanding of who he/she is (Zarbe et al., 2017, p. 5). Identity provides individuals with an integrated and cohesive sense of self that endures throughout their lives. Identity is shaped by a myriad of personal experiences, interactions with others, and acquired knowledge. Identity enables individuals to navigate their lives by guiding their actions, beliefs, and behaviors.

Following Franzen and Moriarty's analysis of identity definitions, it can be reckoned that the concept of identity can be subdivided into three categories:

- Consistency: identity implies that something or someone remains unchanged within a certain timeframe. The constellation of identity characteristics acts as a foundation of the self. Without consistency, identity cannot be established, nor recognized.
- Continuity: identity can only assume palpable dimension if it is communicated in a uniform manner and over an extended period of time.
- Singularity: identity's essence must be distilled to the clearest unique 'DNA'. Identity's singularity points to a well-recognized proprietor. Singularity is what sets something or someone apart (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009, p. 110).

Cognitive neuropsychologists have recognized that the neurobiological processes in the human brain are programmed to detect and recognize patterns in the stimuli that come to us from the external world. Patterns are quickly recognized and categorized. It has been observed that toddlers have the ability to recognize patterns and quickly learn how to categorize. Objects that have the same functions, similar form, tend to be lumped in the same category. That's why while walking down aisles in the furniture store, we are able to instantaneously identify objects on which one can sit and label them as chairs, sofas, ottomans, bar stools, etc. But when the human brain, hardwired to detect patterns in the external environment, encounters a novel stimulus – something that cannot be easily and effortlessly identified, labeled, and categorized – the entire neurobiological process is being put into a state of a heightened alertness (Pi et al., 2008).

The implications of these neurobiological processes for our understanding of the brand identity concept are profound; consistent brand identity is a foundation of a strong and socially and culturally appealing brand. When a brand's communications are consistent and delivered in a uniform manner, when the tone of voice is consistently stable, when the same color palette is used, when logo, imagery, overall aesthetics are embraced and displayed, a strong brand identity is being established.

The strategic brand management and political branding literatures acknowledge that the concept of identity has been borrowed from psychology. Franzen and Moriarty suggest that Erik Erikson's three levels of identity components – physical, social (relationships with others), and mental (the ego and self-identity) – have a particular application to branding (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009, p. 110):

- The physical level: this level consists of all the aspects associated with physical appearance. This level manifests itself through a plethora of external and bodily attributes of a person. In other words, this level refers to a myriad of important visual – and verbal – expressions of the brand. Components of the physical expression include name, logo, tagline, color palette, typography, graphical element, imagery, tone of voice, overall aesthetics, clothes, style/fashion, etc. It can be inferred that components of the physical level provide important clues that communicate positive qualities about the brand and directly contribute to the perceived authenticity of the brand. The physical level is important due to the fact that its management is under the full control of brand strategists and communications experts.
- The social level: This level encompasses all aspects related to a person's self-concept and his/her position/role in the society/community. It has been observed by psychologists that social groups, such as family, social class, golf club membership, religions, sexual orientation, ethnic groups, gender, nationalities, etc. – which people belong to - play a critical role in the formation of pride and self-esteem. Social groups provide individuals with a sense of social identity: a sense of belonging to the social world. People strive to maintain a positive social identity by contributing to their group's advantageous social standing over that of relevant out-groups. This is facilitated by the mental process of social categorization. People are prone to mental categorization - the intrinsic propensity to organize others into social categories in order to simplify their understanding of the social world. Membership in a particular social group confers self-esteem and a sense of security, which contributes to one's sustained social identity. To put it differently, social identity refers to an individual's self-categorization in relation to his/her group membership (the "WE"). Numerous research studies demonstrate that young children express a robust positive bias towards their own gender group. Empirical evidence indicates that people categorize themselves and others into "us" versus "them"; they express a favorable bias toward their in-group and prejudice against out-groups. The underlying social categories are predicated on the prototypical attributes describing social groups. These attributes can include physical characteristics (ethnic groups), norms and beliefs (religions), values (political ideology), feelings and behaviors (nationality), interests and lifestyles (brand

communities). Individuals who express membership in such groups/communities share a common social identification with other members, experience elevated levels of self-esteem and pride, and by internalizing these shared values, principles, and normative rules, they tend to define themselves through their membership.

- The mental level: The psychological level revolves around stable and salient aspects of one's self-perception (e.g., 'I think of myself as a Democrat'). This level is also associated with the inherent, genetic makeup of an individual, exhibited through personality. According to contemporary psychologists, there are five fundamental dimensions of personality collectively labeled as the BIG 5 personality traits. The BIG 5 traits include openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. This five-factor model is currently widely accepted as valid and useful by the psychological community, although, it merits mentioning here that other competing models also exist. Individuals tend to express their personalities through their behaviors, attitudes, social views, values, and intensity of their beliefs and convictions. For the political brand, this level revolves around a well-articulated and consistently communicated vision and values.

It can be summarized then that brand identity "is the unique combination of the physical, social, and mental components of a brand – central, durable, and salient" (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009, p. 111).

Despite the fact that the concept of brand identity is still debated within the political science milieu, many prominent scholars are of the opinion that brand identity constitutes an important – if not critical - component of successful political brand strategy. Christopher Pich and Dianne Dean opine that "The concept of brand identity can be considered a useful approach to generate a deeper understanding of a brand from an internal perspective. Brand identity can be conceptualized as the intended projection, formulated and communicated by the brand's creator ... brand identity is the 'aspired associations envisaged' by internal stakeholders. Brand identity conveys what the brand stands for and signifies the reality of the organization. Moreover, the concept of brand identity focuses on the 'central ideas of a brand and how the brand communicates these ideas to stakeholders'. However, the notion of brand identity is also complex and a multifaceted construct with very few frameworks devoted to deconstructing the internal view of a brand" (Pich, 2015, p. 1354). Johan Bosch,

Elmarie Venter, and Ying Han offer a fairly succinct definition of brand identity, stating that brand identity should be understood “as the visual and verbal expression of a brand. The brand identity supports, expresses, communicates, synthesizes and visualizes the brand. Brand identity is described ... in terms of the psychological and emotional associations that the brand aspires to maintain in the minds of consumers. The role of the vision, mission and value statements ... must also be acknowledged in shaping the brand identity” (Bosch et al., 2006, p. 11). Numerous researchers emphasize the corporate dimension of the brand identity construct, indicating that additional components should be incorporated into the definition of brand identity: vision, culture, positioning, personality, relationships and presentation or reflection, and physique. It also must be mentioned that – according to Pich, Dean, and Punjaisri – the authenticity of the brand identity system can only be established if internal stakeholders (for example, political campaign volunteers and staff) strongly embrace and believe in the brand’s shared values (Pich et al., 2016, p. 102).

It is undeniable that our modern electoral politics has changed dramatically, and now political communication is becoming increasingly visual. A quick glance at presidential elections reveals that visual elements have overtaken other elements of political communication. It can be asserted that visual brand identity must be considered the public face of the brand.

This assertion, thus, points to one of this research project’s hypotheses: brand identity has an important impact upon voters-consumers’ brand perceptions. As has already been presented in subchapter 1.3, the human brain connects and associates the brand with a set of brand characteristics, attributes, benefits, impressions, memories, moments, and emotions. By activating certain well-defined cognitive concepts, other concepts can be activated in people’s minds. A brand’s visual identity – as was mentioned before – is said to be based on a unique constellation of physical, visual (and verbal), appearance-related attributes. “The visuality of brands” – say Stephanie Harvey Danker – “is significant, but a deeper interpretation of the complexity of brands goes beyond analyzing the logo [...]. Visual identity systems within a larger framework build a more holistic understanding of brands” (Danker, 2014, p. 41). When voters-consumers search out, learn about, and cast their ballots for a particular political brand, they are exposed to specific brand-related characteristics such as color palettes, logos, designs, style/fashion, logotypes, tone of voice,

and other visual elements which collectively contribute to the development of the face of the brand and identify it. According to Airey “The origins of identity design began in the time of the earliest human tribes. Consider how members of a tribe would distinguish themselves from other tribes by marking, dances, language, and other visual and verbal signs. Knights and nobility, villages, cities, and countries – they, too, were all given a form of differentiating visual mark” (Airey, 2019, pp. 006-007). The 2008 U.S. presidential election perfectly illustrates the use of a strong political brand visual identity. There is no disputing that Barack Obama’s personal engagement with voters-consumers can easily be equated with Reagan’s - or Roosevelt’s - populist techniques. There is – however – one significant difference: Whereas the traditional media such as radio and television allowed Reagan and Roosevelt to engage citizens in a one-sided communication – a monologue delivered to the American audience – Obama’s use of modern digital technology allowed him to engage American citizens in a passionate dialogue. According to Genin and Dipaulo, “By focusing on crystal clear, differentiated messaging and deploying a design system with a level of consistency that flabbergasted even the most experienced of design practitioners the Obama ’08 campaign established itself as one of the most iconic brands of the early twenty-first century. At the heart of the brand was a universal icon, a simple logo in the shape of an O: open, shining, patriotic. Obama’s vision of America for all Americans. Crafted by the designer Sol Sender to be a symbol of unity, the logo avoided the traditional red state/blue state rhetoric inherent in most election graphics, instead expressing all the colors of the American flag. Also doing away with primarily typographic-centered designs of campaigns past, the Obama ’08 identity placed the graphic icon at center stage. It reinforced the notion of Obama as the human icon that people could believe in, no matter their age, race, or gender. The logo projected the values of Obama’s politics and allowed people to see their values mirrored through the broad range of interpretations utilized throughout the campaign. The gay community adopted the symbol to create web banners that read “Obama Pride” and featured the full-spectrum rainbow in place of the symbol’s red-and-white stripes. “Women for Obama” transformed the outer O into the Venus symbol. While the O mark served as the visual anchor for the campaign, the identity system’s true engaging power can be attributed to its “ownability.” Using a sophisticated combination of metaphor and recognizable iconography to modify the mark,

the campaign was able to establish direct associations with many groups within the population. This allowed the identity system to simultaneously project and absorb different narratives, all involving candidate Obama. These were inserted into various campaign signs, web banners, and other materials that correlated to different subsets of Obama's constituents among the fifty states and U.S. territories" (Genin & Dipaolo, 2012, p. 136). This detailed account of Obama's logo – an important element of the brand identity visual system – illustrates the psychocultural impact of visual stimuli on people's affective, cognitive, and conative responses, thus giving further credence to one of this research project's hypotheses that states that brand identity has an important impact upon voters-consumers' brand perceptions. Thus, it can be posited that the major objective of choosing the constellation of visual elements of brand identity is to create a holistic look and feel and style for a brand. These visual elements should be consistent and enduring. The challenge, as indicated by many brand strategists and political consultants, is to (a) achieve consistency between the visual elements and the brand strategy, (b) consistency among visual elements themselves, and (c) consistency of visual elements over time (Phillips et al., 2014, p. 324). Brand scholars agree that visual brand identity can be defined "as the holistic look and feel of a brand, manifest as consistency among the brand, its strategy, and all its individual visual elements, ongoing over time" (Phillips et al., 2014, p. 328). Moreover, visual brand identity should consist of so-called ownable visual elements that are easily recognizable and unique within the competitive environment. The visual elements of brand identity should also be intrinsically linked to brand's values and vision.

Strategic brand management literature offers an interesting concept – brand equity – that can be viewed as an overarching and integrating brand framework. According to David Aaker – who proposed and popularized this concept in the 1990s – "Brand equity is a term used to describe the value of having a recognized brand, based on the idea that firmly established and reputable brands are more successful. More specifically, it's a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand name and symbol, which add or subtract from the value provided by a product or service" (Aaker, n.d.). David Aaker – and Kevin Keller, another preeminent brand scholar – have emphasized the importance of a brand's image in creating this value for customers. "Applied to politics" – says Gareth Smith – "this value generation takes two forms. The first is the provision of value to politicians in the form of

greater loyalty to a party and competitive advantage. This loyalty and advantage should then lead to greater partisanship amongst the electorate when voting. Secondly, image also provides value to the customer/elector by enhancing the interpretation/processing of information about the party and increasing confidence in the voting decision” (Smith, 2001, p. 991):

It has been widely observed that modern political campaigns – and corresponding media coverage of them – are paying particular attention to the aspects related to the development of the candidates’ images. This shouldn’t surprise us, given that the candidate’s image has become critical to electoral success. As Guzmán and Sierra explain, “Although some voters base their decision on policy issues and ideology, most voters generally create shortcuts that help them decide how to vote. On some occasions, voters simply do not care about the policies. On others, the supported policies are difficult to understand or are not clearly expressed by the candidate. Thus, they defer to evaluating a candidate based on his/her image, as a decision-making shortcut. Focusing on personal characteristics allows voters to infer how the candidate will act in office” (Guzman & Sierra, 2009, p. 209). Despite the fact that the brand image of the political candidate seems to be front and center of all brand building activities, this personal brand image is not entirely independent of the external influences; it is also – to a certain extent – “constrained by the party history, ideology and their record of promise delivery” (Pich et al., 2016, p. 104). Numerous research studies lend credence to the profound role brand image of the candidate plays in elections. Some researchers have demonstrated that “perceptions of candidates and voting intentions are more commonly focused on personality characteristics and image, rather than on policy concerns or partisan affiliations. As a consequence, the media spends more time focusing its attention on the candidates’ personalities than on reporting their positions on policy issues” (Guzman & Sierra, 2009, p. 209).

Brand image, therefore, deserves particular attention. At its most rudimentary level, brand image is the way brand proprietors would like consumers to see the brand. Brand image can be defined as the constellation of associations, emotions, perceptions, and imagery linked to the brand by external stakeholders (consumers, voters, citizens, etc.). “Brand image” - say Bonera and Bigi - “is linked to the perception of the public and depends on the set of associations – namely the elements of information, rational and

emotional, that are in the memory of the consumers and that guide their behaviors by defining their perception of the brand” (Bigi & Bonera, 2015, p. 82). According to Kevin Keller, brand image can be defined “as perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory” (Keller, 1993, p. 3).

Implied in these definitions is a rather dismal fact that this imagery cannot be fully controlled by the brand proprietor; the imagery resides in the minds of voters-consumers and their interpretation of this imagery is highly subjective. Brand image, thus, can be described in terms of how the brand is understood by the external stakeholders. Given that the brand image encapsulates the subjective interpretation of the associative brand cognitive network on the part of individual voters-consumers, it is clear that brand image is fundamentally different from brand identity, which was defined “as the unique combination of the physical, social, and mental components of a brand – central, durable, and salient” (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009, p. 111). Pich and Armannsdottir accentuate the importance of brand image by stating that understanding the discrepancy between the way voters-consumers perceive the political brand and the way the political brand intends to be perceived is critical to effective – and successful - management of political brands. “Therefore” – say Pich and Armannsdottir – “understanding the external associations and perceptions will not only generate deeper insight into a brand, but also highlight whether the understood external image is coherent with the aspired internal identity” (Pich & Armannsdottir, 2018, p. 37). Brand image – although still quite a nebulous concept in political branding – has increasingly become an important idea in studying electoral politics. Many political science scholars emphasize the role political image plays in elections: “image in politics” – says Smith – “is of critical importance and as such merits further analysis” (Pich et al., 2018, p. 7).

Political brand image concept is inextricably intertwined with the positioning concept that was already explained and elaborated on. Numerous political science scholars distinguish between ‘intended positioning’ – which refers to the constellation of image characteristics, attributes, and traits that political brand strategists deliberately want to embed in voters-consumers’ minds and ‘actual positioning’ – which refers to the constellation of image characteristics, attributes and traits that unintentionally became embedded in the voters-consumers’ minds. As was already mentioned, “the distinction

between intended and actual positioning is important because it allows us to recognize that communication is not only a two-way negotiated process between communicator and audience, but that the set of image attributes that end up in peoples' minds are not mere facsimiles of those image attributes that ... marketers seek to place there" (Baines et al., 2014, p. 172). According to Baines, Crawford, O'Shaughnessy, Worcester, and Mortimore, political positioning – and, by extension, political brand image creation – is a complex phenomenon whose range extends from intended positioning through mediated positioning to actual positioning. The authors claim that brand positioning "operates at four descending levels of abstraction based on decreasing control over the message conveyed and increasing mediation as follows:

- Level 1: What messages politicians wish to convey and how they wish their messages to be interpreted (ascertained in research terms by depth interviews amongst political leaders or content analysis of interviews they undertake and broadcast – this is intended positioning).
- Level 2: What messages party communicators disseminate (ascertained in research terms by content analysis of, for example, press releases, speeches, and other party communications – this is intended positioning).
- Level 3: What journalists and other public commentators disseminate based on messages they have received from parties (ascertained through content analysis of news reports and media monitoring in general – this is mediated positioning).
- Level 4: What the general public thinks about the messages they receive, including from others by word of mouth (ascertained through surveys, focus groups and depth interviews – this is actual positioning) (Baines et al., 2014, p. 175).

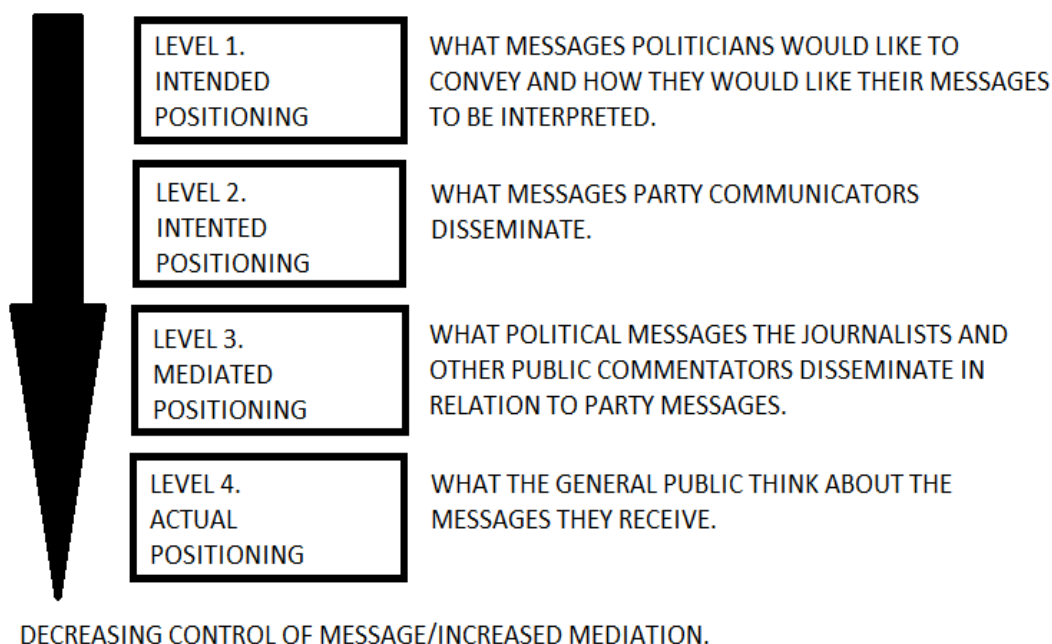


Figure 3. Levels of political positioning
Source: Baines et al., 2014, p. 175

In a political marketplace where a large number of contestants – political candidates – vie for nomination and – ultimately – for electoral success, each political brand must create – and embed - a unique image in the minds of the voters-consumers. Pierre Martineau eloquently described this process when writing about consumer culture in America: “in our competitive system, few products are able to maintain any technical superiority for long. They must be invested with overtones to individualize them; they must be endowed with richness of association and imagery; they must have many levels of meanings, if we expect them to be top sellers, if we hope that they will achieve the emotional attachment which shows up as brand loyalty” (McNair, 2003, p. 98). Although Martineau talks about commercial products, the same brand-building principles apply to political branding. In order to be successful, brands operating in the political marketplace need to possess - and ooze - emotionally evocative images that resonate with the voters-consumers. Guy Dubord famously noted that “the *image* has become the final form of

commodity reification” (Hockett, 2005, p. 73). In light of the overwhelming evidence that shows that political brand images can considerably change the election outcomes, it can be posited – following Jeremy Hockett’s argumentation – that the *image* has certainly become the final form of political reification (Hockett, 2005, p. 73).

Brands are characterized by strong images, meanings, and symbolic value. Baudrillard was of the opinion that products have ‘sign-value’, “in so far as they ‘are at once use-value and exchange-value. The social hierarchies, the invidious differences, the privileges of caste and culture which they support, are encountered as profit, as personal satisfaction, as lived as ‘need’. Commodities come to signify meanings other than those of their utility. A Porsche is more than a vehicle for transporting people from one point to another. Levi 501s are more than hard-wearing work garments. Flora margarine is more than an oily spread. And in so far as commodities take on these meanings, advertising [and branding] is the most important means available to producers for bringing them to the market” (McNair, 2003, p. 98). In other words, brand image refers to the sum of the total impressions, feelings, imagery that people associate with the brand. What is implied in this definition is the fact that the associations, feelings, and imagery that people have about the brand may not always correspond with the actual reality and the intended brand image crafted by the brand proprietor. “That the perception of reality is more important than reality itself” – say Dawn Dobni and George Zinkhan – “is a theme which underlies most conceptualizations of brand image” (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990). Along the same lines, political brands are characterized by well-crafted images, associations, symbolic value, and meanings. “Political brand images” – say Baines, Crawford, O’Shaughnessy, Worcester, and Mortimore – “are established through symbols, knowingly or unknowingly conveyed by communicators rather than weighing rational evidence” (Baines et al., 2014, p. 175). For example, George W. Bush’s political brand image revolved (at least during his first presidential election campaign) around the idea of the so-called Compassionate Conservatism, Southern Cowboy – tough guy – masculinity, and a conspicuous ‘W’ or ‘Dub’ya’. According to Jess Collen, who studies political brands, many politicians carefully employ strategic brand management principles to establish strong political brands for themselves. Donald Trump – said Collen in 2015 – “is the brand personified. He made his announcement from a building branded Trump Tower. Even in the wake of the 2012

election, where ‘the 1%’ became a catchphrase, Trump defined his brand as this: “I’m really rich.” He threatened to run for president at least twice before, thus imbuing his brand, by now, with at least some semblance of political color. His brand may not be loved, but it gets him attention; skeptics are writing today that all he wants is more brand-building attention, and that as much as he would love to be president, that is not what his campaign is about. It is about burnishing his “Trump” trademark for his next round of commercial ventures. Celebrities have sometimes surprised the experts. The national media looked at Jesse Ventura’s candidacy as a joke when he ran for governor of the State of Minnesota in 1998. But when he won the election, he won a lot of fans in the process. The image of a Navy SEAL may play well in any political race. The image of a pro wrestler? Probably not so much” (Collen, 2015).

The primary objective of positioning is to establish a well-crafted image for the brand and embed it in the minds of voters-consumers. Political positioning – according to Baines, Crawford, O’Shaughnessy, Worcester, and Mortimore – “is the creation of coherent and consistent images (i.e., symbolizations) maintained despite attempts by adversaries to undermine their credibility and consistency” (Baines et al., 2014, p. 173). Thus, positioning aims at creating a set of meanings, ideas, feelings, attitudes, and associations that serve to set a brand apart from its competition. These definitions clearly imply that in order to analyze the image of the brand, it is necessary to research voters-consumers’ beliefs about the brand. Political brand image has become the pivotal concept in the political science literature. Staci M. Zavattaro states that “It is no surprise that political candidates must portray a certain image – this is why a dour-looking Nixon lost to the younger, good-looking Kennedy. There should be some kind of substance behind the façade, but because political views are manipulable, it makes more sense to focus on the image rather than the concrete” (Zavattaro, 2010, p. 124). Bosch, Venter, Han, and Boshoff opine that “Brand image is ... shaped by six associations and variables, namely strength, uniqueness, expectations, perceptions, experiences and evaluations of the brand” (Bosch et al., 2006, p. 13):

- Strength: The strength of a brand image – and the corresponding brand associations – is a function of density, clarity, and relevance of the cognitive associative brand

network and the nature/sophistication of the brand communications to which people are exposed.

- Uniqueness: Brand Uniqueness – say Sarah Song Southworth and Jung Ha-Brookshire – “refers to the extent to which a consumer regards the brand as different from other brands. It is a favorable brand attribute that brands strive to attain because it offers an over their competitors” (Southworth & Ha-Brookshire, 2016, p. 6). In other words, the brand uniqueness revolves around the distinct feature (or features) of a brand which sets it apart from other – competing – brands. According to Abhishek Dwivedi, Tahmid Nayeem, and Feisal Murshed, the brand uniqueness entails “having a strong point-of-difference and reflects the degree to which a brand stands out so that it can be easily noticed, recognized, and recalled over competing brands. If a brand cannot create and sustain unique associations, consumers have little basis for choosing that brand over other brands ... perceived uniqueness offers consumers analytical information that sets a brand apart from competing brands and helps reduce consumers’ cognitive burden, thus presenting a simple heuristic for choosing among alternatives. Supporting this view, perceived uniqueness, separating the brand from the from the competition, provides an added value to consumers” (Dwivedi et al., 2018, p. 102). The uniqueness of the brand should be consistently emphasized in the brand communication so that voters-consumers can associate the constructed uniqueness with the brand in question.
- Expectations: Brand expectation revolves around the promise the brand makes to its audience/constituents. The brand promise allows voters-consumers to form expectations for a brand. Political brand expectations are determined by the perceived credibility of the political brand, communicated ideas/statements, brand’s behavior, attitude, convictions, beliefs, past track record, achievements, education, family life and so on.
- Perceptions and associations: There is no doubt that a strong brand image is the result of the voters-consumers’ positive perceptions of the brand. There is ample evidence that brand perceptions strongly influence voter-consumer behavior (Romaniuk & Sharp, 2003, p. 218). A political brand’s name, appearance, tone of voice, language, demeanor, fashion style should all be attractive, appealing to potential voters-consumers, and should convey the key benefits of the brand (Wanke et al., 2007, p. 1).

There is a wide-spread consensus among brand scholars that “not all perceptions are as important as others, that there are certain perceptions that can operate as ‘triggers’ for purchase. That is, if a customer holds a specific belief/perception about the brand, they will buy it. Therefore, from a marketing perspective, there is a benefit in getting more people to link the brand with that attribute” (Romaniuk & Sharp, 2003, p. 219). What types of feelings, emotions, attitudes, imagery or connotations does the political brand trigger? What ideology do voters-consumers associate with the political brand? Brand perception is a critical component of strategic brand management. Collectively, brand perception refers to all the emotions, feelings, imagery, ideology, connotations, and experiences voters-consumers associate with the political brand.

- Experiences: Brand experience can be defined as the subjective feeling the voter-consumer has when engaging or interacting with a brand. It must be emphasized that brand experience manifests itself differently from voter-consumer to voter-consumer because each individual has different experiences with the brand. Some political brands evoke feelings of hope and stability, while other political brands evoke feelings of turmoil and urgency.
- Evaluations: Brand evaluations revolve around voters-consumers’ subjective interpretations and assessments of the political brand and other brand related, media-generated, information. “The brand image evaluation is determined by the perceptions, expectations and, most importantly, the experiences of the brand in question” (Bosh et al., 2006, p. 14).

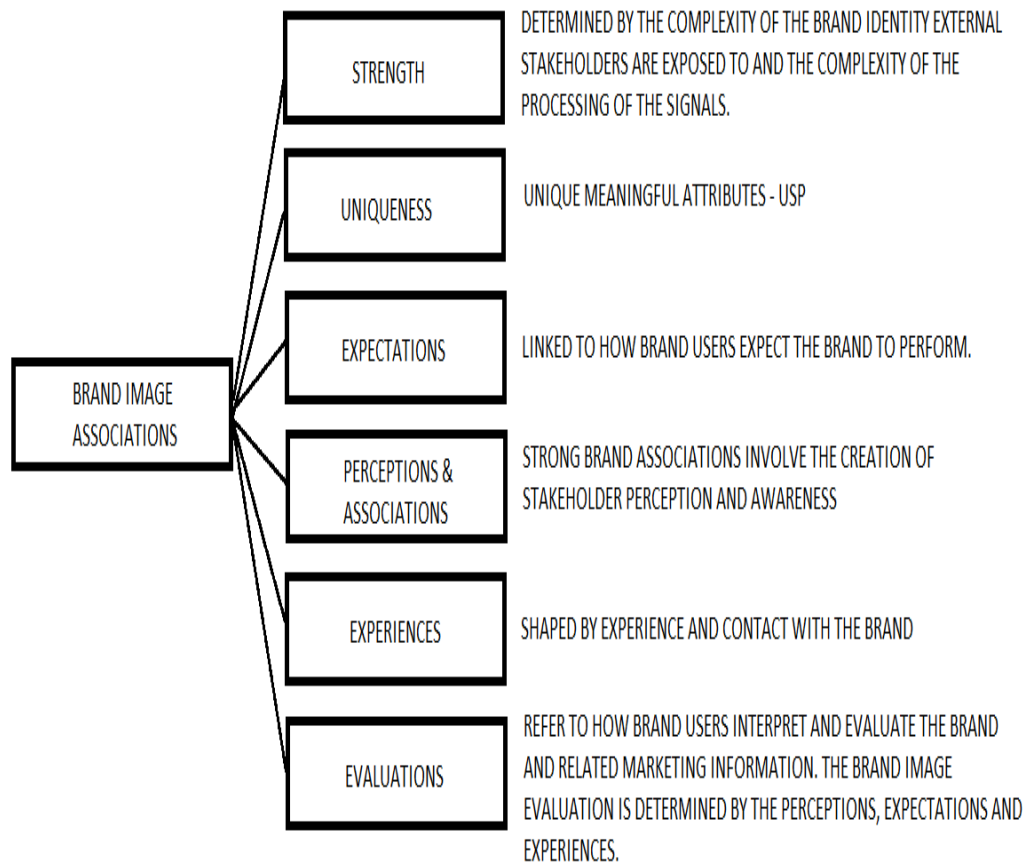


Figure 4. Depiction of the six variables of brand image
 Source: Bosh et al., 2006, p. 14.

Numerous political science scholars have recently provided strong evidence that political candidates are primarily evaluated according to their constructed – and communicated – media images. These images are composed of socially shared meanings, culturally determined standards of beauty, associations that serve to differentiate a political brand from its competition, subjective beliefs and emotions that are activated in the minds of voters-consumers when they are exposed to the political brand in question. According to many experts, brand image is a critical component of brand strategy. The ultimate goal of brand strategy is to establish “positive and favorable brand images because such images serve a role to generate positive and favorable attitudes toward the brand” (Lee, 2014, p. 9). Political science scholars also indicate that voters-consumers pay a particular attention to the physical aspects of brand images; the fact that voters-consumers are profoundly

influenced by the candidates' physical appearance confirms "the widely held belief that candidate's physical image is relevant to voters' decisions" (Guzman & Sierra, 2009, p. 216).

In summary, political brand image must be carefully constructed to achieve electoral success. The core attribute – or attributes – of the brand image constitutes the nucleus of the intended brand image; other – secondary - attributes enrich the core attribute by contributing to the complexity and density of the cognitive associative brand network. The core attributes should have the strongest links with the brand; they should drive voters-consumers' perceptions of the brand. "If certain brand perceptions are inconsistent with the intended positioning, corrective action could be taken to either modify these perceptions (if possible), or to reconsider the brand's points of parity and points of difference" (Brandt et al., 2011, p. 202).

This subchapter focused on the anatomy of brand identity and brand image. The presented in this subchapter evidence gives credence to one of this research project's hypotheses that claims that brand identity has an important impact upon voters-consumers' brand perceptions. This subchapter also addressed two research questions: 1) Does strategic branding in politics facilitate a politician's long term career growth? and 2) What are the success factors in political branding? Based on the presented evidence, brand identity – as an important element of strategic branding – emerges as an indispensable branding instrument that acts as one of the success factors in political branding. It has also been shown that brand identity significantly influences voters-consumers' perceptions of political brands. Chapter 5 will further elaborate on the empirical data concerning the impact of brand identity on voters-consumers' brand perceptions.

2.5. The Evolution Of Political Branding

It can easily be said that brands are neuro-psycho-socio-cultural phenomena that have, indeed, transcended the conventional definitions of business. Brands have permeated through a plethora of social institutions, including business organizations, political parties, educational institutions, show business, media, art, sports, and religious organizations. Branding is no longer confined to the inner sanctum of a business organization. Although

the use of marketing techniques has a long history in electoral politics, political branding as an academic discipline is surprisingly new. Despite the prevailing opinion that political actors cannot be equated with brands, a growing number of political science scholars find merit in the analogy of political actors and commercial brands. The role marketing plays in politics has been well documented in both the political science and marketing literatures. There are many conspicuous similarities between the selling – and branding – of politicians and the selling – and branding – of products, services, and organizations. Perhaps the most lucid parallel revolves around the fact that “politics sell an abstract and intangible product; it is value-laden; it embodies a certain level of promise about the future, some kind of attractive life vision, or anything the satisfactions of which are not immediate but long-term, vague, and uncertain. Vendors of products that share the above characteristics will have legitimate things to say to politicians: the analogies are with promise-based offers ... the growth of a more homogenous society creates promiscuous political allegiances: voters are no longer pre-committed, so political merchandising assumes greater significance” (O’Shaughnessy & Henneber, 2002, p. XI). A quick glance at the US Presidential elections reveals an obvious truth: billions of dollars are being pumped into the campaigns meticulously designed and executed not by political science scholars, but by brand strategists and marketing and advertising executives. Politicians and political parties employ armies of brand and marketing consultants who – very often – play instrumental roles in crafting – and communicating - political brand images capable of eliciting positive emotions in voters-consumers (Kumar & Dhamija, 2017, p. 44). Political candidates – contends Staci M. Zavattaro – “are inexorably engaged in a marketing game, so turning presidential candidates into commodities via branding was the next logical step. Commodities are bought and sold...” (Zavattaro, 2010, p. 124). Zavattaro’s comment overlaps squarely with this dissertation author’s observations regarding the use of strategic brand management principles in political environment. The highly competitive arena of electoral politics – where every vote counts – is forcing political actors to search for effective tools, frameworks, and strategies that would allow them to drum up voters’ support and loyalty. Strategic brand management – akin to the one leveraged by commercial brands such as Apple, Starbucks, Giorgio Armani, Agent Provocateur, and Nike – offers a plethora of highly sophisticated tools and strategies aimed at connecting

with voters-consumers. Strategic brand management in political environment transcends the now platitudinous visual brand identity system, consisting of brand logo, slogan, jingle, and color palette. Strategic political brand management revolves around the development of compelling brand narrative (brand positioning), brand identity, brand name, and brand authenticity that resonate with the voters-consumers' values, aspirations, culture, needs, and concerns. The author of this dissertation hypothesizes that the use of the strategic brand management principles is necessary for the U.S. presidential candidates to successfully appeal to voters. It is assumed that a well-formulated political brand strategy directly translates into the ability of a political actor to gain – or maintain – voters-consumers' support and loyalty. This subchapter focuses on the evolution of political branding and its application to the field of electoral politics. As the investigation of branding in the political context continues, it is imperative that the branding phenomenon is explored within its own context as a unique concept independent of commercial marketing principles (Gangloff, 2018)

More and more political science scholars seem to subscribe to the tenets of strategic political brand management. According to Guja Armannsdottir, Stuart Carnell, and Christopher Pich, “Political parties, politicians, prospective candidates, political institutions such as lobbyists and campaigners utilize commercial marketing techniques and tools to communicate, engage and build long-term relationships with citizens. Nevertheless, political marketing has evolved significantly as an international niche area of commercial marketing since the seminal work of Lock and Harris. Indeed, political marketing represents a hybrid sub-discipline home to many specialized factions of study. However, despite progress made within the political marketing area, more empirical understanding is needed as this will allow the sub-discipline to advance and continue to develop. Political marketing can only develop if it continues to apply new concepts or reapply advanced theories and framework. One well-documented faction of political marketing is the construct of political branding. However, political branding research remains under-researched, particularly the internal orientation and intentional, desired positioning otherwise known as *political brand identity*” (Armannsdottir et al., 2020, p. 74) As indicated by Newman and Seth, “...political marketing educates the voters about the various political parties and leaders thus leading them to making an informed choice”

(Kumar & Dhamija, 2017, p. 76). What is really puzzling, though, is the fact that although marketing as a discipline incorporates theories and techniques that transcend advertising, the preponderance of political marketing research has focused on this latter area. As noticed by Uribe, Buzeta, and Reyes, “A clear example of this research scarcity is political branding, an area intimately linked to communication, whose focus is the administration of a positive and differentiated image of candidates and parties (as if they were brands), seeking to make it act as the driving force of choice on the part of citizens” (Uribe et al., 2017, p. 90). Despite the fact that political branding has been increasingly employed by American political actors – and their advisors and strategists - very little empirical research has been done that investigates the components of political brand strategy and their impact on voters’ brand perceptions. The author of this dissertations is of the opinion that it is an imperative to further explore the composition of political brand strategies and the relationship between political brands and voters-consumers’ brand perceptions. The purpose of this subchapter is to study the differences between political marketing and political branding to delineate the innate intricacies of these two domains. Although this subchapter offers only fragmentary analysis of the differences between political marketing and political branding, it serves as a starting point for further clarifying the nuances separating these two seemingly overlapping domains.

It is believed that the first political science scholar who used the term political marketing was Stanley Kelley. In his seminal book, titled *Professional Public Relations and Political Power*, published in 1956, Kelley emphasized the growing importance of marketing experts in electoral politics in the 1960’s, in the United States (Bigi & Bonera, 2015, p. 81). Kelley’s opinions expressed in his book coincided with the emergence of television in the 1950s. There is no doubt that few technological inventions have had as much effect on modern American electoral politics as television. Before 1947 the television set was a fancy technological gadget for only a few thousand highly affluent Americans. Four years later, in 1952, 19 million American homes were equipped with television sets. Television – often called ‘the atom bomb of electoral politics’ - profoundly transformed the way electoral politics played out. In October 1952, American television stations began to broadcast a carefully prepared collection of twenty-second commercials promoting the Republican candidate for the Presidency of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower. The

mastermind behind this first political advertising campaign was advertising executive Rosser Reeves. For Reeves, who was a television advertising trailblazer – the idea of political-candidate-as-product was a perfectly valid one. Reeves honed his marketing skills while working with popular American commercial brands. “Famous for catchy campaigns that worked well on TV, such as M&Ms ‘melt in your mouth, not in your hand’, and Anacin’s ‘Fast Fast Fast!’ Reeves favored simple repeat messages that stuck (often annoyingly) in the brain [...]. On a fall day two months before the election, Eisenhower sat in a studio and recorded forty commercials for a series Reeves conceived and called “Eisenhower Answers America.” The candidate was filmed without his glasses (which Reeves believed made him less telegenic) and read from giant cue cards. The “common folks” who appeared in the commercials asking Eisenhower scripted questions were tourists who the producers recruited outside of Radio City Music Hall. The commercials were programmed to run just before or after popular television programs in order to get maximum exposure. The slogan “I like Ike” was the most memorable of the lot” (Galloway, 2012, p. 23). This unprecedented strategy transformed electoral politics forever and introduced the idea of *selling* a presidential candidate by employing the same roster of marketing techniques that successfully sold other products, from soaps to automobiles. Catherine Suzanne Galloway, whose research focuses on political campaigns, posits that “Up through 1948 race presidential candidates relied on a small handful of salaried advisors. Harry Truman had just twenty paid campaign staffers, including speechwriters, secretaries and security, a small fraction of campaign staff post television” (Galloway, 2012, p. 18). Drew Westen - one of the most venerated American political psychologists – sums up the critical role television plays in electoral politics by saying: “television gave viewers the kind of multisensory connection with candidates more similar to the early Greek democracies than the newspaper and whistle-stop democracy of nineteenth century America” (Westen, 2007, p. 285). An impressive gamut of empirical studies has demonstrated the profound impact of television on brand authenticity, credibility, and likability. It has been recognized that brands that leverage television are able to improve their growth: TV turns brands into household names. “TV is proven to be heads, shoulders, knees and toes above others at driving the strongest fitness, social, popularity and success signals, and to outperform other media at suggesting brand quality, self-confidence and

strength (MarketingWeek, n.d.). Despite the fact that the media landscape has changed dramatically since the turn of the century, TV has remained an important part of branding strategy. According to Amanda Ai, “Although many companies are moving towards social media, TV advertising remains an effective form of marketing [...]. TV has been and remains a cornerstone of marketing due to its ability to reach customers efficiently and effectively. With brands competing for customer attention daily, marketers need to be up-to-date with any market shifts in the advertising landscape” (Ai, 2022). Sara Savat from the Washington University in St. Louis emphasizes the role TV plays in political brand management by blatantly stating that “During the 2020 election cycle, presidential candidates spent nearly \$3 billion on television, radio and digital ads – shattering records and demonstrating how important advertising is to campaign strategy” (Savat, 2022). It is well acknowledged within the academic milieu that TV ad-related brand associations strongly influence brand authenticity. In an era where voters-consumers crave authenticity from brands, TV appearances can lend credibility to the political brand and can enhance brand’s compelling narrative.

A stunningly vast array of research streams in the 1970s demonstrated an antiquated role of traditional political communication techniques. According to Maarek, “The rapid development of mass media ... in contemporary society ha[s] relegated to the garbage can ‘classic’ means of communication – those, in any case, which have not been backed by more up-to-date marketing strategies. Modern political communication can no longer continue, as in the past, to rely only on the literary quality of political discourse and the rhetorical competence of its orators when the growth of new electronic transnational media has provoked a now unavoidable ‘globalization’ of mediatized political information to the public” (Maarek, 2011, p. 2).

The marriage of marketing and politics has been a steady one, reinforced by more than five decades of research on political advertising effectiveness, political policy making, segmentation, consumers-as-voters, social policy, and political communication. During the past 40 years, a rich literature revolving around broadly conceived political marketing has emerged and transformed our understanding of political processes. Concurrently, “the marketing concept, as a general management philosophy and overarching principle in marketing, has been noted to be a useful philosophy that is relevant to both profit and

nonprofit organizations as well as to a variety of industry contexts” (Bigi & Bonera, 2015, p. 81).

It is important to note here that initially – in the 1960s – American political strategists emphasized short-term marketing campaigns aimed at reaching well-defined - yet limited – objectives. Over time, this short-term orientation gave way to long-term perspective that currently highlights the importance of an ongoing brand-building process. This long-term brand-building orientation aims “to increase the brand image of political parties and influence the viral effect of user-generated content in political communication. Shifting from short-term to long-term communication aims at the creation of a political brand” (Bigi & Bonera, 2015, p. 81).

Surely, when political science scholars discuss electoral politics, strategic brand management is one discipline which hardly ever comes to their minds. However, it merits mentioning here that many institutions, organizations, and non-commercial entities have extensively been using strategic brand management techniques and principles to create – and elevate – strong brands for themselves, and, in the process, attract supporters, generate loyalty, and – ultimately – increase profitability (universities, religious organizations, sports teams, political parties, publicly owned media (PBS in the United States), art institutions, etc.). “Some more non-traditional fields which have been considered as brands in the western nations have been the Roman Catholic Church as well as the popular universities. This is so because the concept of branding is increasingly being associated with all such phenomena which involve some sort of consumerism and choices on the part of the consumer” (Kumar & Dhamija, 2017, p. 76). Gareth Smith and Alan French, two of the most vocal proponents and advocates of political branding, bluntly declare, “In fact, branding principles have been applied in virtually every setting where consumer choice of some kind is involved, e.g., with physical goods, services, retail stores, people, organizations, places or *ideas*. It is axiomatic that political parties are *organizations* where politicians (*people*) seek to exchange *ideas* and promises for electoral support” (Smith & French, 2009, p. 210).

Although the preponderance of research on political brands is still being conducted within the domain of political marketing, an important distinction must be made between political marketing and political branding. Political marketing has been described as the

use of commercial marketing principles and techniques to promote political ideologies, parties, and politicians. Political marketing is traditionally viewed as a subcategory of political communication; a collection of strategies and techniques used to analyze public opinion. According to Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy, political marketing seeks "to establish, maintain and enhance long-term voter relationships at a profit for society and political parties, so that the objectives of the individual political actors and organizations involved are met. This is done by mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises. This definition emphasizes the following aspects: a focus on exchange relationships [...]; a long-term perspective, voter-oriented (but restricted by societal considerations); and mutual benefits for all parties involved" (O'Shaughnessy & Henneber, 2002, p. XIII).

Political branding, on the other hand, is concerned with (a) how political parties or political candidates (politicians) are perceived by voters-consumers, (b) what contributes to the preferential position of the political brand in the mind of the voter-consumer (when the political brand is perceived as favorable, valuable, exciting, and credible to the voter-consumer), and (c) what emotions and associations the political brand is capable of eliciting. To put it differently, political branding allows the political actor (party or individual) to establish – and/or modify – favorable mental position in the mind of the voter-consumer, create a cognitive network of associations and feelings (cognitive, affective, and conative associations), and engender a trusting relationship with the voter-consumer, one that can lead to voter-consumer's loyalty towards the political brand. Political branding's objective is to help voters-consumers to quickly grasp what differentiates the political brand from the competition. Political branding, thus, emerges as a sophisticated strategic instrument helping political actors achieve competitive advantage, drum up voters-consumers' support and loyalty, and secure their political career's long-term growth. This assertion squarely overlaps with one of this research project's objectives that revolves around proving that the application of brand management principles and strategies in the U.S. electoral politics increases the incidence of success in presidential elections.

These presented definitions demystify the differences and nuanced complexities between political marketing and political branding. Although these two domains share a common foundation, political branding has diverged from political marketing by shifting

its attention onto voters-consumers' mental associations, perceptions, impressions, images, identities, authenticity, positioning, cognitions, emotions, and cultural context. According to Pich and Newman, "Political branding has developed into a distinct area of research within the discipline of political marketing. Taking a step back, political branding can be simply defined as the critical application of traditional branding concepts, theories, and frameworks to politics in order to provide differentiation from political competitors and identification between citizens and political entities [...]. For example, there is a shared understanding that political parties [local-regional, national, and international], pressure groups, movements, politicians, candidates, and campaigns can be conceptualized as 'political brands'" (Pich & Newman, 2020, p. 2). Sigge Winther Nielsen defines the political brand as "Political representations situated in a pattern, which can be identified and differentiated from other political representations" (Nielsen, 2016, p. 71). Over time, voters-consumers attach certain socially shared meanings to the names and electoral symbols of political parties, which allows them to differentiate and vote from one party to another in elections (Smith & French, 2009, p. 211). Looking from the neuroscience perspective, the brand is ultimately a neural network – a pattern of connectivity in voter-consumer's brain. It is the sum total of the cognitive, affective, and conative associations that voters-consumers have internalized and come to understand that the brand represents. And it's this associative pattern that gives the brand its symbolic meaning shared within the cultural milieu. Preference for a political candidate is driven by the same decision-making mechanisms in the human brain responsible for preferences for commercial brands, such as running sneakers or flashy sports car. This preference, as was already indicated in Chapter 1, depends on mental short-cuts. Making decisions about who we can and can't trust, who we should and shouldn't be loyal to are important for our security and well-being, both as individuals and as a group. Many voters-citizens are not always sure who to vote for. According to several studies conducted by neuroscientists, in difficult choices such as these, the human brain resorts to – sometimes - highly irrational cognitive strategies, known as heuristics. Political brand is one of these heuristics. A candidate's well-crafted brand name, brand identity system, brand positioning, and brand authenticity are key factors in important decision such as these. Moreover, various studies conducted in fields such as neuroscience, experimental psychology, and economics indicate that when

an individual has to make an important decision and is not sure whether they are making the right choice, they tend to imitate their close neighbors, family members, best friends, and reference groups as a way out of the dilemma. This finding fits squarely with the arguments discussed in subchapter 1.1. concerning identity, belonging, and reference groups. The presented evidence gives compelling credence to one of this research project's hypotheses claiming that the conceptualization of voters as consumers justifies the application of strategic brand management principles in politics.

The brand concept is considered a powerful and highly attractive instrument for understanding electoral politics and – in particular - political images. According to Margaret Scammell, branding has the potential to unify the rational and emotional aspects of political behavior. “The importance of the brand concept in political science” - says Scammell – “is broad and inclusive; brings together the rational and the seemingly irrational, the hard and soft elements of voter choice, the important dimensions of political reputation and the seemingly trivial details of the appearance and tone of voice. In short, the brand concept is attractive because it has the potential to bring together perspectives from political science, economics-based approaches to political marketing and cultural analysis of modern politics” (Scammell, 2014, p. 8). According to Gareth Smith and Alan French, a political brand can be understood as a complex phenomenon with three distinct elements: “the party as a brand; the politician as his tangible characteristics; and politics as basic service offerings” (Smith & French, 2009, p. 212).

Only recently, the idea that political entities can be likened to brands has emerged and gained traction within the political science community. As explained by Pich and Armannsdottir in their seminal paper, “The conceptualization of political parties, ideologies and candidates as ‘brands’ has become an accepted proposition and a recognized area of research that continues to evolve and develop ... political brands are powerful important devices, which need to be thoroughly understood. Political brands can be seen as a trinity of three elements, including the party leader, political party, and party policy” (Pich & Armannsdottir, 2018, p. 35). Thus, following this line of thought, it can be argued that politics can be associated with the commercial brand setting, as both involve choices “on the part of the consumer-citizen, and politicians tend to garner support for their electoral cause by engaging in exchange of ideas” (Kumar & Dhamija, 2017, p. 76). These

arguments presented by Pich and Armannsdottir support this research project's hypothesis that the conceptualization of voters as consumers justifies the application of strategic brand management principles in politics. These arguments also serve as a partial answer to one of this research project's questions - Does Strategic Branding in politics facilitate a politician's long term career growth? – and suggest that leveraging the principles of strategic brand management – akin to the one successfully leveraged by commercial organizations such as Zara, Victoria's Secret, and Target – can significantly help political actors in achieving competitive advantage, drumming up voters-consumers' support and loyalty, and securing their political career's long-term growth.

It is well known that western democracies have been the first ones to jump on the political branding bandwagon, embrace the arsenal of strategic brand management techniques, and apply them to mainstream politics. According to Kumar, Dhamija, and Dhamija, "This happened because the practicing politicians came to realize that no longer can politics be treated as an isolated concept and the changes which are happening in the conduct of day-to-day affairs will be reflected in their manifestations in various forms" (Kumar et al., 2016, p. 116).

The history of political science is replete with theories that only became accepted by the scientific community after a long and protracted uphill battle. The growing interest – and acceptance – of the politicians-as-brands paradigm has not transpired in the social vacuum though, but, instead, has been precipitated by the plethora of social and technological processes and events. The rising competitiveness, the proliferation - and technological advancement – of diverse mass media systems and formats, and especially – as Durántez-Stolle and Martínez-Sanz assert – “the dissolution of boundaries regarding political media content, turn out to be crucial to boost the presence of politicians in hybrid television programs – either in the form of magazines, interviews talk-shows, or late-night shows- whose common basis is 'that candidates can make politics a permanent show' and monopolize the viewers' attention”¹ (Duranyez-Stolle & Martinez-Sanz, 2019, p. 112). Presidential campaigns in the United States have also seen a dramatic paradigm shift, from “private discussions among elite white men to the *consumerized* media spectacle that graces every television screen from Maine to Hawaii” (Giovanni Lovett, 2018, p. 12). By looking at this media-related transformation of electoral politics, one can draw significant

parallels between strategic brand management and modern politics. In branding, *campaign* refers to various types of brand communications an organization employs to promote – and ultimately sell – its products or services to potential consumers. A *brand campaign's* objective is to generate interest, commend consumers' attention, build brand awareness, construct associative brand network, link the brand to positive emotions, induce the customer to purchase the brand, and – ultimately – generate brand loyalty. By the same token, a *political brand campaign's* objective is to generate interest, instigate awareness, build strong political image, link the politician (political brand) to strong positive emotions, generate votes, and ultimately – engender long-term loyalty. For commercial brands and political actors alike, the arsenal of promotional techniques currently revolves around the well-tested principles of strategic brand management. It is a well-known and documented fact that politicians have extensively been using communications tools - such as PR, media, advertising, social media, logos, slogans, jingles, and others – to sell their selves, their visions, ideas, and ideologies. In the commercial environment, businesses use the principles of strategic brand management in order to develop a blockbuster brand whose image, values, authenticity, narrative, identity, personality, and promise would resonate with consumers. Successful brands – such as APPLE, NIKE, HARLEY-DAVIDSON – positively resonate with consumers' needs, wants, desires, and values, and – in the process – enrich consumers' lifestyles, their aspirations, and expectations. Political actors face similar objectives and challenges. They must be acutely attuned to what makes voters tick. This leads to the concept of voter-consumer which will be further elaborated on later.

While the idea of politician-as-brand has gained widespread traction within the political science community, some scholars actively resist this new conceptualization of politics. As Kumar, Dhamija, and Dhamija explain, “The puritans are ... not very convinced about comparing politics with the materialistic aspects as found with commodities. They are not convinced with the bringing together of branding and politics and argue that the principles of marketing [and branding] are too consumer-oriented to be applied to politics” (Kumar et al., 2016, p. 47). There are those political science scholars who “have cautioned against marketing's application in not-for-profit areas such as politics and, more particularly, against viewing political parties and politicians as brands. They

suggest this overstates marketing's capabilities in the area while oversimplifying and minimizing the uniqueness of politics" (Smith, 2001, p. 990).

This resistance and caution are unwarranted though, as more political parties and candidates around the world blatantly employ brand strategists who, in turn, employ strategic brand management principles to create distinct and durable brands for their political clients. Moreover, strategic brand management is primarily concerned with (a) researching, identifying, analyzing, and – subsequently – satisfying consumers' needs, wants, aspirations, desires, (b) analyzing cultural context within which consumers live their lives, and (c) devising brands that would positively resonate with well-defined target audiences. Similarly, politics is "as much concerned with understanding the electorate as it is about delivering on the promises made during the pre-poll campaign once the party or leader is elected to power" (Kumar et al., 2016, p. 117).

Many interdisciplinary studies clearly demonstrate - as Gareth Smith elucidates - an "increasing evidence of the general applicability of marketing across a wide range of not-for-profit organizations such as universities, public libraries and leisure centers as well as politics. In particular, brand building and image development have been forwarded as a fundamental task in the strategic management of political parties" (Smith, 2001, p. 990). Thomas Meyer, one of the most influential German political science scholars, once wrote: "If democracy is nothing but legitimation by the most successful form of communication, then the communication artist is the best democrat, with no effort whatsoever. And if the authentic play of body politics is the most efficacious form of entertaining communication, then *briefcase politics* with its institutionalized procedures and long-winded arguments might as well bow out now" (Street, 2004, p. 440). Therefore, it can be said - as John Street argues in his widely-quoted essay *Celebrity Politicians: Popular Culture And Political Representation* – that "'telegenicity' has become the measure of 'representativeness' ..." (Street, 2004, p. 440). For example, Aron O'Cass and Ranjit Voola assert that "both political and marketing processes play a significant role in virtually all societies (democratic or not and capitalist or not). Politics affects all facets of individuals' lives, and so too does marketing. However, in more recent times, the nexus between the institution of politics and the discipline of marketing has become a major talking point ... in the latter part of the twentieth century, commercial marketing concepts and theoretical frameworks

have been applied to politics with growing sophistication. Such applications include, but are not limited to: the marketing concept; political relationship marketing; marketing mix; communication; market orientation; image; branding; strategy; marketing research. Importantly, an analysis of the practical as well as the theoretical developments in political marketing shows a growing sophistication and breadth to the domain. Such efforts provide an added dimension to the view of Smith and Hirst that the discourse in political marketing has moved to a strategic marketing era. Essentially, this line of argument emphasizes long-term and more permanent strategies to ensure continued governance, as opposed to short-term tactics, such as conducting marketing research in the advent of an election. Furthermore, as Scammell argues, the ‘emphasis on strategy is the prime distinctive contribution of the marketing literature’ to political marketing” (O’Cass & Voola, 2011, pp. 627-628).

A significantly growing number of political science scholars argue that “the nature of governing is much like a service provider, in that it is intangible, complex, and heavily reliant on people” (Pich et al., 2016, p. 103). Branding - and marketing - zeroes in on the consumer and the analysis and interpretation of his/her behaviors, attitudes, latent needs, desires, underlying motivations, and cultural values (socialization, acculturation, enculturation). This last point plays an increasingly important role in political branding. The so-called consumer-centric approach of marketing and branding revolves around the “experiential learning which consumers engage in when they come in contact with a particular brand, and, in the process, are motivated to show their allegiance to the brand. It is this approach which advocates the coming together of politics and branding thereby resulting in political branding. This holds significance because this aspect of branding has much to do with the preferences formed in the minds of the consumers owing to their experience with that brand. They take help of mental shortcuts to arrive at a decision with regard to that brand, developing an emotional connection in the process. The field of political branding functions in similar fashion ...” (Kumar & Dhamija, 2017, p. 77). The corresponding services perspective of political parties as providers of promises, ideas, and visions is supported by Henneberg and O’Shaughnessy who argue that political marketing should be viewed as “essentially a form of services marketing: marketing a party consists in projecting belief in its ability to govern (and political parties are service organizations).

But there is skepticism about services, and therefore parties need to reassure: they must eliminate all perception of risk. The ideal party ... would be a political version of a Holiday Inn” (O’Shaughnessy & Henneber, 2002, p. XII). The authors also claim 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 (Pich et al., 2016, p. 103).

The overarching logic behind the aforementioned consumer-centric and services perspectives, and their application to political science, is that voters-consumers tend to view political parties and politicians [especially political candidates running for office] as brands and, in order to simplify their decision making process, they generally “use cognitively efficient strategies for coding vast amounts of complex data to create shortcuts that help them decide how to vote” (Guzman & Sierra, 2009, p. 208). Guzmán and Sierra posit that political branding should shift its attention away from political parties and focus more on the candidates. The authors contend that “while a political party is an important brand attribute, a candidate, above his or her own ideology or party affiliation, has become a brand – a brand that voters follow. A brand that has its own traits and values and, like any other brand, fights for a space in consumers’ mind. A brand that has an image built around three pillars – the physical attributes of the candidate, the candidate’s personality, and the benefits the candidate promises to the electorate” (Guzman & Sierra, 2009, p. 208).

Many political communication scholars, who explore the connection between politics and marketing, go so far as to say it “is not that politics just makes use of the practices and techniques of marketing, but that *politics is marketing*. As the logic of marketing takes hold, it necessarily shapes the conception of ‘representation’. Representatives sell themselves to their market; successful parties are like successful entrepreneurs, and this is a fact to be welcomed, not condemned. To the extent that celebrity politics is a form of marketing, then the celebrity politician is simply making use of the techniques of marketing, either ... selling themselves, or ... endorsing a product ...”(Street, 2004, p. 441). On top of that, political science scholars all agree – as Smith and French attest to – that “A major feature of western politics is increasing levels of disengagement with the electoral process. As such it follows that many consumers will have low levels of knowledge of political brands and few perceived benefits from voting. For them, political

brands are weak. Conversely, political brands will be stronger for more involved, partisan voters. In this sense political brands reflect the variation in consumer response to brands generally” (Smith & French, 2009, p. 211). Following this logic, many prominent political science scholars – including Christopher Pich and Bruce Newman - have come to an agreement that “political parties [local-regional, national and international], pressure groups, movements, politicians, candidates and campaigns can be conceptualized as ‘political brands’” (Pich & Newman, 2020, p. 2).

Despite the fact that political science scholars, by and large, have accepted the idea that political actors can be conceptualized as brands, many have failed to tackle political branding from a neuropsychological perspective. The concept of a commercial brand, traditionally understood as a cluster of unique features of a product that are aimed at creating unique value for consumers compared to the rivaling products, has a limited value in political science. Over the years, it has been assumed that brands are associated with products, services, corporations, and other business entities. This view – perpetuated by many social scientists – has been recently contested by numerous brand scholars who acknowledge that people (politicians), places (countries, cities, regions, amusement parks), ideas (APPLE’s creativity and nonconformity, Harley-Davidson’s rebelliousness), religious institutions (Catholic Church), artists (Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons) can also be branded (Bigi & Bonera, 2015, p. 81). This assertion – already validated by countless researchers - has profound implications for the politician-as-brand conceptualization of electoral politics. Following our definition of a brand as a cognitive entity, a political brand can be defined as “an associative network of interconnected political information and attitudes, held in memory and accessible when stimulated from the memory of a voter” (Giovanni Lovett, 2018, p. 10). Accordingly, political brands are developed in order to achieve a number of well-articulated strategic objectives: (a) create appealing and compelling identities and images, (b) promote brand narratives aimed at instigating authenticity, (c) formulate acceptable positions in the minds of consumers-voters, and (d) develop multidimensional and dense cognitive brand network of associations (Pich & Newman, 2020, p. 3). In order to be perceived as authentic and avoid ambiguity, political brands must communicate a clear, easy-to-understand, and consistent message. Political brands – as explained by Giovanni Lovett – “exist in our subconscious in much the same

way that commercial brands do” (Giovanni Lovett, 2018, p. 10). A brand can also be conceptualized as a powerful communication vehicle which encapsulates values, nature and personality of an organization, product, service, idea, place, political party, or political candidate.

Looking from the neuropsychological perspective, a brand resides in the mind of the consumer-voter as a cognitive entity. As a cognitive entity, a brand can be likened to a heuristic – a mental shortcut that allows individuals to solve problems and make judgments swiftly, effortlessly, and efficiently. The cognitive components of a brand include brand awareness, brand identity, and brand image. According to Bonera and Bigi, “Awareness is linked to the reputation of the brand. It depends on the strength of the brand in terms of recognition and customers’ ability to recall the brand. Brand identity is connected to the distinguishing factors that enable the recognition of the brand, and the set of ... value(s) that guide the selection of choices over the life cycle of the brand. Brand identity ... is the combinative construal of firm culture, history, structure, characteristics, status and reputation with competitors, customers, and society at large, and it is formulated and cemented over time. In contrast, brand image is the external projection of the identity. Scholars have seen organizational image as a broader concept, which includes notions involving the ways organization’s members believe others see the organization; fabricated, projected pictures aimed at various; and the public’s perception of a given organization” (Bigi & Bonera, 2015, p. 82).

Countless research studies have also recently demonstrated that political brands provide a range of benefits for voters-consumers, including sociological, rational, psychological, and cultural benefits (Smith & French, 2009, p. 214). Numerous political science scholars are currently studying the scope of these benefits and how voters-consumers perceive and value them. According to Gareth Smith and Alan French, “...these benefits will vary significantly in their importance, with different benefits being valued by different voters. For some, few if any benefits will be perceived as important, resulting in a low involvement in the political process overall” (Smith & French, 2009, p. 214). Smith and French propose the following categories of political brand’s benefits for voters-consumers:

1. Political brand and social benefits:

- a. Relationship partner,
 - b. The political brand and community involvement,
 - c. The political brand and cultural identity,
2. Political brands and rational benefits:
 - a. Functional and economic benefits,
 3. Political brands and psychological benefits:
 - a. Political brand as heuristic,
 - b. Self-concept reinforcement through the political brand,
 - c. Epistemic value and variety seeking with political brands (Smith & French, 2009, p. 214-218).

Political brand and social benefits (Relationship partner): Many political and social psychologists and anthropologists agree that “relationship principles have virtually replaced short-term exchange notions in both marketing thought and practice, precipitating what has been considered a paradigm shift for the field as a whole” (Fournier, 1998, p. 343). Following this line of reasoning, political science scholars are of the opinion that “Indeed, the development of a positive relationship between the voter and the party [and the political candidate] has been forwarded as the *raison d’être* of political marketing. In the commercial sector, it has been identified that consumers form relationships with brands through consumption and that this provides strong and valued benefits for consumers” (Smith & French, 2009, p. 214). According to Susan Fournier, who is a leading researcher and authority in the field of branding and consumer behavior, “For a relationship to truly exist, interdependence between partners must be evident: that is, the partners must collectively affect, define, and redefine the relationship. The premise that consumer actions affect relationship form and dynamics is easily accepted” (Fournier, 1998, p. 344). In the political environment, it has been recognized that voters “exhibit similar characteristics to those identified as in a ‘committed partnership’ with a brand. The relationship is a ‘long term, voluntarily imposed, socially supported union, high in love, intimacy and trust and a commitment to stay together despite adverse circumstances’. In 2005 the British Electoral Studies research identified some three million voters in the UK who through their partisan allegiance were strong candidates for such a relationship with one of the party brands” (Smith & French, 2009, p. 214).

Political brand and social benefits (The political brand and community involvement): The concept of a brand community has garnered attention in 2001 when Albert M. Muniz and Thomas O’Guinn recognized that brands’ loyal consumers – regardless of their geographical location – would congregate in brand communities. The authors introduced the very first definition of a brand community, calling it “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialized because at its center is a branded good or service. Like other communities, it is marked by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. Each of these qualities is, however, situated within a commercial and mass-mediated ethos, and has its own particular expression. Brand communities are participants in the brand’s larger social construction and play a vital role in the brand’s ultimate legacy” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Political science scholars agree that some voters-consumers actively support their favorite political brands through political communities, social networks, constituency gatherings, party conventions, and conferences. It has been recognized that many voters-consumers create virtual political brand communities where they share their support with other, like-minded individuals. Smith and French suggest that Barack Obama successfully leveraged the concept of brand communities during the 2008 Presidential elections. The authors claim that “...the Obama camp successfully used an online strategy to create small social network to recruit, energize and fund-raise among local activists and their friend. The campaign also highlighted the use of MySpace, Facebook and YouTube for developing an interactive viral marketing-driven relationship with the Obama brand. Social networks, with their potential for fund-raising and local canvassing, as well as providing brand community benefits to a large number of partisan voters, are likely to become an increasingly important source of future political brand relationships” (Smith & French, 2009, p. 215).

Political brand and social benefits (The political brand and cultural identity): There is a consensus among cultural anthropologists that “consumption symbols such as commercial brands (e.g., Marlboro cigarettes) can serve as carriers of culture. That is, the meaning embedded in brands can serve to represent and institutionalize the values and beliefs of a culture” (Aaker et al., 2001, p. 492). It has been argued that brands are imbued with symbolic properties that place them within the boundaries of culture, as cultural

phenomena. Culture is a nebulous and slippery concept. Over the years, many definitions of culture emerged in many disparate academic fields. An agreement exists among cultural anthropologists that “The culture of any society consists of the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior which the members of that society have acquired through instruction or imitation and which they share to a greater or lesser degree” (Birukou et al., 2009, p. 3). Other definitions of culture emphasize transmission of socially shared values, beliefs, and moral and ethical standards. According to Jennifer Lynn Aaker, Jordi Garolera, and Veronica Benet-Martinez, “Much of the research in cross-cultural psychology has conceptualized culture as a broad, domain-general, and stable set of value tendencies (e.g., individualism-collectivism, power distance). In this light, the portrayal of culture is of an abstract, encompassing structure, one that is often indexed by nationality and examined in light of its influence on individuals’ behavior. Another perspective is that culture is more fragmented and dynamic, a set of subjective contexts and situations that are constructed and experienced by the individual. Two key issues within this perspective are that (a) culture is best conceptualized in terms of the meaning derived from and added to everyday experience and (b) individuals and culture are inseparable and mutually constitute each other” (Aaker et al., 2001, p. 492-493). It is widely accepted that brands embrace and mirror cultural ideas, values, patterns of habitual behavior, traditions, and mythologies. “Referred to as consumption symbols or cultural icons, commercial brands have significance that goes beyond their physical properties, utilitarian character, and commercial value. This significance rests largely in their ability to carry and communicate cultural meaning” (Aaker et al., 2001, p. 493). Political science scholars are of the opinion that political brands can – and often do – embrace and communicate cultural values, ethical and moral principles, and religious beliefs. Political brands can subscribe to and convey values related to progress, modernity, liberalism, conservatism, tradition, openness, isolationism and so on. For example, Democratic and Republican Parties in the United States stand for two distinct sets of values and worldviews. Recent social trends in the United States indicate that Americans are politically increasingly polarized. According to a 2019 Gallup study “the number of Americans who identify as moderate shrank to 35%, down from 43% in 1992, while the portion of Americans identifying as liberal or conservative grew from 53% in 1992 to 61%

in 2018. Pew Research shows Republicans and Democrats have been moving further apart in their political values, as well as approaches to addressing national issues they identify as top government priorities. Another Pew survey from 2018 found that 53% of Americans say that talking about politics with people they disagree with is generally stressful and frustrating, compared with 46% who said the same two years prior” (Steimer, 2019). Thus, leveraging voters-consumers’ espoused values is a powerful technique in political branding. Moreover, standing firmly behind a well-articulated set of values has always been a winning strategy in commercial strategic brand management. “Appealing to consumers’ political ideologies” – says Sarah Steiner – “by taking a stand on an issue has well-documented success: In December 2017, Patagonia announced plans to sue the Trump administration in response to the government’s decision to reduce the protection on two national monuments in Utah. According to e-commerce and analytic company Slice Intelligence (now Rakuten Intelligence), Patagonia sales were 7% stronger the week of the statement than they were they precious week – a week that included Cyber Monday. Similarly, Nike sales surged 31% after it released its ad featuring Colin Kaepernick, according to Edison Trends” (Steiner, 2019). Therefore, it can be posited that voters-consumers can internalize values of their chosen political brands “to affirm their civic duty and attachment to ... cultural institutions, over and above any benefits derived from the political brand itself” (Smith & French, 2009, p. 216).

The meaning attached to political brands typically is located in the abstract (brand identity) and concrete (proposed program, ideology) properties of the political brand that provide symbolic and/or value-expressive benefits for the voter-consumer. According to Smith and French, “To the extent that the political brand is associated with internal and external cultural values it offers the voter the ability to reinforce his/her own self-image (a psychological benefit) and sense of belonging to a nation’s core value-set (a cultural benefit) through the brand. Conversely, inasmuch as a person thinks negatively about politics (i.e., all politicians are corrupt; it has little impact on my life, etc.), he/she may well reinforce his/her own self-image by a considered decision not to vote” (Smith & French, 2009, p. 216).

Political brands and rational benefits (Functional and economic benefits): It has been argued that voter behavior and decision-making process are the result of a rational and logical assessment of proprieties, objectives, and utility maximization. This conception of voters' behavior is perfectly encapsulated "in the view of the human as a "rational animal", an organism endowed with the capacity to reason logically, to act consistently in its own interests (or in response to the contingencies of its environments), to sense, perceive, and subsequently represent mentally the objects and events of the real world, and to develop through education and learning increasing capacities for reason as it matures. This view of man as a rational machine is located in the writings of Aristotle and Francis Bacon, and in the British Associationists (Locke, Berkeley, Hume) who laid the philosophical foundations for American functionalism and behaviorism (Thorndike, Watson, Skinner), and probably defines the implicit prevailing view of human functioning among most contemporary educators" (Shulman & Caray, 1984, p. 501). Political branding can easily be applied into this rational voter theory. As Smith and French assert, "The brand plays a key role in this process in that consumer utility will be informed by the functional and economic benefits offered by the political brand. Functional benefits from a brand are derived from features of the service promised and they operate at the more basic level of consumer physiological and safety needs. Thus, political brands can offer functional benefits such as greater safety (through improved health care) and freedom from harm (via policies on policing, surveillance and wider national security). Financial security directly impacts on both physiological and safety needs. Any perceived economic benefit superiority of one brand over another is a likely powerful influence on voting behavior. As the Bill Clinton aphorism would have it, 'It's the economy, stupid'" (Smith & French, 2009, p. 216).

Political brands and psychological benefits (Political brand as heuristic): Despite the fact that functional and economic benefits from political brands should be deemed relevant and important by voters-consumers, the validity of the rational voter theory has been questioned by political psychologists and cultural anthropologists who – ultimately – have labeled it as highly unrealistic and outdated. Voter decision making has been extensively examined and studied by psychologists, neuroscientists, and others. The major objective of these studies is to understand the mental processing ability susceptible to intrinsic limitations

and situational constraints. “A common thread running through these studies is that consumers [and voters] must strike a balance between their desire for judgmental accuracy and their desire to minimize effort expenditure. One way to achieve this balance is for consumers [and voters] to use cognitive heuristics (rules of inference) to simplify decision making, minimize effort and at the same time deliver an adequate level of confidence that the judgment is correct” (Mandrik, 1996). It is now widely acknowledged that “‘Pure’ rational choice theory is unsuccessful in explaining voter turnout. Indeed, the instrumental voter axiom predicts large-scale abstention because no individual is likely to have an influence on the election outcome ... it is clear that the strict economic self-interest axiom ‘fails as a generally applicable model to explain economic behavior’” (Geys, 2006, p. 16). Voters-consumers - confronted with a deluge of information about the nuances and intricacies of political brands from infinite news sources - “save time and energy by using heuristics to help them decide their voting intention. For them, the associations they currently have of the party brand are sufficient, obviating the need to actively engage in new learning about a party, its policies and values” (Smith & French, 2009, p. 217). Thanks to neuroscience we know now that the human brain doesn’t use rationality and logic as a default operating scheme. According to Hilke Plassmann, Tim Ambler, Sven Braeutigam, and Peter Kenning, “...the human brain is nothing like a computer. It is capable of processing information in a rational fashion to produce logical answers. We can multiply two by two just like a computer can, but our brains do not do that in the same way the computer does, and it does many other things a computer cannot ... decision making of the shopping or dining type (as distinct from habitual or corporate) may depend on feelings with little if any rational involvement except for post-rationalization. Contrary to traditional economic thinking, we are not trying to make decisions solely on the basis of calculating and maximizing our utilities but also on the basis of emotions and what feels ‘right’. If our brains were merely calculators, advertising [and branding] would have little to contribute. In addition, we know from cognitive psychology that emotions play an important role for memory processes: they can help us to learn and to remember” (Plassmann et al., 2007, p. 152). Given the latest discoveries in neuroscience, it is clear that the rational voter theory must be deemed inadequate and outdated. In political environment, say Smith and French, “the brand operates as a heuristic device at several

levels. The party itself ... [e.g., Democratic and Republican] and its perceived ideology (left or right) provide a beneficial heuristic for voters to assess a candidate. So voters do not need to learn specific party policies Finally, the leader's image, as a major and often dominant part of the overall brand, has been identified as a heuristic for voter assessment of critical issues such as overall party competence, responsiveness and attractiveness. Moreover, the political brand has been seen to produce constraint (i.e., consistency) in voting decisions. Despite the short-cuts used, such voting decisions have been seen to be consistent and leading to 'correct' decisions at elections (i.e., voters end up voting for a party/politician that, after more informed reflection, was in fact the correct one). As such, the brand heuristic performs a critical function for democratic systems" (Smith & French, 2009, p. 217).

Political brand and psychological benefits (Self-concept reinforcement through the political brand): The term self-concept is a well-researched socio-psychological phenomenon. Self-concept is a general term used to refer to how someone perceives him/herself. According to Edward Burkley, Thomas Hatvany, and Jessica Cartis, "A person's self-concept is comprised of many things and the line that separates "me" and "not me" is a thin one" (Burkley et al., 2017, p. 1). Many research studies conducted by psychologists have demonstrated that the self-concept is actively involved in mediating and regulating individual's behavior. This new perspective nullifies the now outdated view of the self-concept as reflecting an individual's on-going behavior. Self-concept, say Hazel Markus and Elissa Wurf, "... interprets and organizes self-relevant actions and experiences; it has motivational consequences, providing the incentives, standards, plans, rules, and scripts for behavior; and it adjusts in response to challenges from the social environment" (Hazel & Wurf, 1987, p. 299). According to many cultural anthropologists who subscribe to symbolic interactionism school of thought, the self-concept is predicated on the perceptions and responses of other people with whom an individual interacts. It is now widely accepted that self-concept plays a profound role in consumption behavior. The strategic brand management, consumer behavior, cultural anthropology, and political science literatures support the premise that individual's purchasing behavior is determined by the self-images. Consumers – say Sameer Hosany and Drew Martin – “buy products and brands they believe to possess symbolic images similar and/or complementary to their

self-image, that is, to achieve image congruence. Strong supporting evidence shows self-image congruence explains and predicts different aspects of consumer behavior ... people consumer products/brands/services for both functional value and symbolic meanings ...people buy products not only for what they can *do*, but also for what they *mean*. Product consumption symbolizes personal attributes, motivations and social patterns. Symbolic consumption reflects the personality and lifestyle of consumers, expressing social distinctions. For example, people consume luxury products (e.g., high-performance automobiles) to reinforce their status symbol in society. Consumption serves as a vehicle of self-expression and consumers choose products/brands perceptually consistent with their own self-concept” (Hosany & Martin, 2012, p. 685). The self-concept is composed of four sub-categories:

- Actual Self: How an individual sees him/herself,
- Ideal self: How an individual would like to perceive him/herself,
- Social self: How an individual assumes others see him/herself,
- Ideal social self: How an individual would wish others to see him/herself.

Given that the self-concept drives consumption behavior, and brands allow consumers to express their self-concepts, it can be reckoned then that congruence between the voter-consumer’s self-image and the image of the political brand can act as a powerful psychological driving force motivating the individual to support the political brand. In other words, “...a leader who has identifiable personality traits ‘like me’ or ‘as I’d like to be’ would be attractive to voters and the match with self-concept offers a short-cut to preference [...]. Certain brand personality traits, such as competence, honesty, sincerity, being down to earth, even if not held personally, are still likely to be valued by voters and help them decide between possible party leaders” (Smith & French, 2009, p. 217-218).

Political brand and psychological benefits (Epistemic value and variety seeking with political brands): Epistemic value refers to the perceived utility derived from the political brand’s ability to arouse curiosity, provide intellectual stimulation, offer novelty, and/or satisfy an innate desire for knowledge. Political brands that offer entirely new experiences certainly offer epistemic value. Brands – say Franzen and Moriarty – play a profound role in “knowledge development and intellectual stimulation by arousing curiosity, gathering new experiences, and expanding knowledge” (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009, p. 81).

Neuroscientific evidence demonstrates the existence of the human tendency to engage in variety-seeking behavior. Variety-seeking behavior revolves around switching among and between brands, products, categories, activities to decrease – or avoid – boredom and monotony. Politicians, political parties, social movements, ideologies, religions can also provide voters-consumers with the epistemic value. According to Smith and French, “Politicians and their parties also offer an epistemic value to some voters who have an innate desire for change caused by a sense of curiosity or just boredom with their existing brand’s leader/politics. Just as consumers can obtain pleasure by switching from something they know to something new, there is prima facie evidence that voters get bored with the same old faces, and leaders/governments pall after having their weaknesses and limitations exposed. There is a shelf-life with most brands, and consumers can get pleasure from brand switching – i.e., using their power to stop buying one brand (the government) and experimenting with a new, interesting brand on sale (an opposition party)” (Smith & French, 2009, p. 218). Voters-consumers’ variety-seeking proclivity – innate desire for novelty – is currently widely recognized as one of the most profound characteristics that influence voters-consumers’ choice behavior. Variety seeking is a psychological phenomenon affecting multiple facets of buyer behavior, particularly among voters-consumers for whom loyalty toward the brand(s) is not considered important. Numerous studies have shown that novelty-seeking has a profound impact upon bored voters-consumers. “Brand switching has also been found to have consumer value in that it allows individuals to affirm their self-identity as unique/interesting. It is also known that some consumers have an intrinsic preference for varied experiences. Just as many people want a change when they buy a new car, some consumers can derive benefit from variety seeking in politics too” (Smith & French, 2009, p. 218).

The objective of this subchapter was to present the evolution of political branding and delineate the differences between political branding and political marketing. As the presented evidence indicated, the principles of strategic brand management have significantly helped commercial organizations – such as Google, Under Armor, and Christian Louboutin, and many others – achieve phenomenal profitability and elicit consumer loyalty and long-term commitment. Extending this logic to the context of electoral politics, it can be presumed that the principles of strategic brand management can

significantly help political actors achieve competitive advantage and elicit long-term voter loyalty. This subchapter attempted to contribute to the overriding objectives of this research project – 1) Proving that the application of brand management principles and strategies in the U.S. electoral politics increases the incidence of success in presidential elections, and 2) Proving that existence of voting-consumption analogy justifies the application of brand strategies in the U.S. electoral politics – by presenting an in-depth analysis of the evolution of political branding. This analysis showed that political branding has become a potent and effective tool leveraged by numerous political actors determined to build long-lasting political careers.

CHAPTER 3. THE CONCEPT OF COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN POLITICAL BRANDING

3.1. Voting-Consumption Analogy

One of the primary objectives of this research project is to prove that the existence of voting-consumption analogy justifies the application of brand strategies in the U.S. electoral politics. This subchapter is dedicated to an extensive analysis of this analogy. As will be shown, the voting-consumption analogy tends to polarize scholars within the political science milieu, although strategic brand management, marketing, cultural anthropology, and social psychology scholars are – by and large - prone to support it.

Scholars from a wide range of academic backgrounds have analyzed and compared voters and consumers. Some political science scholars have argued that the differences between these two categories are minuscule, others that they are significant. However, according to Darren Lilleker and Richard Scullion, “Research conducted over the last three decades under the cross-disciplinary umbrella of political marketing has reinforced the notion of the citizen or voter as political consumer; an individual who will ‘question every aspect of elite provision and will no longer accept being told by the elite what is good for them’” (Lilleker & Scullion, 2008, p. 2). Corroborating this perspective are cultural and consumer anthropologists and social psychologists who emphasize that “people, in their various roles (as consumers and citizens), relate to names, terms or symbols (i.e., brands), which identify certain groups, organizations, services or products, and that these names are a key factor in the decision process of developing a preference” (Uribe et al., 2017, p. 91). These opinions highlight the fact that political brands are susceptible to the same mental processes of brand assessment, “such as denominations (names) that generate a mental representation that acts as one of the central foundations of the political decision-making process” (Uribe et al., 2017, p. 91). These arguments have already been presented in Chapter 1, where cognitive associative networks were described and analyzed. Underlying this strain of research are the tenets of psychology of learning, neuropsychology, strategic brand management and marketing. Many political science scholars suggest that the use of

marketing and brand management in electoral politics forces politicians to be responsive and accountable to the public thereby strengthening the democratic process. “Thus far then” - says Heather Savigny – “it can be seen that through the application of this concept [brand management and marketing] and the analogy of a marketplace accepted within this literature, that voters are conflated with consumers” (Savigny, 2008, p. 38).

Given the abundant evidence supporting the voting-consumption analogy, it is highly plausible to call voters political consumers. According to Norman Peng and Chris Hackley, “Voters and consumers do share some resemblance in their affective, cognitive and behavioral responses to advertising [and other brand communications], which is perhaps unsurprising, since political parties and commercial entities do ... employ similar marketing techniques” (Peng & Hackley, 2009, p. 172). Nevertheless, numerous political researchers are of the opinion that “political engagement, participation and thus the act of voting, as a unique behavior, a civic duty, grounded within citizenship” (Lilleker & Scullion, 2008, p. 3) should not be squarely overlapped with commercial consumption. According to Stefan Schwarzkopf, “The pervasiveness of marketing practices in Western societies rests on a number of powerful social and political mythologies that helped normalize the reshaping of these societies along the lines of market structures that favor corporate interests over those of the public and civil society. One of these myths that ‘mobilized’ and redefined people as consumers is the imagination of the marketplace as a ‘democracy of goods’ and a ‘consumer democracy’ in which consumer choices act as ‘votes’ that decide over fate of products and companies. In this vision, consumer advertising is presented as ‘information’ and the consumer appears as a sovereign decision maker to whom the market ultimately has to answer. This myth of the consumer as independent and sovereign ‘voter’ and the market as a form of democracy has its origins in the interwar battles over the legitimacy of marketing as a social technique and the legitimacy of the free market as an alternative form of social and political governance. In particular, the scientification of market research tools through consumer interviews, panel surveys, consumer juries, program analyzer techniques, and product testing panels, which emerged during that period helped legitimize marketing practices. With the help of graphs, charts, and statistics, advertising and market research companies projected the marketplace as the new agora of a consumer democracy and visualized mass consumer opinion as

independent jury and skeptical arbiter” (Schwarzkopf, 2010, p. 8). These political mythologies – revolving around the idea that the free market is the best form of democracy - are being vigorously promoted by scholars, media pundits, and politicians themselves. “Notorious free marketer, technophile, and relentless ‘democratizer’ Thomas Friedman even went so far as to promote the stock market as the ideal of democratic participation. Where the political elites had failed, according to Friedman, the market succeeded in “turn[ing] the whole world into a parliamentary system, in which every government lives under the fear of a no-confidence vote.” Consistent with his ‘flat world’ view, Friedman detects the networked masses rise above everyday oppression and marginalization from the depths of their wired basements. Transformed into revolutionaries by personal computer and broadband these neglected and disempowered souls came to symbolize ‘democratization by the stock market’ because at the NYSE they now can “vote every hour, every day through their mutual funds, their pension funds, their brokers” (Lilleker & Scullion, 2008, pp. 12-13).

The voting-consumption analogy has a long tradition in the American political science and electoral politics. This should not surprise us given the highly competitive nature of the American elections. Justin Buchler - whose seminal book, *Hiring and Firing Public Officials: Rethinking The Purpose Of Elections*, lucidly explains the intricacies and complexities of the American electoral politics – eloquently describes the cultural antecedents behind the voting-consumption analogy: “Every two years, the American voters hire 435 individuals for positions in the House of representatives, and over the course of every six years, they hire 100 individuals for positions in the U.S. Senate. These jobs come with two-year and six-year contracts, respectively. At the end of each contract, incumbents may ask the voters in their districts or states to renew their contracts for another two- or six-year period. When that happens, voters can either renew the incumbent’s contract, or dismiss the incumbent in order to hire a replacement. When incumbents ask for their contracts to be renewed, voters oblige more than 90 percent of the time, and they do so by large margins” (Buchler, 2011, p. 4). This brief description of the electoral process is entirely predicated on the commercial marketplace vernacular whereby voters-consumers’ participation in the political process is described as ‘hiring’, ‘firing’, and ‘renewing job contracts’. This vernacular is prevalent in the American political science

literature and reinforces the collective perception that political and commercial marketplaces are two sides of the same proverbial coin. “The term ‘political marketplace’” – says Thomas Tso – “is increasingly used in academic literature and judicial opinion. The most famous and prevalent use of the “marketplace” analogy is in First Amendment jurisprudence. The First Amendment is often described as protecting a marketplace of ideas. Beyond the First Amendment protection of speech context, the “political marketplace” provides a framework for describing the interaction among democratic institutions more generally. For example, Richard Pildes and Samuel Issacharoff analogize economic markets and democratic institutions for the purpose of examining democratic competition between political parties. In essence, these scholars view political markets as similar to economic consumer markets. In this “political marketplace” metaphor, parties produce candidates and voters choose these candidates based on the attractiveness of the candidates and their ideas. Candidates, along with their packaged ideas, platforms, speeches, advertising, and images, are the “product.” Political parties compete with each other by changing their “products” in an attempt to attract a larger number of voters willing to choose their products under heavy judicial and legislative scrutiny. Parties are thus like a heavily “regulated industry,” with voters as their consumers. The relationship between voters and parties is one of marketing and consumption. The party is a private institution, and voters cast their ballots in a private transaction, just as corporations are private entities and consumption decisions are private decisions. The metaphor is straightforward, persuasive, and has strong rhetorical value and important implications for framing constitutional issues” (Tso, 2009, pp. 832-833).

The key to understanding the conceptualization of electoral politics in terms of voting-consumption analogy is the meaning attached to the word *competition* in the American culture. According to Buchler, “The word *competition* has inherently positive connotations in American culture, and those connotations contribute significantly to the widespread belief in competitive elections. However, adherence to the doctrine of competition does not simply come from the intuitive appeal of the word. Scholars from political science, economics, and even to some extent law, along with journalists and reformers, commonly think of an election as a system analogous to a consumer product market. Within this popular analytic framework, voters are analogous to consumers, and

opposing candidates are competing firms. An election, then, is a market in which voters exchange votes for policy. In fact, this analytic framework is the central organizing principle of modern electoral theory, and the normative conclusion implied by this market analogy is that competitive elections are as critical to the health of a democracy as competitive markets are to the health of an economy” (Buchler, 2011, p. 5). American competitiveness had stemmed from the plethora of factors, one of them being ethnic heterogeneity. This factor has greatly shaped the meaning of competitiveness in the American culture. American culture is not characterized by the same homogeneity that many other nations enjoy and take for granted. Homogeneity of society tends to lead to more cooperation, due to the fact that individuals within the homogenous setting share a single cultural identity. The American culture has no such single identity, which leads to friction and – ultimately – to increased competition. Moreover, the profound impact of the Puritanism on the American culture had shaped the meaning of competition and morality. American culture celebrates competitiveness as a moral virtue; those who are not competitive – either because they don’t want to, or they can’t – are seen as moral failures. Those who are competitive are seen as morally superior.

Competition, therefore, is the bedrock of the American electoral politics, and – by extension – the American social life in general. Voters-consumers analyze political brands using the same mental frame of reference as when they contemplate the purchase of a new car. Thomas Tso posits that “The independent voter paradigm accords with the “voter-as-consumer” trope: voters, like consumers, make private decisions with limited constraints; they rationally and independently assess the attractiveness and benefits of each product-candidate” (Tso, 2009, p. 840). Competition between and among political actors – even within the same political party – stands front and center of the American democracy. Buchler continues his explanation of the important role competition plays in the American electoral politics by saying: “American belief in electoral competition does not merely come from positive cultural connotations of the word. It is also deeply rooted in economic theory. At the core of American political thought is the notion that an election is essentially a consumer product market. This is the central organizing principle of modern electoral theory. Hence our preoccupation with competitive elections is as connected to our belief in free market economics as it is to any particular insights from political science. Market

theory holds that competition is essential to the health of an economy. Monopolies and centrally planned economies do not work because without the incentive structure created by competitive markets, an economy cannot sustain itself efficiently. On the other hand, competitive free market systems are guided by an invisible hand that forces self-interested actors to serve the common good through the mechanism of market competition. Modern political theory holds that elections operate under the same basic principles as a market. Hence competitive elections are important for the same reason that competitive markets are important. Competitive elections create the incentive structure that forces self-interested candidates to behave in ways that benefit society through the political equivalent of the invisible hand. In contrast, an electoral system without competitive elections is the political equivalent of either a monopoly or a centrally planned economy” (Buchler, 2011, p. 8).

Strategic brand management literature elucidates the intricacies of consumer behavior and suggests that shopper decisions are predominantly based on the values of consumers. According to Vanitha Swaminathan, a professor of marketing at the University of Pittsburgh, “Political identity has always been a component of consumers’ identity. There’s something called identity salience ... ‘How important is a component of who you are to you?’ Lately, it seems ... that people’s political orientation has become a salient part of their identity, it’s how you define yourself more and more” (Steimer, 2019). Political science scholars studying political engagement have recently discovered that partisan identities are playing a critical role in electoral politics. Political affiliation is fundamentally similar to commercial brand affiliation; people identify with values and beliefs that resonate with them. Commercial brands embrace, emphasize, and consistently communicate values in their dialogue with consumers. The strongest brands are predicated on the well-articulated values consumers can easily identify with. For example, since its inception, Ben & Jerry’s brand unabashedly promotes well-defined values: “Capitalism and the wealth it produces do not create opportunity for everyone equally. We recognize that the gap between the rich and the poor is wider than at any time since the 1920s. We strive to create economic opportunities for those who have been denied them and to advance new models of economic justice that are sustainable and replicable. By definition, the manufacturing of products creates waste. We strive to minimize our negative impact

on the environment. We seek and support nonviolent ways to achieve peace and justice. We believe government resources and more productively used in meeting human needs in building and maintaining weapons systems” (Ben & Jerry’s, n.d.).

““In political campaigning, you appeal to different types of values, different types of things when trying to get people to vote for you,” says Samuel Gosling, a psychology professor at the University of Texas. It’s targeting by segmentation. “Political orientation is a really helpful variable because it does seem to predict a lot,” Gosling says. His own research from 2008, published in *Political Psychology*, found liberals to generally be more open-minded, creative, curious and novelty-seeking, while conservatives were found to be more orderly, conventional and better organized. It’s the exact type of audience insight that could make a marketer salivate. As the nation becomes more politically polarized and Americans more entrenched in their views, political ideology may help marketers segment their audience. It’s just a matter of learning what traits are typical of an ideology, and how brand messaging can speak to them” (Steimer, 2019). Sean Freeder, who focuses on voters’ psychology, demonstrates this paradigm shift in his research: “As partisan identity becomes increasingly important, citizens should become less concerned with making accurate, fair evaluations of the economy, and more concerned with defending the performance of their team, and/or attacking that of the other” (Freeder, 2019, p. 3). Freeder implies that voters-consumers increasingly fall back on political brand communications that emphasize cultural values espoused by the constituents. Countless research studies have recently demonstrated the critical role consumer values play in modern elections. According to Sarah Steimer, “Marketing researchers are finding that election maps can predict consumer attitudes as much as traditional demographics. The use of these insights doesn’t need to be overt: Ideological values can predict how consumers will respond to variations in messaging. Research on political messaging has shown as much, as studies find that conservative policies can gain liberal support when framed in terms of traditionally liberal values, such as empathy, social justice, and equality of opportunity. The inverse is also true, as progressive policies were found to be more appealing to conservatives and moderates when framed in relation to traditionally conservative values such as patriotism, family, the American dream and respect for tradition” (Steimer, 2019).

Cultural and consumer values play an increasingly critical role in consumption behavior and decision making.

It has been recognized by numerous psychologists that voters have evolved in their political engagement and selection pattern, from civic participation motivations to consumer purchasing behavior for choosing and voting for political candidates. Understanding this paradigm shift seems pivotal to scholars, practitioners, and political actors (Foster, 2018). Dr. Hume Johnson – a political scholar, speechwriter, and an associate professor of communication at Roger Williams University – gives a particularly succinct, eloquent, and incontrovertible analysis of the voters as consumers analogy: “*Voters see political candidates as brands* [emphasis added]. Ever since the introduction of marketing techniques and consumerism in politics, *the candidate has morphed into a product* [emphasis added]. In this politics-meets-marketing nexus, today’s *voters are now consumers* [emphasis added]. Every election cycle, this new voter-consumer sifts through a barrage of political information (promises and policies) and learns about political brands in order to decide whether to vote or not vote, and which candidates and parties to support – *in the same way consumers choose which products and services to buy* [emphasis added]. Although studies show that less than half of Americans have confidence in each other's ability to make informed political decisions, voter-consumers do have some knowledge of political brands. Whether they are sophisticated, informed or even cynical, they are not only aware of a political brand, but also about perceived benefits and drawbacks of the brand — its image, their feelings towards it and their experiences of the brand in action. The failure or success of a political brand is therefore increasingly tied to its brand quality, i.e., how it positions itself in the electoral marketplace, but also, fundamentally, how it is seen and perceived by voters” (Johnson, 2022). Voting, therefore, is considered a purchase behavior; the final act of buying is made on the day of the election. “At this point” – says Heather Savigny – “voters exchange their votes for promises and favours. This suggests a straightforward relationship, whereby ‘consumers’ purchase a political product on the day of the election. To this end, political marketing accepts a fundamental definition of marketing and applies it to the activity of politics. Marketing ‘is about trying to incorporate the customer into the production process in order to better satisfy them and thereby increase your chances of making a profit’. This fairly standard definition is transposed into political

marketing to mean that identifying ‘consumer’ demands means parties are better placed to ‘sell’ their ‘product’ on the day of the election” (Lilleker & Scullion, 2008, p. 37).

While political branding scholars have fully embraced the conceptualization of voters as consumers, semioticians have recognized that consumers-citizens are becoming increasingly adept at cultural re-mixing and meaning-making. Coleman asserts that “we are now living in a more selective culture in which people are reflexive about their identities as citizens and more consumerist in making choices” (Lilleker & Scullion, 2008, p. 5). Moreover, it has been argued that contemporary consumption entirely revolves around symbolic meaning and co-production of meaning. According to Kritsadarat Wattanasuwan, “Endeavoring to create the self in contemporary society is presumably inseparable from consumption. Indeed, contemporary society is first and foremost a consumer culture – where our social life operates in the sphere of consumption. That is, our social arrangement in which the relation between lived culture and social resources, between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, is mediated through markets. Consumption is thus central to the meaningful practice of our everyday life. Basically, we employ consumption not only to create and sustain the self but also to locate us in society. Products (e.g., low-calorie corn flake, natural-based cosmetic, leather jacket or Victorian house) that we buy, activities (e.g., Oxfam’s Big Fast, fly-fishing or traveling) that we do and philosophies or beliefs (e.g., astrology, religion, or *political ideology* [emphasis added]) that we pursue tell stories about who we are and with whom we identify. Certainly, we do not consume products, activities or beliefs only to satisfy our needs but also to carry out our self-creation project. In order to feel ‘alive’ in this saturated world, we crave for a sense of meaningfulness in our pursuit of ‘being’ (i.e., the self-creation project). And it seems that we can symbolically acquire it from our everyday consumption” (Wattanasuwan, 2005, p. 179). Following this line of thought, an increasing number of political science scholars argue that “seeing consumption as a creative maker of meaning in people’s lives” (Lilleker & Scullion, 2008, p. 7) has become the central tenet of political branding, marketing, and political psychology. According to many contemporary political science researchers, “brand marketing management conceptual frameworks can be applied seamlessly to understanding, and also to managing, voter attitudes and behavior in the political context” (Peng & Hackley, 2009,

p. 172). This assertion serves as a potent argument supporting this research project's hypothesis that the conceptualization of voters as consumers justifies the application of strategic brand management principles in politics. The presented evidence irrevocably suggests that approaching voters from the consumer psychology perspective can fundamentally contribute to our understanding of voting motivations, patterns, behaviors, and choices. This understanding in turn can help political actors build better political brands and thus connect more effectively with voters-consumers.

Since the 18th century, when Adam Smith introduced his concept of the invisible hand - a metaphor for the hidden economic forces of self-interest that have a profound impact upon the idea of free markets - economists have believed that people are rational when making economic decisions. According to this view - and subsequently, the updated neoclassical model - people, also called economic actors, are assumed to be self-interested and rational. This theory argues that people generally are capable of making logical and rational decisions that - by and large - produce the most optimal outcomes for themselves. This theory has been prevalent for decades, and has had a profound impact upon managers, economists, political science scholars, politicians, political consultants, and policymakers. The field of neuroscience technology is advancing rapidly. In fact, neuroscience has undoubtedly become one of the most dynamic fields in biomedical research focused entirely on researching the function, structure, and biochemistry of the nervous system and the human brain. Neuroscience is currently being translated from the research lab studies to applications in real-world settings, including electoral politics and business competition. As a result, neuroscience can easily be credited with shattering the hegemony of the rational choice theory. According to the Harvard Business Review's seminal article *The End of Rational Economics* penned by Dan Ariely, "We are now paying a terrible price for our unblinking faith in the power of the invisible hand. We're painfully blinking awake to the falsity of standard economic theory - that human beings are capable of always making rational decisions and that markets and institutions, in the aggregate, are healthily self-regulating. If assumptions about the way things are supposed to work have failed us in the hyper-rational world of Wall Street, what damage have they done in other institutions and organizations that are also made up of fallible, less-than-logical people? And where do corporate managers, schooled in rational assumptions but who run messy, often

unpredictable businesses, go from here? We are finally beginning to understand that *irrationality is the real invisible hand that drives human decision making* [emphasis added]. It's been a painful lesson, but the silver lining may be that companies now see how important it is to safeguard against bad assumptions. Armed with the knowledge that human beings are motivated by cognitive biases of which they are largely unaware (a true invisible hand if there ever was one), businesses can start to better defend against foolishness and waste" (Ariely, 2009).

Rober H. Blank – following Friend and Thayer – postulates that due to advances in neuroscience “Rational choice will wane, political psychology will wax as the center of the discipline. The glorification of economics and economic approaches will fade too. It is ironic that psychology was once dismissed as the ‘softest’ of the social sciences, while economics was triumphed as the most scientific. Yet the advance of the life sciences, evolutionary psychology, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience altered this ordering” (Blank, 2013, p. 251).

According to Drew Westen - the world's preeminent expert on neuroscience and political psychology, who provided an eloquent and comprehensive description of the neural correlates of political judgment and decision-making in his seminal book “The Political Brain: The Role Of Emotion In Deciding the Fate of the Nation” - the brain areas responsible for reasoning are not active when partisan voters are exposed to their favorite political candidates. Instead, the brain areas regulating emotions are highly active and involved in information processing. Westen asserts that “the notion of *partisan reasoning* is an oxymoron, and that most of the time, partisans feel their way to beliefs rather than use their thinking caps” (Packard, 2008). Westen is abundantly clear when he posits that “when reason and emotion collide, emotion invariably wins – and that it isn't only partisans who think with their guts in politics” (Packard, 2008). The overwhelming evidence offered by neuroscience indicates that connecting emotionally with voters and consumers is the only viable way to motivate a vote or a purchase and generate loyalty and commitment. Emotions – as described by neuroscientists – are the survival mechanisms through which every decision is taken. The conscious cognitive operations of the human brain are very slow and consume an exorbitant amount of energy – the human brain consumes approximately 25% of all calories absorbed in the body. Almost all the stimuli people

receive from the external environment are processes by the unconscious part of the brain. Emotions facilitate logical and rational thought. Without emotions, reason doesn't exist. It has been shown that patients with impaired emotional systems in their brains are unable to make rational decisions. The cognitive thought needs emotions. Emotion, therefore, is the primary source of human motivation. Voters-consumers do not have time to meticulously analyze every possible option, every candidate, every brand, every product or service, every political program. Emotions profoundly determine people's choices by enhancing a brand's value perception (Pantidos, 2021). According to Herbert Simon, American Noble Laureate scientist, "In order to have anything like a complete theory of human rationality, we have to understand what role emotion plays in it" (Whitener, 2021). As Simon – and many other neuroscientists have already indicated - "emotions influence, skew or sometimes completely determine the outcome of a large number of decisions we are confronted with in a day. Therefore, it behooves all of us who want to make the best, most objective decision to know all we can about emotions and their effect on our decision-making [...]. First, every feeling begins with an external stimulus, whether it's what someone said or a physical event. That stimulus generates an unfelt emotion in the brain, which causes the body to produce responsive hormones. These hormones enter the bloodstream and create feelings, sometimes negative and sometimes positive. So, to review, it's stimuli, then emotions, then hormones and, finally, feelings. In other words, your emotions impact your decision-making process by creating certain feelings" (Whitener, 2021).

This neuroscientific account of how emotions determine human decision-making has profound implications for one of this research project's hypotheses, namely that the conceptualization of voters as consumers justifies the application of strategic brand management principles in politics. With a deep understanding of consumer behavior, political actors can make better decisions about their political brands. Understanding consumer behavior also helps in finding out effective ways to boost voter loyalty, which in turn can lead to long-term political career.

Voting is considered a civic duty, and typically, in the United States, presidential elections attract large numbers of voters who eagerly cast their ballots. Although voting is an important part of the democratic process, millions of U.S. citizens decide to forgo voting

for numerous reasons. Some of these reasons might seem legitimate and valid, as Gerry Mackie suggests: “It’s extremely unlikely that any one vote would break a tie, and when a single vote does not break a tie it has nothing to do with the outcome. Since voting is costly, almost any single vote would be irrational. The paradox of nonvoting was first stated by Downs and is often formulated as follows. B is the individual’s Benefit from a winning election outcome, C is the Cost of the individual voting, and p is the Probability that an individual’s vote is pivotal in causing the winning election outcome. An individual would vote then, when $pB - C > 0$. The probability of being pivotal, however, is minuscule, effectively zero; for any individual, the act of voting is all cost and almost no benefit, and hence no one should vote” (Mackie, 2011, p. 2).

There is a growing research evidence that corroborates the validity of a political science theory called “expressive voting” which, to a certain extent, draws heavily on the anthropological and psychocultural perspectives underlying the assumption that social structures shape human behavior, and that culture is, by and large, a meaning-making practice. According to this theory “people have non-rational motives for voting” (“Identity beats policy when it comes to voter choices”, 2016). This theory clearly indicates that social identity is one of the most critical drivers of voter choice. Duke University political science researchers Scott Huettel and Libby Jenke claim that policy positions and social identity are actively competing to shape an individual’s motivation to choose one political candidate over others, and – even more importantly – whether an individual would vote at all. Huettel and Jenke assert that “Policy positions are a rational way to decide: pick a president whose policies align more closely with your own. Social identity, on the other hand, is *what your vote means for your own self-image and how others see you* [emphasis added]” (“Identity beats policy when it comes to voter choices”, 2016). Over the years, political science scholars have introduced numerous theories about voter choice. Most of these theories and frameworks explicitly assume voters choose rationally. Some researchers have recognized the role social identity plays in voting behavior. “But none had proposed that rational choice and identity might actually compete to determine voter choice” (“Identity beats policy when it comes to voter choices”, 2016). Huettel and Jenke blended decision-making research from the fields of neuroscience and social psychology to arrive at the following conclusions: “We think that treating identity as something that

competes with policy helps explain *why voters often select candidates whose policies go against their own interests* [emphasis added]. People often think about what their vote says about themselves, how it makes them feel as a person, what it says about them to their friends and colleagues” (“Identity beats policy when it comes to voter choices”, 2016). This new political science theory called “expressive voting” significantly contributes to our understanding of some seemingly highly paradoxical voter choices. According to Scott Huettel, “For some people, the act of voting itself is primarily about identity – not about the direct personal benefits of a vote. The chance that an individual’s vote will have an impact on the presidential election is slim-to-none in most cases, because of the sheer number of people who vote and because of how the Electoral College system is set up. People are deciding to vote not because their vote has a material effect on their future, but because the act of voting signals something to themselves and others” (“Identity beats policy when it comes to voter choices”, 2016). Gerry Mackie lucidly explains the expressive voting theory as follows: “Market and ballot choices are each composed of both instrumental and expressive elements ... Individuals may value expression of a preference through a market exchange or a vote, in other words, they desire to express a desire. The formula becomes $pB - C + E > 0$, where E is the expressive value of voting; the instrumental value is $pB \approx 0$, and thus an individual votes if and only if the expressive value of the act exceeds its cost. The expressive aspect of voting is *action that is undertaken for its own sake rather than to bring about particular consequences*. The expressive theory holds that there is almost never a causal connection between an individual’s vote and the associated electoral outcome. Hence, her vote is not disciplined by opportunity cost, and is rationally suspect compared to market exchange, which is disciplined by opportunity cost. Expressive valuation can be the irrational opposite of instrumental valuation, and as a result, an aggregation of individuals’ expressive preferences could be the opposite of what an aggregation of their rational instrumental preferences would have been, to the harm of many” (Mackie, 2011, pp. 2-3).

During the 2016 United States presidential election, many voters who enthusiastically supported Bernie Sanders had a difficult time switching their support to Hilary Clinton when she officially became the Democratic nominee. Scott Huettel explains this phenomenon by indicating that social identity can hardly ever be sacrificed: “What’s

striking is that it's extremely difficult for people to sacrifice their identification with their previous candidate – even when they recognize that one of the remaining candidates is closer to their personal interests than another. You can't explain that with any traditional model" ("Identity beats policy when it comes to voter choices", 2016). Another example cited by Huettel and Jenke is the "Brexit" vote. According to Duke University researchers, the "Brexit" vote perfectly illustrates the importance of "expressive voting" in voters' decisions. Huettel asserts that "For many people, the vote to leave the European Union is a signal that you supported your country, you're patriotic, you're a nationalist. But a different identity could reinforce a vote to stay, such as in those people who identify as being a European or a citizen of the world. We're not saying that using identity in voting is wrong. Instead, what we're saying is that there are going to be cases in which *people will vote against their own self-interest* [emphasis added] because identity has such a strong impact. In the short term, however, that vote says something about themselves that they find very rewarding" ("Identity beats policy when it comes to voter choices", 2016). Michael Munger, who is currently the director of the philosophy, politics, and economics program at Duke University, succinctly sums up the consumer-voter analogy: "People do a poor job of acquiring information and using it to make decisions in the way that the rational choice model predicts. Here's the conclusion: This has implications for the capacity of consumers to benefit from markets, because consumers are people. But the conclusion also has to be that voters have the same problem, unless you think people are dumb in the supermarket but miraculously smart in the voting booth. It's the same person. Why are voters even dumber than consumers? Consider this: A consumer who buys a bad television, or pays too much for a coffeemaker, or gets ripped off on an investment, is stuck with the bad TV, and loses her own money on the coffeemaker or the dumb stock buy. It happens, but you learn from your mistake (this is called "market feedback") and make a better decision the next time around. Voters, on the other hand, have even less information, have no way of getting accurate information, and know that their choices won't determine the outcome anyway. If I spend months learning about the candidates, and then cast my vote for president, it has absolutely zero impact on the outcome. Not small, mind you: *zero*. I still vote, of course. I'm a good citizen. But I vote for the candidate who *makes me feel good* [emphasis added]" (Munger, 2015).

This subchapter's primary objective was to present a compelling account of the potency of the voter as consumer analogy in electoral politics. The varied evidence presented in this subchapter points to the logic behind using the principles of strategic brand management in electoral politics and the validity of the conceptualization of voters as consumers.

3.2. The Importance Of Competitive Advantage

Increasingly intensifying competition and a rapidly changing media landscape have left many commercial organizations – and political actors – searching for avenues of survival and success. Many organizations within the business environment – and political actors within the political competitive environment – are increasingly resembling one another and are finding it very difficult to attract loyal supporters due to lack of differentiating factor. A concept, which has been embraced by the disciplines of strategic brand management, political branding, consumer/voter behavior, and political marketing as central to long-term survival and success of the organization, is that of competitive advantage. The primary objective of this subchapter is to address one of this dissertation's research questions: Does Brand Equity in politics lead to electoral competitive advantage? The concept of brand equity has already been introduced in subchapter 2.4 and described as “the value of having a recognized brand, based on the idea that firmly established and reputable brands are more successful. More specifically, it's a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand name and symbol, which add or subtract from the value provided by a product or service” (Aaker, n.d.). In other words, brand equity is the value of a brand determined by the voter-consumer's perception of its likability, authenticity, expertise, and *affiliatability* [author's neologism indicating the degree to which voters-consumers affiliate and identify with the political brand]. In order to answer the research question - Does Brand Equity in politics lead to electoral competitive advantage? – it is imperative to first dissect the concept of competitive advantage. The role of competitive advantage in politics will be explored in greater detail in subchapter 3.3.

As has been well documented in the management literature, strategic organizational activities “have always focused on achieving sustainable competitive advantage, especially

in highly competitive markets” (Quereshi et al., 2022). Despite the immense popularity of and interest in competitive advantage among management scholars and practitioners, a considerable confusion exists as to what exactly constitutes competitive advantage. Tim O’Shannassy elegantly summarizes this confusion and ambiguity in the following words: “The strategy discipline for many years has been lacking a clear definition of competitive advantage and a deep understanding of the influence of this construct on firm performance. There has been increasing discussion of and empirical research into competitive advantage in recent years, however understanding of what is competitive advantage and distinguishing this concept from organization performance remains a challenge for the discipline. In recent years there has also been some discussion of the fleeting nature of competitive advantage for firms in a challenging, competitive marketplace but little connection of this discussion to the perceived environmental uncertainty construct ... The term competitive advantage is another of the strategy *buzzwords* words that cause confusion for academics, business executives and consultants (ABCs). ABCs have a tendency to use the term competitive advantage, like other popularly used terms in the strategy vocabulary such as strategic thinking or strategic innovation with different meaning in different contexts, this includes different use of these terms in different countries. This challenge for the strategy discipline is exacerbated by ABCs all endeavouring to have their message accepted and embraced by the ABC community” (O’Shannassy, 2008, pp. 168-169). An erroneous belief exists within a managerial milieu according to which a competitive advantage is equated with performance; managers tend to use the two terms interchangeably. However, the academic community rejects this notion and, instead, treats competitive advantage and performance as two different constructs. Hao Ma pointedly addresses this issue by asking: “If our ultimate dependent variable is performance and the ultimate question *Why do firms differ in performance?*, then we have to justify why we need competitive advantage as an intermediate variable between its underlying dimensions and firm performance. If our ultimate dependent variable is simply competitive advantage, and whatever follows (i.e., superior performance as a natural benefit of competitive advantage), then we have to answer the question *How do you know an advantage when you see one?*; i.e., the criteria we use to identify competitive advantage” (Ma, 2000, p. 29).

There is a plethora of competitive advantage definitions currently populating numerous academic disciplines. According to BDC, “A competitive advantage is anything that gives a company an edge over its competitors, helping it attract more customers and grow its market share” (BDC, n.d.). Wen-Cheng Wang, Chien-Hung Lin, Ying-Chien Chu claim that a competitive advantage “exists when the firm is able to deliver ... benefits that exceed those of competing products (differentiation advantage) (Wang et al., 2011, p. 100). The scholars – following Jay B. Barney’s argument – suggest that “the resources that are scarce and valuable at the same time can create competitive advantage, and if these resources are also difficult to duplicate, substitute and hard to deliver, they can sustain the advantage. Competitive advantage occurs when an organization acquires or develops an attribute or combination of attributes that allows it to outperform its competitors (Wang et al., 2011, p. 100). Competitive advantage thus is seen “as the ability to stay ahead of present or potential competition ... “(Wang et al., 2011, p. 100). The scholars posit that differentiation strategy – which is essentially predicated on developing a unique brand capable of attracting, and retaining, consumers – is able to build a competitive advantage rooted in impenetrable entry barriers such as customer and brand loyalty (Wang et al., 2011, p. 101). According to Harvard Business School’s Catherine Cote, an important source of competitive advantage can be found in branding: “One way to gain an advantage over competitors is by differentiating your product from theirs. Ask yourself: What makes my offering unique? Why would consumers want to purchase my product instead of my competitors? Countless attributes can set your product apart. Here are some to consider: better customer service, more variety, faster or cheaper shipping, location, color and aesthetics, brand identity, atmosphere of brick-and-mortar locations, source of goods. Whole Foods Market is one example of a company that differentiates its products using brand identity, atmosphere, and sourcing. Whole Foods’ competitors are other natural food chains, such as Trader Joe’s and Sprouts Farmers Market, along with big names in the grocery space, including Stop & Shop and Wegman’s ... Its brand identity centers on the integrity of its natural and organically sourced foods. It also cultivates an in-store atmosphere that makes grocery shopping feel purposeful and is a step up from some of its competitors' traditional grab-and-go shopping experience. Like Whole Foods, find the attributes that differentiate your product from others and make them central to your brand’s

identity” (Cote, 2022). Several management scholars support the idea that brand orientation – a strategic management philosophy that refers to the extent to which the brand becomes a central element and coordinating mechanism for an organization’s decision-making – can be viewed as a means to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. Brand orientation - following Rohana Mijan’s comprehensive analysis of this concept - can be described as “an approach used in the process of organization related to the creation, development and protection of brand identity and involves constant interaction with target customers with the goal to achieve sustainable competitiveness. It involves a process of brand management in the market for superior performance. In this case, the brand will be decisive and lead the process of brand development. The purpose ... is to develop the company and build a sustainable relationship with customers” (Mijan, 2015, p. 1). There is a consensus within the management science milieu that “the competitiveness of a firm is the ability of a firm to consistently perform two roles. The first role is meeting customer demand; the second is making a profit” (Ungerma & Burešová, 2022, p. 138). Hao Ma contends that “competitive advantage is a relational term. It is essentially a comparison drawn between a focal firm and its rival(s) on certain dimension(s) of concern in competition ... Competitive advantage, as a relational term, depends on the reference point. That is, we must answer questions such as *against whom?* and *on what?* Does competitive advantage mean that one firm must be superior than all rivals? Or does competitive advantage mean only to be a pair-wise comparison between two rivals of concern? Porter’s description of the cost leader advantage seems to suggest that the cost leader has absolutely the lowest cost position among all firms in an industry, hence perhaps his justification for equating such (cost) competitive advantage to superior performance. In reality, however, competitive advantage could be, and often is, assessed between any pair of rivals on a certain dimension(s) that has competitive ramifications. For instance, among three chain stores – A, B, and C – which compete in an industry where, say, the number of locations is a major area of competition, A has the largest number, B the middle, and C the smallest. Then we could infer that, assuming the number of locations is of linear importance in competition, firm A has competitive advantage over B, which in turn has competitive advantage over C. In this case, we can compare a particular firm with the other two; we can also choose any two focal firms of interest to conduct pair-wise comparison. Such pair-

wise comparison on a specific and discrete dimension of competition features competitive advantage in its most basic form and its most basic level of analysis. Notice that such conception of competitive advantage separates competitive advantage from firm performance, treating them as distinct constructs” (Ma, 2000, pp. 17-18). The scholar offers a condensed definition of competitive advantage by stating that competitive advantage is “the differential between two competitors on any conceivable dimension that allows one to better create customer value than the other” (Ma, 2000, p. 18). Competitive advantage, as numerous scholars contend, can be described as follows: “a) popularity increase due to improved quality product/service offering, b) superior product/service offering over competitors, and c) leadership over competitors” (Antoniades, 2022, p. 897). It must be noted, however, that the phrase “superior product/service offering over competitors” unequivocally points to the subjective perception of consumers-voters. Objective superiority simply doesn’t exist. As Jorge Vera states: “A superior customer value can be achieved when a brand offers more value for the customers than its competitor at the same price. The superior value can be an advantage for a firm where there are many bases of superior customer value, one of which could be product quality ... Sometimes, high quality is not one of the attributes a customer is looking for. In this case, quality would not be a part of the pursued value, so it would not be an important element in the transaction” (Vega, 2015, p. 153). There is no doubt that consumer value is a concept that still generates multiple meanings and a lot of confusion among academicians and practitioners alike. According to Raquel Sánchez-Fernando and M. Ángeles Iniesta-Bonillo, “...relevant studies have not yet yielded any unambiguous interpretations of the nature of customer value. Inconsistency pervades the terminology used, confuses the meaning of the concept, and thus its conceptual component parts” (Sánchez-Fernández & Ángeles Iniesta-Bonillo, 2006, p. 40). The scholars recognize however that the concept of consumer value is predicated on an idea that “consumers do not buy products or services for their own sake. Consumers will derive value according to the utility provided by the combination of attributes less the disutility represented by the final price paid” (Sánchez-Fernández & Ángeles Iniesta-Bonillo, 2006, p. 43). Consumer perceived value thus can be conceptualized as the perceived benefits that consumers believe they obtain from a brand in relation to the plethora of costs that must be incurred in order to acquire the brand. In

other words, consumer perceived value refers to the consumer's subjective evaluations of the overall worth or desirability of a brand based on their individual values, convictions, preferences, needs, desires, aspirations, and expectations. Consumer perceived value is a critical concept in understanding the nature of competitive advantage and strategic brand management as it influences consumers-voters' behavior, attitude, purchase decisions, and – ultimately - brand loyalty and brand performance.

Within the management literature, competitive advantage is conceptualized as the implementation of a strategy that is inherently unique and not currently used by competing firms. This idiosyncratic strategy helps in cost reduction, exploitation of market opportunities, and neutralizing competitive threats. This strategy should be characterized by durability, appropriability, and superiority (Newbert, 2008, p. 746). Tim O'Shannassy contends that competitive advantage emerges out of value a firm can offer its customers that exceeds the firm's cost of producing it (O'Shannassy, 2008, p. 171). And Felicia Naatu claims that "Competitive advantage occurs when an organization acquires or develops an attribute or combination of attributes that allows it to outperform its competitors. These attributes can include access to natural resources, or access to highly trained and skilled personnel. Competitive advantage requires delivering more value and satisfaction to target consumers than competitors do. By competitor analysis, which entails the process of identifying key competitors, assessing their objectiveness, strategies, strengths and weaknesses, the company may be able to develop competing marketing strategies unique and quite differentiated that would strongly position the organization against competitors and give it the greatest possible competitive advantage. As advantage comes from the differential in any firm's attributes, be it ownership, access, or knowledge based, that allows one firm to better provide customer value than others can, any factor that contributes to the existence and/or enlargement of such a differential could serve as a source of firm advantage. Since the overall objective of firms is to provide value for customers and the organisation itself, marketers must ensure a continuous provision of greater value in terms of the competition that builds the brand value, and which makes it in the best interest of customers to stay with the company rather than switch to other firms" (Naatu, 2016, p. 553).

Regardless of which definition of competitive advantage one is willing to accept and adopt, one aspect seems to be universal: “sustainable advantage cannot be created simply by evaluating environmental opportunities and threats, and then conducting business only in high-opportunity, low-threat environments. Rather, creating sustainable competitive advantage depends on the unique resources and capabilities that a firm brings to competition in its environment. To discover these resources and capabilities, managers must look inside their firm for valuable, rare and costly-to-imitate resources, and then exploit these resources through their organization” (Barney, 1995, p. 60).

3.3. The Role Of Competitive Advantage In Political Competition

Several scholars are of the opinion that a key strategy for political actors to successfully navigate a precarious competitive landscape, and, in the process, build a competitive advantage, is to develop an idiosyncratic brand image for themselves (Panda et al., 2019, p. 234). An idiosyncratic brand image can have a profound impact on reputation, which, in turn, can positively influence people’s perceptions of the organizations and political actors. Good reputation acts as positive signals to potential voters-consumers, creating a differentiating factor for the organizations and political actors. A combination of attractive brand image and solid reputation directly contributes to improved level of voter-consumer satisfaction, which would eventually lead to positive word of mouth and brand loyalty. In the process, the political actors would develop a differentiating factor for themselves, contributing to their competitive advantages. Felicia Naatu asserts that a brand can act as a potent source of competitive advantage due to the fact that “Brands identify the enterprise or company and the source of all its goods and services. The brand stands for something specific: It is the corporate personnel that conveys value, creates trust, and delivers assurances of a consistent quality and service leading to repeat purchase and loyalty from customers, users, and the world at large. Brands are assets constitutive of intellectual capital value, significant drivers and creators of market capitalization, reputation and public integrity ... [a brand] represents many more intangible aspects of a product or service; it embodies the collection of feelings and perceptions about quality, image, lifestyle and status. The power of a brand lies in its ability to command a

good reputation, goodwill and the best memorable position in the mind of the proposed consumer ... The use of branding to achieve competitive advantage requires to a larger extent a brand strategy. Brand strategy is the what, where, when, how and whom you plan on communicating and delivering your brand messages. It is the plans for the systematic development of brand to enable it to meet its agreed objectives. The strategy should be rooted in the brand's and the company's vision and driven by the values as well as principles of differentiation to sustain customers appeal. A strong brand strategy would increase the awareness of a company and its offerings in a way that establishes strong feelings, reactions and a favourable view towards the company as a whole. This sort of brand awareness can only be achieved through skillful brand strategy. This strategy can aid in creating the impression that a brand associated with a product or service has certain qualities or characteristics that make the brand special and unique. Successfully out-branding your competitors is a continuous battle for the hearts and minds of your customers" (Naatu, 2016, pp. 551-553). It can be reckoned then that if a political actor wants to achieve success in the market, it ought to develop an attractive offer - one that will be deemed compelling by the voters-consumers – and be considered better than its rivals. Otakar Ungerman and Jitka Burešová argue that "A company's competitive advantage may lie not only in its product or the price of that product, but also in many aspects of the company's activity ... including the brand" (Ungerman and Burešová, 2022, p. 139). This view – that a brand constitutes a source of competitive advantage - is shared by many scholars in the political branding academic community. According to Kalim Khan and Tapish Panwar, "Brands are assets that create a high degree of loyalty among customers, and assure stability in future sales, and higher profitability. A brand brings a competitive advantage to a firm by offering a differential value to customers and thus gives them a reason to prefer it over others" (Khan and Panwar, 2019, p. 213). The ultimate objective of strategic brand management – as Michael Serazio opines – is to build an "affective, authentic relationship with a consumer, one based – just like a relationship between two people – on the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations" (Serazio, 2015, p. 2). This last assertion is an important one due to the fact that within the electoral politics context, politicians, in order to attract and retain voters-consumers' loyalty, must depend on the creation, and maintenance, of pseudo-friendships,

known as para-social relationships. Given the critical importance of these relationships within the political environment – and the aforementioned definition of strategic brand management offered by Michael Serazio – brand orientation emerges as a dominant framework capable of synthesizing electoral objectives with voters-consumers' expectations and behaviors.

More and more scholars are of the opinion that a brand can act as the ultimate source of competitive advantage for political actors. Akhmad Farhan, Nor Asiah Omar, Taslima Jannat, and Muhamad Azrin Nazri clearly state that strategic brand management within the political context can significantly contribute to political actors' performance and competitive advantage. The scholars claim that "From its origin in industry and commerce, the brand concept has been expanded to a more complex and greater number of subjects, such as universities, churches, and political parties. In a highly competitive market, political parties frequently confront the issues of electoral volatility, valence issues, decreasing political participation and high campaign costs. Therefore, they dedicate considerable resources to develop, refine and promote their political brand to get support from voters. Brand management strategies increase political parties' competitive advantage by making their political products distinct, attractive and appealing. They also provide knowledge about voter's choices, preferences and behaviour to the political parties and help them design their political platforms so that they can achieve the desired results" (Farhan et al., 2020, p. 125). Peter Reeves, Leslie de Chernatony, and Marylyn Carrigan state provocatively: "If commercial brands are assuming increasing power in consumer lives, then it is possible that the way and nature that people make choices about political parties is akin to how they make choices about their commercial brands. This may seem like a challenging assertion to make, but if one accepts that consumer lives are highly influenced by brands then it can be articulated that the way voters choose political parties has some similarities to how they make their choices about brands" (Reeves et al., 2006, p. 421). This assertion assumes that a brand plays a critical role in creating a sustainable competitive advantage for political actors. Indeed, this view is supported by strong evidence gleaned from numerous studies showing that brands act as the sources of competitive advantage. Orlando Lima Rua and Catarina Santos present solid proof that "the brand as an intangible resource promotes a competitive advantage strategy through

differentiation. Therefore, companies must enhance their relationship with the brand to maintain and increase their customer base and obtain a competitive advantage in the market” (Rua & Santos, 2022, p. 8). Gareth Smith and Richard Speed assert that “With the decline in emotional voting based on social-class affiliation, in the modern era, such voting is based more on emotions linked to trust in, and the personality of, party leaders/local candidates. Leader personality traits such as youthfulness, energy, physical attractiveness, intelligence, and so on have been seen to be important to decision making ... Both trust and personality are under persistent barrage from events and personal attacks prevalent in an adversarial political system in combination with an often-complicit fourth estate” (Smith & Speed, 2011, p. 1306).

The brand-oriented political actors are acutely aware of the brand potential as a viable strategic asset which must be carefully developed – and leveraged – to build a strong political brand that will be difficult – and even impossible - to imitate by competitors, and impossible to ignore by voters-consumers (Mijan, 2015, p. 2). According to REACH VOTERS, a full-service digital marketing agency focused on political campaigns and candidates, brand orientation is the ultimate source of sustainable competitive advantage in electoral politics: “Throughout history, many political figures have used the power of branding to carve their names in the heart of the masses. In the west, the likes of Barack Obama, John F. Kennedy, even Donald Trump leveraged on branding in their political journey. Standing out can be challenging in the dynamic world of election rallies, passionate speeches, and spirited debates. For a political candidate, the secret to differentiating oneself lies in their campaign promises and *how effectively they build and communicate their political brand* [emphasis added]. Creating a solid political brand is a complex task fundamentally connected to the election success of any candidate” (ReachVoters, 2023).

A political brand, therefore, can become a significant source of competitive advantage for political actors. Kiran Voleti – a political branding strategist – succinctly summarizes the contributing role of political branding in generating competitive advantage within the political context: “Political branding is a process that aims to create and manage perceptions of a political party or a candidate ... Political branding is the process by which a political party, candidate, or leader attempts to create a distinctive and recognizable image

or identity in the eyes of the public. This image or identity attracts support and votes from the electorate ...The benefits of political branding are plentiful. First and foremost, it allows candidates to control their message. They can carefully craft what and how they say it to appeal to the broadest range of voters. Branding can also help candidates stand out, especially in a crowded field. It can make them more recognizable and memorable, which can be helpful when casting a vote. Finally, Branding can help build enthusiasm among supporters, which can help boost fundraising and turnout on election day ... Political Branding can be very beneficial for several reasons:

- It can help voters to identify the party or candidate quickly. It is essential in crowded elections where many candidates are running for office.
- Political Branding can build trust between the voters and the party or candidate. When people see a consistent and positive message from a party or candidate, they are more likely to trust them.
- Political Branding can motivate voters to go to the polls.
- People who feel connected to a party or candidate are more likely to vote for them.
- The benefits of political Branding are numerous. When a politician or party can brand themselves successfully, they can expect to enjoy increased name recognition, more electoral support, and an increased likelihood of winning elections.
- Political Branding allows candidates to create a positive image in voters' minds. It can also help to differentiate them from their opponents, who may see them as similar or indistinguishable.
- A solid political brand can also help build supporters' loyalty. Once a voter sees a politician or party as trustworthy and competent, they will likely vote for them.
- Political Branding can also help to raise funds from donors. Individuals or groups who support a particular brand may be more likely to contribute money to help support the cause.
- Branding can also help a politician or party to communicate their message more effectively. By developing a clear and concise message, they can ensure that voters know what they stand for and plan to do if elected.
- A strong brand can also help a politician or party to build coalitions with other groups. It can be essential to win elections or pass legislation.

- Branding can also help a politician or party to better connect with voters. Creating an emotional connection with the electorate can inspire people to participate in the political process and vote for them.
- Branding can also improve a politician's or party's public image. It can lead to increased media coverage and create a positive cycle that helps increase support even further.
- Finally, political Branding can help build name recognition among voters. The more people know about a politician or party, the more likely they will vote for them" (Political Marketer, <https://politicalmarketer.com/political-marketing-branding-strategies/> accessed 2.20.2024).

The issue of competitive advantage creation via branding activities has been well recognized by numerous scholars. As Luigi Cantone and Alessio Abbate claim: "the source of competitive advantage is the creation and exploitation of *distinctive capabilities* which are difficult to build and maintain, difficult to codify and, in turn, difficult to replicate ... A firm's success depends on its capacity to create *value*, and *value derives from customers* (Cantone & Abbate, 2006, p. 24). It can be inferred then that the ultimate objective of political brand management is to create competitive advantage by aligning the political brand with values, convictions, beliefs, and aspirations of its audience, and – in the process – building trust and loyalty among potential voters-consumers.

By synthesizing the abovementioned definitions of competitive advantage with the brand concept, one can postulate that a brand can be considered a viable source of competitive advantage within the electoral politics context: a) a brand – by definition – is a market device created – and managed – to set one entity – such as a presidential candidate - apart from other entities operating within the same market context and vying for the attention of the same audience, b) a brand is characterized by durability: a brand's idiosyncratic identity – like a person's identity - enables it – all things being equal - to achieve longevity (e.g., Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. has been actively in politics since 1970 and his political brand achieved the ultimate strategic political objective in 2021 when he became the 46th President of the United States of America). This, of course, implies that an idiosyncratic identity cannot be stolen and/or imitated by other market players, c) a brand is a catalyst for generating appropriability. According to numerous studies, branding has

the capacity to transform a saleable commodity into one enhanced with unique quality/qualities that induce consumers to pay a higher price for it, compared to similar commodities without these enhancements. By analyzing hundreds of case studies, Ripal Patel and Naresh Patel concluded that there is a positive relationship between brand performance and the financial performance of a firm. According to the scholars, “Successful brands enhance the firm’s financial performance in general. There is consensus that brands are strategically essential resources enabling firms to gain superior financial performance. These findings are parallel with the argument that a firm’s strategic orientation could only improve financial performance through an operational performance (e.g., brand performance)” (Patel & Patel, 2013, p. 13), d) a brand acts as a propeller of uniqueness and competitive superiority. Staci M. Zavattaro eloquently explains the intricacies of this process within the electoral politics context by stating that “Political candidates are inexorably engaged in a marketing game, so turning presidential candidates into commodities via branding was the next logical step ... As a commodity, the candidate goes through the traditional steps of product marketing — create identity (brand image), get party approval (company image), win primary election (test market), campaign hard (advertising and distribution), get elected (market share), and stay in office (repeat sales). In this sense, *political contests remind us that candidates are marketed as well as soap*; that is, candidates become a commodity just like a consumer’s favorite brand of soap” (Zavattaro, 2010, pp. 124-125). And Stephen Diorio, describing the business context, argues that “Brand preference creates firm value by measurably improving profits, cash flow, and share. If more financial executives understood the economics of customer behavior and the financial power of brand preference, they would be better armed to work with CMOs to generate better financial performance. An analysis by the Marketing

Accountability Standards Board (MASB) shows that brands contribute on average 19.5% and in many cases well over 50% of enterprise value when the impact of brand on firm cash flow, profits and firm value are properly measured. Academic research reinforces finding by quantifying how superior brand preference in a given category directly improves profitability, price premiums, cash flow, market share and share price. For example, an analysis by the MASB found a direct linkage between brand performance and market share across 120 brands and 12 categories. And a study of 220 consumer products by the

Marketing Science Institute (MSI) found that a superior brand preference or reputation commanded price premiums of 26% on average, *even when brand quality is the same* [emphasis added]. These results are validated in the marketplace where the dominant phone brands—Apple (Brand value \$182B) and Samsung (Brand value \$47B) — capture the lion’s share of profits in the mobile handset category” (Diorio, 2019).

A study, called “Brand orientation and business performance”, conducted by Marcas Renombradas Españolas Forum and Summa Branding, with the collaboration of the Spanish Patent and Trademark Office and Iberinform, recently revealed that investing in development of strong brands can have a profound impact on: “Higher turnover, higher medium-term growth, greater longevity of the business, doubling their chances of market leadership, greater investment in R&D, increased generation of new jobs, higher margin on sales, increased profitability, increased employee productivity” (Calma, 2021). According to Orlando Lima Rua and Catarina Santos, brands are vital for building successful market entities “as they become the major source of differentiation between other competitive offerings in the market. The brand thus takes a *leading role* [emphasis added] in defining sustained and differentiated ... strategies which can lead to competitive advantage” (Rua & Santos, 2022, p. 1). It can be assumed thus that political branding strategies aim at determining how to initiate, build, and sustain public support for a political actor (political parties, politicians, NGO, etc.), policies, programs, and ideology, and developing – and maintaining – the political brand’s competitive advantage through positioning and communication strategies. Numerous scholars support the idea that competitive advantage within the political context is predicated on the ability and extent to which political brands create value for the voters-consumers (preceded by the identification of what constitutes that value for voters-consumers). Strategic brand management has become a crucial part of politics. Candidates, politicians, political parties, governments, NGOs, and interest groups have come to understand and appreciate the role of strategic brand management when formulating strategies, setting objectives, and communicating with diverse audiences. Strategic political brand management goes beyond mere political communication; it affects the way a political actor behaves.

The political electoral environment – at least in the USA – has become increasingly characterized by entrepreneurial/brand management orientation. According to Wayne

Steger, Andrew Dowdle, and Randall Adkins, “Candidates’ campaign teams develop strategies that attempt to give the candidate the best chance of winning (or of influencing the policy discussion within the party) in a particular electoral context. Campaign teams assess the strategic position of the candidate, taking into account the conditions and problems at a particular point in history, the strengths and weaknesses of potential rivals, a strategy for generating resources for the campaign, identifying potential sources of support, creating messages designed to mobilize potential supporters, and the means by which messages will be communicated to voters ... At the presidential level, nomination campaigns are by their nature *highly entrepreneurial endeavors* [emphasis added].

Candidates and factional leaders and activists engage in entrepreneurial and organizational efforts to attain their goals (Steger et al., 2009, pp. 8-9). The language of strategic brand management has become a staple of electoral politics. According to Brennan Center Fellow Ciara Torres-Spelliscy: “Way before Trump, the language of marketing had already infected political discourse. Recall when President George W. Bush’s chief of staff Andrew Card said, “You don’t introduce new products in August”, explaining why the administration didn’t try to “sell” the Iraq War to the American public during the summer of 2002. Or as pollster Celinda Lake explained to me in an interview, “Whether you’re Pepsi or Obama, you have to run a campaign to get your brand out.”” (Torres-Spelliscy, 2019). Ira Basen - following Torres-Spelliscy argument – contends that “Today, our economic, cultural and social interactions and increasingly seen through the prism of brands. We expect companies like Nike and Coca-Cola to sell us shoes and soft drinks. But in a brand culture, we’re now also forming *relationships* with them on social media, looking to them as legitimate vehicles of social and political change, even as trusted sources of news and information. Nearly half the respondents in a recent survey conducted by the PR firm APCO Worldwide agreed that global companies had a bigger impact on their lives than governments. Sixty per cent thought that companies now serve some functions in society that were previously reserved only for the government. Meanwhile, the language of branding now permeates our cultural and political discourse. In today’s brand culture, we’ve got people behaving like brands, and brands behaving like people.

The less that people pay attention to politics, the more politics has had to go and find people where they live. So where do people live? They’re consumers. So you might

as well speak to them in the language with which they're familiar, which is advertising, slogans, brands, all the things that make shopping enticing to consumers. And so, we now routinely hear parties and politicians referred to as *brands*, and we hear about *Starbucks voters* versus *Tim Horton's voters*" (Basen, 2013).

It can be said thus that in order to thrive, political actors need competitive advantage to successfully set themselves apart from their rivals. This competitive advantage can be effectively found in brand orientation and – by extension - strategic brand management. Having a strong brand is all about cohesive, well-developed, synchronized, and easily identifiable expressions: a strong brand transcends products and services and offers a well-articulated and relevant meaning that resonates with voters-consumers. According to FRONTIFY, a strategic brand agency, a strong brand provides a myriad of benefits that act as a driver of competitive advantage. A strong brand: increases recognition, improves voters-consumers' loyalty, generates positive word-of-mouth, improves advertising effectiveness on voters-consumers, galvanizes volunteers who want to work for a brand and are emotionally engaged, motivate employees who are proud to work for the brand ("7 major benefits of a strong brand", n.d.).

Competitive advantage refers to any strategic maneuvering that gives a political brand an edge over its rivals, helping it attract more voters-consumers and generate higher levels of loyalty. This subchapter attempted to transfer the concept of competitive advantage from management theory to political competition. Competitive advantage as a political actor's ability to sustainably outrival any opponent in a given voter segment involves a well-devised brand strategy. The effort involved in establishing uniqueness and differentiation and increasing one's likability, authenticity, and attractiveness means that a political actor's competitive advantage is difficult to challenge by its direct opponents. A strong brand brings a competitive advantage to a political actor by offering a differential value to voters-consumers and thus gives them a reason to prefer it over other political brands, vote for it, and be loyal toward it (Khan and Panwar, 2019, p. 213).

The presented in this subchapter evidence is an attempt to answer one of this dissertation's research questions: Does Brand Equity in politics lead to competitive advantage? Brand equity refers to the value of a brand determined by the voter-consumer's perception of its likability, authenticity, expertise, and affiliatability. In brand-saturated

consumer cultures of the western societies, politicians and political parties increasingly turn their attention to brand orientation and strategic brand management to effectively differentiate themselves and create brand equity that would allow them to enjoy long-term competitive advantage. In the realm of electoral politics, brand orientation has emerged as a critical strategy for winning elections, building long-term political careers, and generating loyalty among voters-consumers. Much like in the business world - where companies like Grupo PDC, MGM Resorts International, and Yaesta have embraced brand orientation as a dominant management philosophy - political branding involves developing a strong, unique, likable, authentic image that resonates with voters, elicits positive emotions, and sets the political actor apart from competitors. Brand equity in politics leads to competitive advantage due to the fact that it helps political actors connect with voters-consumers on an emotional level, build trust, and convey their vision and policies clearly. Strategic brand management is predicated on the principles of neuroscience introduced and explained thoroughly in subchapter 1.3. In order to appeal to voters-consumers, drum up their support, generate their loyalty, political actors need to employ strategic brand management strategies. Brand equity – as the value of a brand determined by the voter-consumer’s perceptions of its likability, authenticity, expertise, and affiliatability – can considerably contribute to the establishment of a sustainable competitive advantage viewed here as the ability of a political actor to enjoy a long-term political career.

3.4. The Role Of A Brand In Generating A Competitive Advantage

A competitive advantage can be created by - and be based on - a strong brand. Several scholars support the idea that a brand can be considered the only sustainable source of competitive advantage. It is assumed that “the possibility of creating a competitive advantage based on brand value lies precisely in the components of emotional and cognitive perception and that the development of trust by the organization will be grounded precisely in these elements. The perceived mark can then be assessed using the Attitude Model based on the interaction of three components: cognition, affectivity, and connectivity. Therefore, competitive advantage and perceived differentiation are increasingly centered on ... the value resulting from intangible resources” (Rua & Santos,

2022, pp. 1-2). An increasing number of practitioners – executives, strategists, consultants – recognize, and accept the overwhelming evidence that shows that a brand has become the only tool used to achieve market success, both in the business and political environments. According to Pernille Gjøls-Andersen from Implement Consulting Group, brand orientation – as a management philosophy – “provides agility through stability in a fast-changing world ... But change is difficult. Especially when consistency is so highly valued. How can you deliver a consistent customer experience if the world is constantly changing? How can you instill trust when the world is a fundamentally different place today than it was yesterday? And how can you attract and retain customers and employees when their needs are continuously in flux? There are many answers. But an unexploited one is the brand.

The brand is more than just a marketing and advertising activity. Under the right conditions, it can engage employees and customers. It can power strategy. It can align decision-making and behaviours. And it can provide meaning for employees and customers alike. But to recognise the full potential of the brand, it must be lifted to a higher realm than marketing and advertising. It needs to be placed where it rightly belongs – at the heart of business strategy. Only then can it provide direction. And only then can it provide agility through stability.

This approach is called brand orientation” (Gjøls-Andersen, 2017). Brand orientation allows political actors to build strong brand equity, which, in turn, can lead to the establishment of sustainable competitive advantage. By analyzing political advertising in 2020 U.S., Sara Savat has concluded that brand orientation in electoral politics context is playing increasingly important role. According to Savat, “During the 2020 election cycle, presidential candidates spent nearly \$3 billion on television, radio, and digital ads - shattering records and demonstrating how important advertising is to campaign strategy. Given the amount of resources dedicated to advertising, understanding how messages influence voter behavior is critical to campaigns. New research from Washington University in St. Louis is shedding light on how slant — the extremeness of the message — and consistency with the candidate’s primary campaign messaging in national television advertisements affected voter behavior during the 2016 presidential election, specifically online word-of-mouth chatter and candidate preference in daily polls” (Savat, 2022). Savat

quotes Dr. Raphael Thomadsen who stated that “Slant and consistency are two vital dimensions related to the branding of political candidates, with slant representing what the candidate stands for, and consistency representing the extent to which the candidate creates a clear and repeated message of what they represent, which creates the branding of the candidate” (Savat, 2022).

Some scholars treat brand orientation as the unequivocal source of competitive advantage. Mats Urde, in his seminar paper – *Brand Orientation – A Strategy For Survival* – proclaims: “The future of many companies lies in brands. By using brands as a starting point in the formulation of company strategy, an important precondition for a new direction – brand orientation – is created ... Established brands have a great potential for increasing the ability of companies to compete as well as generating their growth and profitability. Awareness of this potential will make brands important in the formulation of company strategies as a source for sustainable competitive advantage ... Managing a brand-oriented company involves organizing and controlling the operations in such a way that an attractive added value can be created. The aim is that this should be accomplished with unchanged or increased total brand equity” (Urde, 1994, p. 18). Urde’s view is supported by numerous scholars who corroborate the idea that brand orientation should be viewed as a powerful management philosophy and its adoption can lead to the development of competitive advantage and – ultimately - to market success. According to Harald Pol, Eveline van der Herberg, Di-Janne Barten, Judith Tielen, and Gerrita van der Veen, brand orientation “...provides a holistic and balanced perspective on an organization, diminishing the risk of too much focus on customers, which leads to myopia. Brand orientation is a deliberate approach to brand building, where brand equity is created through interactions between internal and external stakeholders. This approach is characterized by brands being the hub around which the organization’s processes revolve, an approach in which brand management is perceived as a core competence, and where brand building is intimately associated with business development and financial performance. Previous research also showed that the relationship between brand orientation and brand performance is positively related to enterprises’ ability to attract and retain customers. Brand orientation is positively related to sales performance when levels of both transformational leadership and interfunctional collaboration are high” (Pol et al., 2023, p. 1).

It can be summed up, therefore, that a brand is seen by an increasing number of scholars and practitioners as a powerful strategic instrument – a strategic managerial mindset, a strategic framework - capable of generating consumer loyalty – unequivocally, the most potent indicator of the existence of sustainable competitive advantage. For Lara Mendes Christ Bonella Sepulcri, Emerson Wagner Mainardes, and Danilo Magno Marchiori, brand orientation within the political environment “consists of how party brand values and party practices are in conformity. That is, how much they are oriented towards developing brand potentials” (Sepulcri et al., 2020, p. 100). Pernille Gjøls-Andersen clearly states that countless studies indicate that brand orientation leads to higher brand equity and improved financial performance. She also laments that brand orientation hasn’t yet become a dominant strategic mindset, mostly due to the fact that it entails a fundamentally different strategic mentality, one not yet easily adopted by strategists and managers (Gjøls-Andersen, 2017). Gjøls-Andersen enumerates the benefits of brand orientation as follows:

1. Improved brand’s reputation. Brand orientation enables a company/political actor to deliver on the set of consumer expectations in a well-orchestrated manner. The degree to which the company/political actor delivers on those expectations ultimately contributes to the development of the brand’s reputation. Brand orientation also guides strategic flexibility in the consumer-voter experience.
2. Differentiation and distinctiveness are the foundation of competitive behavior. “If you can define and communicate *what* you do better than the competition, by *how much*, and in a distinctive way so that you *stick out* from the crowd, then the customer has a very compelling reason to choose your offering. Brand orientation helps to achieve differentiation and distinctiveness by incorporating uniqueness into the core of the brand itself. A brand-oriented company revolves around a set of ideals, purpose and values that are *unique* to the organization. In many ways, it is the DNA sequence of the company” (Gjøls-Andersen, 2017).
3. “Emotional connection – from needs fulfilment to real fulfilment. Competing for talented employees is a timely issue for business leaders. A recent survey of more than 1300 global CEOs showed that 77% struggle with a lack of people with the right skills. They claim that the availability of talent is the biggest threat to their business ... So how can an organization appeal to top talent in a differentiated way? The answer is to provide *meaning*. This might seem like a big, hairy concept to grasp. But it simply comes down to helping employees to experience a

meaningful reason for why they do what they do. Being purpose-driven provides meaning to employees, under certain conditions. Firstly, for employees to experience meaning they also need to *believe* and *identify* in the same purpose. If they cannot identify with the cause, then it will not resonate and it will not motivate. Secondly, employees need to experience a sense of *contribution* to that cause. If they cannot see how they play a role in fulfilling the company's purpose, what possible meaning can they gain out of that? Thirdly, the sense of meaning needs to be *shared* by the rest of the employees. Meaning is created in connection with others – that is when meaning actually *means* something” (Gjøls-Andersen, 2017)

A lack of understanding about the implications of the adoption of brand orientation is also a driver of resistance to brand orientation strategic mindset. Ripal Patel and Naresh Patel extol brand orientation as a superior strategic mindset, one that considerably allows companies, and other market entities (such as political actors), to achieve advantageous market positions. The scholars indicate that a growing number of studies prove that “there is a direct positive effect of brand orientation on brand performance ... The firms are at a competitive disadvantage as they have weaker brand orientation as compared to large firms ... The brand orientation has a positive relationship with the brand commitment and the brand trust, which in turn affect the brand performance” (Patel & Patel, 2013, p. 14). Mats Urde is of the opinion that brand orientation has significantly expanded the perspective on the management practice, emphasizing the strategic goals inextricably intertwined with the performance of the brand. He asserts that “An increasing number of company managements are beginning to realize that their products are no longer unique. If the consumers do not perceive a product as having an added value, price and availability will probably determine their choice. This frequently gives rise to a completely new competitive situation, which is difficult to control. Brand orientation is a strategy of survival for companies facing the threats of decreasing product divergence, increasing media costs and integration of markets. The idea behind the strategy is to turn these threats into opportunities by focusing a company's operations on competing with brand products. Rallying the entire organization, its commitment, efforts and resources toward this goal may disperse these threats. The future prospects for strong brands can be considered to be very good indeed. (Urde, 1994, p. 29). Brand oriented market entities – whether business

organizations or political actors – put brand at the center of all strategic activities. They see the brand as the most important strategic asset, device, and a source of competitive advantage. Brand orientation – as numerous studies show – has a profound impact on brand performance, brand loyalty, profits, and market success. As Ripal Patel and Naresh Patel contend: “Firms with high degree of brand orientation nearly doubled the profit in contrast to the firms with low degree brand orientation. Hence, brand orientation associated with profitability is strongly supported. From managers’ perspective ... brands are strategically essential resources that enable companies to gain superior financial performance ... Brand oriented firms are believed to develop their strategies keeping the brand central to it and also regard brands as a source of competitive advantage over rivals. Another critical finding and a definite addition to the literature [of strategic brand management] is evidence that the gap between strategy and performance can be partially closed by firms adopting a high brand orientation. (Patel & Patel, 2013, p. 15).

Being brand-oriented means treating the brand as a the most important strategic asset rather than mere tactical marketing tool. The brand’s DNA – values, identity, image, positioning, name, authenticity, personality - represents the boundaries that dictate what actions are possible and unacceptable for the brand and its management. It is within these boundaries that value and meaning are developed. Brand orientation acts as a beacon for strategists to unapologetically manage and cultivate consistent brand identity. “In extreme cases of market orientation, short-termism can be a threat to the brand. In the ambition to respond to every customer’s need, the brand identity will undoubtedly adapt and change. But when this is not strategic, it will cause problems later down the road. An individual who allows his or her identity to be shaped by the opinions and actions of those around, and who always takes on the popular side in all issues, will not be seen as credible. Seeking to agree with everyone and avoiding tough choices will not result in a strong identity. It will result in an unnoticeable one. The same applies for brands. Thus, being brand-oriented means having a broad back, taking the difficult choices, and not trying to be all things to all people. It means listening to the market but not letting it guide the development of the brand on its own. Last, it means employing the entire organization towards the cultivation of a strong brand identity that creates value and meaning for consumers and other stakeholders” (“Brand Orientation”, 2021).

Branding has become an essential component of several political actors' strategies. As this subchapter exhibited, a strong brand can mean the difference between electoral success and failure in today's hypercompetitive and hyperbranded marketplace. Effective branding – and brand orientation – creates an idiosyncratic identity for a political actor that sets it apart from the rivals, communicates its value and brand promise, and builds voter-consumer trust and loyalty. Branding is much more than just designing an attractive and aesthetically pleasing logo, advertising campaign, or formulating a catchy slogan. Strategic brand management encompasses the entire experience that voters-consumers have with the political actor. Creating a memorable brand – capable of eliciting positive emotions and generating loyalty – is essential for differentiating a political actor from other opponents. A strong political brand that stands out in a crowded political marketplace can make a lasting impression and help voters get emotionally involved with the brand. Investing in and developing a well-thought-out political brand can create a foundation for long-term political career growth (Walker, 2023). Strong brand leads to strong brand equity, which, in turn, leads to competitive advantage characterized by longevity. This subchapter was aimed at presenting compelling evidence of the role brand equity plays in establishing sustainable competitive advantage. By so doing, this subchapter attempted to offer a comprehensive answer to one of this dissertation's research questions: Does Brand Equity in politics lead to electoral competitive advantage?

CHAPTER 4. PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF BRANDS

4.1. The Role Of Mere Exposure Effect In Strategic Brand Management

Understanding the links between consumer psychology and voter choice within the context of strategic brand management should be viewed as an imperative. Today's commercial and political marketplaces are fiercely competitive. Political actors who build and nurture strong brand loyalty as part of their brand image are more likely to achieve success defined here as a long-term political career growth. The most effective brand loyalty strategies leverage the psychological underpinnings of consumer behavior and apply these insights strategically (Nancholas, 2024). The principal objective of this subchapter is to shed light on the impact of select psychological processes on voters-consumers' preferences, choices, and attitudes. This subchapter is an attempt to address one of this dissertation's research questions, namely: Can the conceptualization of voters as consumers (voting-consumption analogy) facilitate the use of Strategic Brand Management principles in politics?

Even if voters-consumers don't click on the presidential candidate online ad that seems to be following them around the internet for months, the fact that they have had multiple encounters with the ad – even if they process the ad only cursorily – means that they have been induced to pay more attention to this particular presidential candidate next time they would see his/her ad. That's because of a psychological phenomenon called the mere exposure effect. As Bence Nanay explains: “The mere exposure effect is the well-known phenomenon that repeated previous exposure to a stimulus makes the positive appraisal of this stimulus more likely. The research on the mere exposure effect goes back at least as far as the very beginnings of what we now know as experimental psychology, but the concept was made famous by Robert Zajonc (Nanay, 2017, p. 58). There is no doubt that the “increasing proliferation of communications ‘clutter’, and the fact that consumers are often involved in tasks that occupy attention and limit communication processing, it is likely that the majority of marketing communications stimuli do not receive any active processing. Furthermore, as brands are generally perceived to match each other in terms of functional performance, consumers no longer feel the need to seek out information about

brands, which in turn inhibits any desire to pay active attention to advertising ... [C]apturing and maintaining the attention of potential customers is now more important than ever before” (Grimes & Kitchen, 2007, pp. 191-192). The mere exposure effect – as a psychological process – refers to the way that people tend to be predisposed to have a more favorable perceptions of things, objects, people, brands, sounds, shapes, etc. they are familiar with as a result of repeated exposure to them. According to numerous research studies, “even unconscious exposure increases the probability of positive appraisal – for example, if the stimulus is flashed for a very short time (under 200 milliseconds) or if the stimulus is masked” (Nanay, 2017, p. 58). The mere exposure effect has profound implications for strategic political brand management and advertising, as brands – commercial and political – try to cut through the communication clutter, stand out, and attract voters-consumers with their messages. It has been observed that even if brand messages – such as ads or social media posts – are noticed only briefly by voters-consumers, brands still get tremendous value out of being noticed at all. According to Bence Nanay, “the mere exposure effect is sensitive to how we allocate our perceptual attention. Previous repeated exposure to the duck-rabbit illusion, for example, can make subjects show an increased appreciation of rabbits, but only if they saw the duck-rabbit figure as a rabbit. More generally, the properties of the stimulus that we have attended to during past exposure influence whether we show an increased appreciation of the stimulus; and – importantly – if the stimulus during past exposure was unattended, the effects disappear” (Nanay, 2017, p. 58).

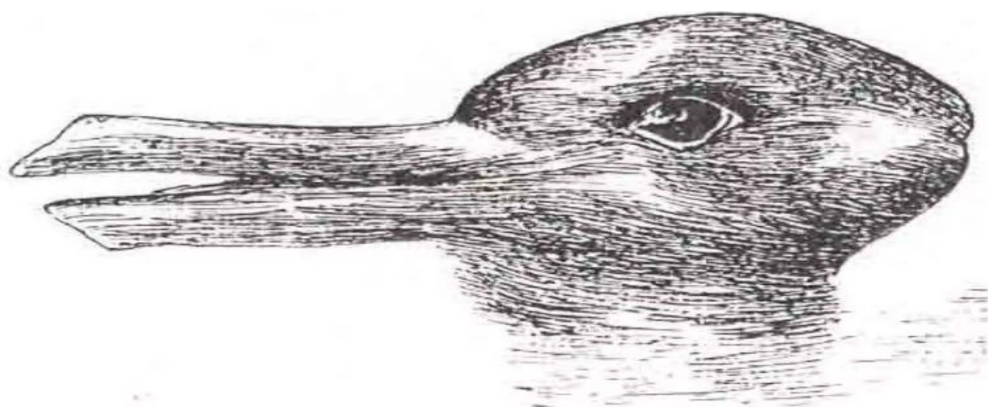


Figure 5. The rabbit-duck illusion
Source: Farand, 2021.

The mere exposure effect can be applied to a range of things, including commercial brands, politicians, political parties, university logos, religious symbols, objects, music, and even designs/shapes. While this may seem like an uncomplicated psychological phenomenon, it has been proven to have a tremendous impact on voters-consumers' preferences and decision making. It has been well documented that - given the complexity of the current media landscape - consumers are eager to avoid exposure and suspend their attention to brand communications messages (Grimes & Kitchen, 2007, p. 192). Moreover, several studies have shown that voters-consumers are more likely to choose brands - both commercial and political - that they have seen before, even if they cannot consciously recall seeing them. In their thorough examination of the mere exposure effect, Xiang Fang, Surendra Singh, and Rohini Ahluwalia have demonstrated that "The majority of ad exposure occurs under incidental conditions - where the audiences' attention is focused elsewhere - such as reading a magazine or browsing a Web page, approximating the *mere exposure* condition, in which the target stimulus is made just accessible to the individual's perception. Repeated exposures under these conditions result in enhanced liking for a neutral stimulus" (Fang et al., 2007, p. 97). Additionally, repeated exposure to a brand can considerably increase brand recognition and build trust with voters-consumers. In his comprehensive studies, Robert Zajonc demonstrated that people evaluated stimuli which had been presented to them more positively than almost identical ones that had not been presented to them prior to the evaluation. Robert Zajonc describes *mere exposure* as "a condition which just makes the given stimulus accessible to the individual's perception" (Zajonc, 1965, p. 1). According to Zajonc, the mere exposure theory has been partially embraced by the advertising industry: "The foremost proponent of this hypothesis, the advertising industry, has always attributed to exposure formidable advertising potential. But - apparently, in respect for the law of enhancement by association - it seldom dared to utilize mere exposure. The product, its name, or its hallmark are always presented to the public in contiguity with most attractive stimuli. At the same time, however, the advertising industry also likes to warn against overexposure, relying, it would appear, on the above law of familiarity" (Zajonc, 1965, p. 1). The mere exposure phenomenon has had a profound impact on the brand communication tactics and strategies. According to Kristin A. Scott and Margaret A. White, the mere exposure effect is currently being used by a

plethora of brands as a presentation signal: “As you watch a favorite comedy series like *Seinfeld*, Jerry walks out of the kitchen eating from a box of Cheerios as he talks to Kramer. In *Austin Powers*, the characters sit around a table for a meeting with a Starbucks cup sitting on the table. Tom Hanks asks for Dr. Pepper on the airplane on his return home in the movie *Castaway*. Ever since E.T. made Reese’s Pieces fly in *E. T.*, movies, TV shows, video games, and music videos have used product placement as a way to advertise to consumers in a non-obtrusive manner. Now, this type of advertising is a billion-dollar industry ... Product placement with children demonstrates that age, which implies processing functions, is not a factor in affecting choice since implicit memory is more important than explicit recall. Thus, choice is not correlated with recognition or recall measures, showing that the two are gauging different perceptions ... Mere exposure is the act of bringing a stimulus into perception and after being exposed to a new stimulus, a person’s liking for that stimulus increases” (Scott & White, 2016, p. 411). It has been well documented by psychologists that familiarity breeds attraction. The more frequently people are exposed to something, the more favorably they tend to evaluate it. Anne Greul, Tim G. Schweisfurth, and Christina Raasch contend that “a stimulus’ familiarity is associated with more positive assessments ...repeated exposure to a specific stimulus improves an individual’s attitude toward it. Substantial empirical evidence supports the existence of the mere exposure effect. For instance, experiments have demonstrated that exposure to a stimulus increases the liking of it. Also, repeated exposure to information about a firm affects employees’ identification with it and its perceived attractiveness. The positive attitudinal change – increased liking – is robust across various stimuli and ratings. Interestingly, familiarity with a stimulus does not require any conscious recognition of it. Even unconscious exposure to a stimulus produces a positive effect through the process of positive reinforcement” (Greul et al., 2023, p. 3). The mere exposure effect can have an impact on a plethora of different areas of social life. For example, being exposed to advertisements for a political brand might make voters-consumers prefer that brand more.

The mere exposure effect can also induce voters-consumers to like a politician more simply because they have been exposed to a large number of his/her commercials, posts, advertising, images, speeches. In their vast exploration of the impact of the mere exposure effect in electoral politics, Roland Pfister, Katharina A. Schwarz, Patricia Holzmann,

Moritz Reis, Kumar Yogeeswaran, and Wilfried Kunde observed that there is “strong evidence for a direct effect of exposure to candidate names in the media on voting preferences. This effect emerged for positive and neutral reporting alike, suggesting that the effect applies to a wide range of situations. Crucially, these observations extend previous results from survey studies by providing data from controlled experiments, thus attesting a causal link between mere exposure and voting behavior” (Pfister, 2023, p. 10). It must be emphasized though that most of the time, people – voters-consumers – are not aware of the mere exposure effect. This psychological phenomenon takes place automatically, below the level of consciousness. As a result, people might feel attracted to certain brands, certain politicians, certain scents, certain designs, certain music, *without knowing why they are attracted to them* [emphasis added].

The major explanation for the mere exposure effect is based on the concept of perceptual fluency. According to Xiang Fang, Surendra Singh, and Rohini Ahluwalia: “The perceptual fluency/misattribution model, or PF/M, utilizes a cognitive perspective and suggests that people generate inferences or metacognitions based upon their fluency experience (e.g., inferring that stimuli that come to mind more readily are better liked), thus misattributing their fluency experience to evaluations of the stimuli. Most marketing studies have utilized PF/M as the explanatory mechanism. The hedonic fluency model, HFM, presents an alternative affect-based explanation, arguing that positive affect generated by the dynamics of fluent processing enhances stimuli evaluations ... The PF/M contends that repeated exposures to a stimulus enhance its perceptual fluency. When an individual is unaware of the true source (prior exposure) of the enhanced perceptual fluency, (s)he may misattribute it to liking for the stimulus or, depending upon the contextual cues provided by the task, to other relevant judgments regarding the stimulus, such as fame, truth, duration, loudness, stimulus brightness and darkness, and narrow/broad product distribution. If the individual realizes having seen the stimulus earlier, (s)he will engage in an automatic and effortless correction process, revising the initial interpretation of fluency and discounting the stimulus evaluation. The PF/M assumes that (1) process facilitation is an affectively neutral, arousal-like experience and (2) this experience can influence extremity of the evaluation by leading to either a more positive or a more negative evaluation of the stimulus, depending on the contextual factors. Thus, if the evaluation

involves darkness (brightness) judgment, more extreme evaluation of darkness (brightness) should occur. The HFM focuses specifically on preference judgments (as opposed to other judgments, such as brightness, fame, and truth) and argues that the dynamics of information processing itself (i.e., processing fluency) lead to positive affective responses, which in turn lead to a more positive evaluation. High fluency may generate positive affect partly because it indicates stimulus familiarity, which signals a harmless situation. It may also indicate progress toward the goal of successful recognition and coherent interpretation of the target, which is a rewarding experience. Winkielman and Cacioppo demonstrated that perceptual fluency increases were associated with affective responses, as measured by facial electromyography (EMG). The process implied in this model is akin to the “affect-as-information” model, where participants infer their evaluations from how they feel (e.g., “if I feel good, I must like it”). Note that this process is also metacognitive in nature but differs from the PF/M in that the inferences are based on the affective experience and not the experience of perceptual fluency” (Fang et al., 2007, p. 98). In other words, the mere exposure effect can be attributed to the fact that increased familiarity with the stimulus facilitates uncertainty reduction. Individuals who are familiar with the stimulus to which they have been exposed feel less ambiguous and less anxious towards it. Kendra Cherry asserts that “This perspective is rooted in evolutionary psychology, which suggests that people are naturally inclined to be cautious and even suspicious of unfamiliar things. The more people are exposed to something, the more they realize that it does not pose a threat.

Choosing things we are more familiar with reduces the amount of effort it takes to process and interpret things in the world around us. We only have so many cognitive and attentional resources to make sense of the things in our environment. Sticking with what is familiar frees up our resources so we can shift our focus elsewhere. Sometimes turning to something familiar, such as a tv show we’ve already seen or a favorite song we’ve heard many times, can have a comforting effect and help reduce feelings of tension and anxiety. Researchers have found that tuning in to reruns of a favorite tv show can be a great way to soothe stress. Studies have found that people tend to prefer watching familiar shows when they are feeling depleted. That might be while you sometimes might feel more inclined to queue up an old favorite at the end of an exhausting day rather than dig into the latest episode of your current tv obsession” (Cherry, 2023).

Consumer psychology refers to the study of how individuals and groups navigate judgments and decisions related to the selection and consumption of products, services, and brands. The overarching objective of consumer psychology is to find the underlying cognitive processes that explain consumers' preferences and choices, and what factors influence their purchase decisions. Businesses, political organizations, religious institutions, and nonprofit organizations all consult findings about consumer psychology to determine how best to connect with consumers. It's important that political actors understand the psychological underpinnings of consumer behavior so they can target their brand strategies to different segments and create as many hard-core loyal voters-consumers as possible. It has already been indicated in subchapter 2.1 that strong brand loyalty is essentially invaluable for the success of a political brand. One of the most important benefits of strong brand loyalty includes increased brand equity and brand awareness – all of which play a significant role in the development of a long-term political career (Nancholas, 2024). This subchapter presented and dissected a cognitive phenomenon called the mere exposure effect and analyzed its impact on voters-consumers choices, preferences, and perceived norms. This subchapter was an attempt to address one of this dissertation's research questions, namely: Can the conceptualization of voters as consumers (voting-consumption analogy) facilitate the use of Strategic Brand Management principles in politics? The presented evidence suggested that understanding consumer psychology can fundamentally help in determining the strategic choices facing political brands.

4.2. Halo Effect, Horn Effect, And Summary Construct In Brand Development

The notoriously influential American psychologist, and the founder of the modern educational psychology, Edward Thorndike “discovered that when people rate someone on one trait it is correlated with their ratings on other traits. Put simply, people tend to see a person's performance as all good or all bad. This phenomenon has come to be called the Halo Effect” (Frederiksen, 2022). According to Angela Bretcu, “Etymologically, the term *halo* comes from the Greek language, meaning *circle*, *disc*, *diameter*. It is used mainly in

astronomical physics and refers to the luminous ring around the moon or the sun, which is formed at certain times due to specific physical phenomena. By analogy, the term halo began to be used in the social sphere, meaning *a generalization of the appreciation of one or more persons starting from a particular feature*. A tendency to irradiate psychic traits and processes, even if objective data reveals no correlation between them, a cognitive bias according to which the perception of a trait (for example, the dominant characteristic of a person or object) is influenced by the perception of another trait of the same person or object, or an assumption that an individual's impression of an aspect of a person, product, service or concept affects the views of other aspects of this. Tiffin and McCormick consider the effect to be the dominance of one trait over all others, and English views the halo effect as the tendency to judge distinct traits on the basis of a general impression. He considers that the perception of a person largely depends on the general sentiment towards that person. The halo effect has in the social sphere the meaning of extending some sequential qualities to a general entity or an appreciation of attributes belonging to a being, good, service, starting from other visible or well-known aspects. The term was first used in 1920 by psychologist Edward Thorndike in a public communication study, describing how people in the US military were being evaluated. Later it began to be used in many other areas, such as education, management, communication, marketing” (Bretcu, 2019, pp. 54-55). The word *halo*, says Ayesha Perera, “stems from a religious concept. It refers to a circle of light that is placed above or around the head of a holy person or saint in order to honor his or her sanctity. Countless paintings from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period depict notable men and women with the heavenly light of the halo. These paintings, in effect, lead the observer to form favorable judgments about their participants. Likewise, according to the psychological concept of the halo effect, one patent attribute of a certain person leads an observer to draw a generalizing conclusion about that person” (Perera, 2023). In other words, the halo effect can be considered a type of cognitive bias in which an individual’s overall impression of a person, brand, object, politician, etc., unconsciously influences how the individual tends to feel and think about the person, brand, object, or politician. Aparna Sundar, Edita Cao, Ruomeng Wu, and Frank R. Kardes contend that “A halo effect occurs when a specific cue influences global evaluations of a product, which in turn biases evaluations of other attributes ... The halo effect was first termed to describe

how servicemen have a tendency to generalize from one positive characteristic to form similarly positive evaluations of their subordinates on unrelated characteristics. Since Thorndike, halo effects have been observed in consumer evaluations of products. Positive global evaluations generally yield high ratings on positive attributes; negative global evaluations more often yield reduced ratings” (Sundar et al., 2021, pp. 1280-1281). The halo effect – as a psychological phenomenon – is a cognitive bias, “involving the unfounded application of general judgment to a specific trait” (Perera, 2023). A single positive attribute of a person, brand, object, etc. may induce a positive predisposition towards every aspect of that person, brand, object, etc. while one negative trait of that person, brand, object, etc. may induce an overall negative impression of that person brand, object, etc. While the former, which is directed at the positive attributes, is called the halo effect, the latter, which is directed at the negative traits, is called the *horn effect*. (Perera, 2023). The horn effect is a cognitive process in which negative attributes, characteristics, and traits are ascribed to a person, brand, object, etc., based on appearance or other factors (AIHR, n.d.). For example, suppose a voter-consumer perceives a politician to be approachable and sincere. In that case, a voter-consumer will attribute a number of other characteristics, traits, and attributes to that politician without any knowledge that they are true, such as he is smart, knowledgeable, moral, patriotic, etc. (Perera, 2023). If a voter-consumer dislikes male baldness, he/she might immediately think that a politician with a receding hair line is less intelligent, less authoritative, and doesn’t possess necessary charisma to become the commander-in-chief. The halo effect, say Lance Leuthesser, Chiranjeev S. Kohli, and Katrin R. Harich, “results from an individual’s global attitude towards a brand, and causes individual attribute ratings to exhibit greater co-variance than they would in the absence of this influence ... On the positive side, what has traditionally been referred to as strong halo “error” may be indicative of strong brand equity in instances where the overall brand evaluation is correspondingly high. Conversely, where overall evaluations are low, strong halo suggests brand *deficit*” (Leuthesser et al., 1995, p. 65).

Lee Frederiksen is of the opinion that the halo effect should be considered the foundation of modern strategic brand management. According to Frederiksen: “While Thorndike saw the Halo Effect as a source of measurement bias in his research, the savvy marketer will recognize it as the foundation of the modern concept of brands. When we

develop a favorable impression of a firm when interacting with one partner at a firm we tend to view the whole firm in a favorable light. Our impression of that firm's brand is strengthened. Not surprisingly it can also work in the other direction. Unfavorable impressions are also generalized via the Devil Effect [also known as the Horn Effect]. Think of it as the Halo Effect's evil twin" (Frederiksen, 2022).

Several psychologists, for example Miguel Angel Moliner, Juan Carlos Fandos, Diego Monferrer, and Marta Estrada, distinguish two different types of halo: "general impression halo and dimensional similarity halo. General impression halo can be defined as a general impression bias whereby a rater's overall evaluation or impression of a rate leads the rater to evaluate all aspects of performance in a manner consistent with this general evaluation or impression. This definition is similar to that given in the seminal work by Thorndike and is the most widely accepted conceptual definition of halo. Dimensional similarity is a rater's tendency to rate similarly dimensions he or she perceives as conceptually similar or logically related. This second definition coincides with the definition of halo error and refers to the operational definition of halo" (Moliner et al., 2020, p. 158). The halo effect encompasses a gamut of various cognitive biases, such as physical attractiveness stereotype and so-called beauty bias. Numerous research studies indicate that people perceive attractive individuals to be "not only more intelligent and competent in general, but also more competent in such a seemingly unrelated and specific task as piloting a plane" (Kanazawa & Kovar, 2004, p. 228).

It has long been accepted within the academic psychology milieu that people associate beauty with goodness, intelligence, morality, and many other virtues. One ancient Greek story talks about Phryne, a beautiful woman who was charged with impiety, a crime punished by death. According to the Greek myth, Phryne's defense lawyer failed to present a compelling argument to save his client. "At the crucial moment, when the jury was about to vote, he therefore tore open her tunic to reveal her naked breasts to the room. Who could condemn a woman when they had seen her naked, one who was beautiful enough to stand in for Aphrodite? Particularly when ... Phryne was more beautiful in the parts of her body which were generally unseen. The male jury quickly acquitted her" (Haynes, 2017). Psychologists unanimously agree that "in people's perceptions of others, *what is beautiful is good*. This statement linking beauty and goodness suggests the existence of a stereotype

whereby physically attractive individuals are believed to possess a wide variety of positive personal qualities” (Eagly et al., 1991, p. 109). It has been recognized that attractive individuals “are less likely to be found guilty by simulated juries and more likely to get reduced punishments when they are. People tend to vote for more attractive politicians, promote better-looking underlings, and even give more attention to better-looking children than those with ...*severe appearance deficits*.” (Hendricks, 2022).

In a now classic study on the physical attractiveness stereotype, researchers “had subjects rate facial photographs that had been selected on the basis of judges’ agreement that the pictured individuals were low, medium, or high in physical attractiveness. Subjects’ ratings pertained to various personality traits as well as to life outcomes such as marital happiness and career success. Indeed, subjects ascribed more favorable personality traits and more successful life outcomes to the pictured individuals to the extent that they were physically attractive” (Eagly et al., 1991, p. 109).

In 1968, Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson conducted an experiment that demonstrated the tremendous impact of the halo effect on peoples’ decisions, behaviors, and attitudes. “At the beginning of the academic year Rosenthal and Jacobson told the teachers that this test was to predict which students would “bloom” intellectually during the academic year. They deceived the teachers that their genius students had been tested by some new methodology of determining the success of school age children, and these kids were the best of the best. In fact, the students were randomly chosen from 18 classrooms and their true test scores would not support them as “intellectual bloomers”. The result of the experiment showed a distinguishing difference between the sample students and the control students. The “bloomers” gained an average of two IQ points in verbal ability, seven points in reasoning and four points in overall IQ. The experiment showed that teacher expectations worked as a self-fulfilling prophecy. If teachers were led to expect enhanced performance from some children, then the children did indeed show that enhancement” (Chang, 2011, p. 198).

Another classic study took place in 2015 and was conducted by Matt Parrett from the FDA federal agency (Food and Drug Administration, USA). The researcher found overwhelming evidence of a beauty earnings gap: “attractive servers earn about 1.37 percentage points more on a percentage tip basis and around \$0.40 more on a dollar tip

basis than unattractive servers. Stated differently, and in a way which highlights the economic significance of the result, attractive servers earn approximately \$1261 more per year than unattractive servers, an amount that is equivalent to roughly 1.5 months of median gross rent in the United States or about 17 weeks' worth of food for an individual following a high-cost nutritious diet as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture" (Parrett, 2015, p. 43). This study is a great attempt to demystify the halo effect and showcase the real impact of this cognitive bias on people's behaviors, attitudes, and everyday decisions.

Satoshi Kanazawa and Jody L. Kovar cite many studies that prove that "people expect physically attractive others to be more intelligent than physically less attractive others. Studies also show that people perceive beautiful others to possess a host of other desirable qualities. This common perception is captured by the phrase *What is beautiful is good*. What is important to note, however, is that, for most of these studies ... neither the sex of the target nor the sex of the perceiver has a significant effect on people's perception that beautiful people are intelligent or otherwise good: both men and women perceive physically attractive men and women to be intelligent and good. In addition, children as young as first and second graders hold the perception that better looking teachers are more intelligent. Thus, romantic or sexual attraction does not seem to underlie people's perception that beautiful others are intelligent and good" (Kanazawa & Kovar, 2004, p. 228). Numerous studies have also found that attractive defendants are more likely to be perceived as less dangerous, less violent, and tend to receive lighter sentences compared to unattractive defendants. According to Georgia M. Winters: "There is some evidence that jurors are more likely to acquit attractive defendants and convict unattractive defendants. This has predominantly been found for empirical studies that use cases involving rape and sexual harassment. One study found that female participants rated the unattractive female defendant as more guilty compared to the attractive female defendant in a vehicular homicide case ... attractive defendants have been assigned lesser sentences in rape and sexual assault cases, negligent homicide, and white-collar crimes. Field studies examining actual courtroom data have supported the link between increased attractiveness and decreased sentence lengths in sentences ascribed by judges. Abwender and Hough found

that female participants ascribed more lenient sentences to the attractive female defendant ...” (Winters, 2018, pp. 5-6).

So how can the halo effect contribute to the development of a strong brand? According to Lee Frederiksen, a brand doesn't need to be the best at everything. The brand, however, needs to be perceived as the best at something, and the halo effect will make this one attribute most prominent in the eye of the proverbial beholder (Frederiksen, 2022). Lance Leuthesser, Chiranjeev S. Kohli, and Katrin R. Harich note that “consumers often avoid active processing of product information. These *cognitive misers* eschew the intellectual effort of making attribute-by-attribute evaluations and instead form overall affective impressions” (Leuthesser et al., 1995, p. 59).

Making an accurate assessment of a brand – commercial or political – tends to be difficult for voters-consumers who are prone to inferences from the most salient brand's attribute, such as physical attractiveness, size, speech pattern, dominant color, life history, cultural background, educational attainment, etc. In their comprehensive analysis of the halo effect and summary construct within the brand-saturated consumer context, Jin Yong Park, Kyungdo Park, and Alan J. Dubinsky observe that “A similar phenomenon occurs when consumers use price to estimate a product's quality. Specifically, the quality of a product is inferred from its price when there is little information about the product or when the consumer is unfamiliar with the product. In such situations, price has a halo effect on product quality” (Park et al., 2011, p. 175). By the same token, presidential contender's idiosyncratic – and well developed - brand identity, perceived authenticity, appearance, speech pattern, name, logo, etc., are likely to serve as a halo on his/her brand when voters-consumers have insufficient information and knowledge about the presidential contender's ideology, program, and political manifest. A politician's idiosyncratic – and well developed - brand identity, perceived authenticity, appearance, speech pattern, name, logo, etc., may carry over to the perception voters-consumers have about the attributes of a politician. Jin Yong Park, Kyungdo Park, and Alan J. Dubinsky assert that “Brands that have favorable associations tend to have a positive transference impact” (Park et al., 2011, p. 175). Because of voters-consumers' inability to ascertain true qualities, knowledge, virtues, and ideology of the presidential candidate, they may turn to the most salient brand feature(s) to infer the true character of the contender. This view, says C. Min Han, “is

analogous to the role of price in product evaluation. Studies have shown that price serves as a surrogate for other information: consumers are more likely to use price in product evaluation when product information is lacking, when they are not familiar with a product, and when information about the purchase context is lacking” (Han, 1989, p. 223).

A concept that – to a certain extent – overlaps with the halo effect, and should be briefly mentioned here, is called a summary construct. A summary construct, according to Jin Yong Park, Kyungdo Park, and Alan J. Dubinsky, “refers to the individual elements of information that are converted to and inferred from a higher-ranked concept. The summary construct view maintains that consumers recode and abstract individual elements of information into higher order units ... Consumers benefit because information chunks are easier to store in and retrieve from long-term memory. An advantage of a summary construct in consumers’ information processing is that it is useful in storing and retrieving ‘chunks’ from long-term memory. Evaluating individual product attributes every time a decision-making situation arises is time-consuming and unnecessary, as consumers only need to recall from memory previously formed overall evaluations of each alternative. A frequently used summary construct is brand name. A brand name carries all attributes that can be utilised to evaluate a product” (Park et al., 2011, p. 176). In analyzing the role of brand name as a summary construct, Jacob Jacoby, George J. Szybillo, and Jacqueline Busato-Schach observe, “Being told ‘this beer is Budweiser’ conveys much more meaning to the typical beer drinker than being told ‘this beer costs \$1.79 per six pack” (Han, 1989, p. 223). The scholars also add that “the role of brand name as a summary construct may explain the relative dominance of brand information over price information in consumer quality judgment” (Han, 1989, p. 223). A politician’s appearance, hair color, speech pattern, political affiliation, etc., can be viewed as a summary construct. Voters-consumers may ascribe certain attributes to a politician, imbue him/her with certain positive/negative traits and feelings, and form quick overall attitude towards him/her based on facile characteristics. Panu Poutvaara puts it succinctly: “Good-looking political candidates win more votes around the world. This holds for both male and female candidates. Candidate appearance may be especially important for uninformed voters, as it is easy to observe. Voters may favor good-looking candidates because they expect them to be more competent or persuasive ...” (Poutvaara, n.d.).

Halo effect, horn effect, and summary construct are examples of a cognitive bias that revolves around the tendency to make specific inferences on the basis of a general impression. The fact is that many everyday concepts in politics – including presidential candidates and elections – are ambiguous and difficult to define. Voters-consumers often infer perceptions of political candidates from something else, which appears to be more specific and tangible: namely, physical appearance, speech pattern, logo, brand name, etc. As a result, many of the things that voters-consumers commonly believe are intrinsic attributes of political candidates are in fact unsubstantiated inferences formed on the basis of general impressions of them (Rosenzweig, 2007). According to Nine Blaes – a branding strategist – the halo effect, the horn effect, and the summary construct play a critical role in strategic brand management. Branding – says Blaes – “thrives on a clear focus that sets your brand apart. Concentrating on a unique strength and consistently communicating it prevents you from spreading yourself thin and diluting your message. Trust in the Halo Effect, where people naturally fill in the gaps. What makes your brand stand out? What makes it unique? Being known for something makes you the first brand people think of in your category—also known as brand positioning” (Blaess, n.d.). The halo effect – and corresponding horn effect and summary construct – exist because when an individual has a positive (or negative) feeling about one salient attribute of the person, object, brand, etc., this individual would assume all qualities about that person, object, brand, etc., must also be good (or bad). The halo effect plays a critical role in everything from strategic brand management to political communication.

4.3. Bandwagon Effect And Strategic Brand Management

The electoral politics environment is a dynamic and ever-changing landscape. Voters-consumers are constantly faced with new candidates, up-and-coming players, and shifting public sentiments about many social issues and challenges. In this environment, it is important to understand the psychological biases that can have a profound impact upon decision-making. One such bias is the bandwagon effect and – corresponding to it – social proof. According to Dennis M. Steininger, Mark Lorch, and Daniel Veit, the bandwagon effect concept was introduced in 1950 by Harvey Leibenstein. The bandwagon effect is a

phenomenon “where an individual will demand more (less) of a commodity at a given price because some or all other individuals in the market also demand more (less) of the commodity. Until today, the term attracts attention in marketing and economics literature, most of the time described as social learning. Social learning is defined as “mechanisms through which individuals may learn from others”. This includes, *inter alia*, observational learning, where individuals are influenced by the information that is contained in other people’s action. The theory of informational cascades is used to explain observational learning and is based on the idea that social and economic actions are influenced by the actions and experiences of other individuals. An informational cascade takes place when it’s rational for an individual to ignore his private information and to imitate the behavior of its predecessors. An informational cascade can arise “when decision makers have imperfect knowledge of the true value of a product, so they infer its utility from observing actions of their predecessors.”. Once a cascade has started, the private information of the decision maker does not join the common knowledge pool, as his observable action does not convey any information about it. Later decisions are not improved due to this reason.

Ignoring his private information and joining the herd is thus described as a negative herd externality on the rest of the population” (Steininger *et al.*, 2014, p. 548). The bandwagon effect, says Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck, “is one of several hypothesized manifestations of “impersonal influence”— effects on individuals’ attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors that derive from these persons’ impressions about the attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors of collectives of anonymous others outside their personal contact sphere. Other examples are the “underdog effect,” complementing the bandwagon effect by stating a negative impact of perceived majority or dominant opinion, and — specifically for elections — the notion of “strategic” voting which expects electors to support the second- or even third-best alternative at an election, if they perceive candidates or parties they like better to be only weakly supported by other voters, so that choosing “sincerely” might lead to a wasted vote. Bandwagon effects may manifest themselves in various situations and forms. Most often they have been discussed with regard to elections. Voters are assumed to be drawn to parties or candidates that they perceive to enjoy broad support in the electorate and therefore expect to win. The same may happen in referenda, when perceptions of majority support help certain proposals gain additional votes. Even roll-call

voting in the US House of Representatives seems not to be immune to bandwagon effects. Bandwagon effects have also been claimed to be an important force behind the dynamics of phenomena of collective protest. Besides such behavioral consequences, perceiving opinion distributions within the mass public as lopsided in favor of one position can also lead to changes of attitudes on political issues. Bandwagon effects may affect social science research in problematic ways. With regard to predicting parties' or candidates' vote shares at elections they raise thorny issues for forecasts which, when published, are bound to spur their own falsification. The validity of post-election studies may be impaired by bandwagon effects, when respondents claim to have chosen the party or candidate which from hindsight they know to have won the race, although they have actually voted differently" (Schmitt-Beck, 2015, p. 1). In other words, the bandwagon effect transpires when people internalize certain attitudes, behaviors, convictions because they assume that other people are doing so. This tendency revolves around the proclivity of the human brain to ascertain something as desirable because other people also desire it. The bandwagon effect extends far beyond one singular social domain to all sorts of decision people make in their lives. The primary concern is that this cognitive bias has the capacity to override the individual critical thinking that is often necessary for making sound decision ("Why do we support opinions as they become more popular?" n.d.).

The bandwagon effect plays a critical role in strategic brand management and electoral politics. According to Matthew Barnfield, "The possibility that opinion polls influence voters has been used to justify legal restrictions on their conduction and publication in many democracies. A recent report found such restrictions before elections in more than half of the countries covered. Academic study of this purported influence has primarily considered a *bandwagon effect*, arguing typically that candidates, parties, or issue opinions performing better in polls can attract support from people who are exposed to them. This raises normative questions about the democratic credentials of publishing polls, especially during campaigns. Particularly problematic is the fact that the predictions of the polls by which voters are supposedly influenced are often incorrect. This notion of a bandwagon effect remains concerned with the effects of polls but has grown to encompass a greater range of theoretical considerations, mostly from social psychology, as it has become tied to theories about conformity, the spiral of silence, and impersonal influence.

As such, it has to some extent become a broader question about the effect of popularity or mass support of opinions, parties or election candidates on individual attitudes and behavior. The polls, however, arguably remain the most salient *signal* of this support” (Barnfield, 2020, pp. 553-554).

In their comprehensive analysis of the nature and impact of the bandwagon effect, Sjoerd B. Stolwijk, Andreas R. T. Schuck, and Claes H. de Vreese demonstrate that the bandwagon effect can have a profound effect on the outcomes of elections: “Since their introduction in the 1930s, opinion polls play an influential role in the media coverage of election campaigns. Ever since, there has been a continuous research interest in their alleged effect on election outcomes. Different studies report different effects. In addition to an *underdog effect* where voters support a losing candidate, the main findings refer to a *bandwagon effect* according to which voters increase their support for a winner in the polls. Some see the phenomenon as an indication of a healthy democratic process, and they argue that polls provide information to voters about the inferred quality of a party. Others see it as an indication of the failure of the democratic process, in which voters are manipulated and persuaded by sub-conscious, emotional processes. In the latter perspective, voters mindlessly follow the bandwagon in a desire to join the winning crowd, rather than expressing their actual personal preference” (Stolwijk et al., 2017, pp. 554-555).

The bandwagon effect has been extensively studied by psychologists, political scientists, sociologists, and brand scholars. The term “bandwagon effect” – explains Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck – “denotes a phenomenon of public opinion impinging upon itself (sometimes also referred to as “contagion effect”): In their political preferences and positions people join what they perceive to be existing or expected majorities or dominant positions in society. It implies that success breeds further success and alternatives that appear to enjoy a broad popular backing are likely to gain even stronger support. Perceived public opinion thus gains the quality of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The metaphorical label of this phenomenon dates from late 19th-century American politics and alludes to the wagon in a parade that carries the band and attracts a large crowd of followers marching behind it to enjoy the music” (Schmitt-Beck, 2015, p. 1). Within the electoral politics context, the bandwagon effect’s role cannot be underestimated. Sjoerd B. Stolwijk, Andreas R. T. Schuck, and Claes H. de Vreese assert that “Taking an even closer look, a

bandwagon effect seems to embody three distinct but complementary effects. Voters previously intending to vote for a losing party should be more likely to change their intention and vote for a winning party, while at the same time, voters already predisposed to vote for such a winning party should be less likely to change their intention. In addition to vote switchers, a bandwagon might be formed by previously undecided voters whose opinion crystallizes during the campaign. Therefore, the bandwagon effect will be defined here as a voter's increased likelihood to vote for a party after exposure to more positive poll coverage about that party. The alternative to the bandwagon effect is the underdog effect in which voters come to the aid of a losing party, yielding the opposite hypothesis: an increased likelihood to vote for a party after exposure to more negative poll coverage about that party" (Stolwijk et al., 2017, p. 556). The bandwagon effect is particularly relevant in the digital era of voter-consumer culture. Social media platforms have an enormous capacity to amplify the bandwagon effect. Online fads can now go viral and reach millions of people all around the world within a matter of seconds. People, enamored by the actions, behaviors, convictions, and attitudes of others, cannot resist doing the same. "Sometimes, these trends can actually make a big difference. For instance, the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge in the summer of 2014 is now considered the largest social media movement in medical history. Since participants had to tag three of their friends to pour freezing water over their heads, the bandwagon effect guaranteed that this trend rapidly spread. The positive impact was astronomical, raising over \$115 million for ALS in just six weeks and creating global awareness about the disease" ("Why do we support opinions as they become more popular?" n.d.).

The bandwagon effect is also known as *herd mentality* or *herd behavior*. The bandwagon effect – contends Hardik Dewra – “can be observed in various historical events. For instance, during the Salem witch trials in the late 1600s, people began accusing others of witchcraft due to the belief that many others were doing so. Similarly, during the Red Scare of the early 20th century, many people falsely confessed to being communists due to the belief that many others were doing so as well” (Dewra, 2023). The bandwagon effect in strategic brand management refers to the tendency of voters-consumers to follow the actions of other voters-consumers when it comes to buying products/services or voting and supporting a political candidate. This happens because these actions are often seen as

sensible or safe. The goal of using the bandwagon effect in strategic brand management is twofold: first, it can increase sales, market share, and politician's popularity. Second, it can create positive feelings among future voters-customers who are following the action (Schick, 2022).

There are at least four neuro-psycho-socio-cultural reasons behind the occurrence of the bandwagon effect:

1. The human brain is hardwired to use shortcuts, or heuristics. "We rely on mental shortcuts called "heuristics." The bandwagon effect serves as a heuristic by allowing us to make decisions quickly. Fully thinking through a behavior or idea and deciding whether it is worth endorsing or not takes time and energy. Many of us see widespread adoption as a cue to adopt a similar stance. That is to say we skip the long process of individual evaluation by relying on others, measuring validity with widespread popularity. If many people are in favor of something, we decide it's safe to adopt those same beliefs" ("Why do we support opinions as they become more popular?" n.d.).
2. People have a natural tendency to fit in. "Most of us dislike feeling excluded from communities and social events. To avoid being the odd one out, many of us go along with the behaviors or ideas of a group to feel like we belong. After all, conformity ensures some degree of inclusion and social acceptance. Sometimes we take our conformity a step even further by adopting norms or attitudes to gain approval and bolster our position within a group" ("Why do we support opinions as they become more popular?" n.d.).
3. People have a natural tendency to be on the winning side. "More often than not, the beliefs that the majority uphold feel right and are subsequently adopted. Our endorsement may be subconscious; we may not intentionally accept the majority opinion thinking we want to be on the "winning side." We have likely evolved to instinctively support popular beliefs because standing against them can be disadvantageous at best and dangerous at worst" ("Why do we support opinions as they become more popular?" n.d.).
4. Social proof. "People often look to others to guide their behavior, especially when they are uncertain or lack information. This is known as social proof. For example, if people

see a large crowd gathering in a particular area, they may assume that something exciting or important is happening and join the crowd” (Dewra, 2023).

The mere exposure effect, halo effect, horn effect, summary construct, and bandwagon effect are examples of cognitive biases that revolve around the tendency of the human brain to simplify information processing through a filter of personal experience and preferences. The filtering process acts as a coping mechanism that enables the human brain to prioritize and process large amounts of information quickly and effortlessly. While the mechanism is highly effective, its limitations can cause serious errors in thought. No one is exempt from cognitive biases. Presented in this chapter cognitive biases help humans find mental shortcuts to assist in the navigation of daily life, but may often cause highly irrational assessments, interpretations, extrapolations, judgments, and decisions (Gillis, 2023). The principal objective of this subchapter was to shed light on the impact of select psychological processes on voters-consumers’ preferences, choices, and attitudes. This subchapter was an attempt to address one of this dissertation’s research questions, namely: Can the conceptualization of voters as consumers (voting-consumption analogy) facilitate the use of Strategic Brand Management principles in politics? Voters-consumers often infer perceptions of political candidates from something else, which appears to be more specific and tangible: namely, physical appearance, speech pattern, logo, brand name, etc. As a result, many of the things that voters-consumers commonly believe are intrinsic attributes of political candidates are in fact unsubstantiated inferences formed on the basis of general impressions of them and affected by cognitive biases. By understanding these biases, political actors can create brands that leverage these biases to drive results. In the context of political branding, cognitive biases can considerably influence the way voters-consumers process and interpret information about political brands and can potentially impact their voting decisions. Political actors should take advantage of cognitive biases by understanding how they influence voter behavior, so that they can craft political brand narratives and communications accordingly. Understanding and recognizing cognitive biases can help political brands anticipate how voters are likely to respond to branding efforts and by being cognizant of the existence of the various cognitive biases that can have a profound impact upon voter preferences, political actors can better develop political brand campaigns that effectively reach and emotionally capture their intended audiences.

CHAPTER 5.

SELECT KEY SUCCESS FACTORS IN STRATEGIC POLITICAL BRAND MANAGEMENT: THE EVIDENCE FROM EMPIRICAL STUDIES

5.1. The Effect Of Brand Naming Strategy On Voters-Consumers' Brand Perceptions

The objective of this subchapter is to showcase how well-thought-out brand naming strategy contributes to the development of a strong political brand during the 2020 United States presidential election. This subchapter addresses the following hypothesis: Brand naming strategy significantly affects voters-consumers' brand perceptions. This subchapter is predicated on a case study – a detailed description and assessment of a specific person in the real world – Pete Buttigieg – for the purpose of deriving generalizations and other valuable insights from it. By focusing on Pete Buttigieg – one of the most successful presidential contenders in the 2020 United States presidential election – in the natural setting, this case study can help improve understanding of the broader features and branding processes within the context of electoral politics in the U.S. (Raikar, 2024). This subchapter contributes to the overarching objective of this dissertation by partially offering an answer to one of this dissertation's research questions: Does Strategic Branding in politics facilitate a politician's long term career growth?

2020 Democratic Party presidential primaries in the U.S. included some of the most prominent, popular, admired, revered, loved, and seasoned politicians, entrepreneurs, and activists, such as Joe Biden, Michael Bloomberg, Amy Klobuchar, John Kerry, Cory Booker, Julian Castro, Tulsi Gabbard, Kristen Gillbrand, Kamala Harris, Jay Inslee, Beto O'Rourke, Bernie Sanders, Tom Steyer, Elizabeth Warren, Andrew Yang, Bill de Blasio, Pete Buttigieg. Every individual on this list was – relatively - well-known – or at least recognizable - in the collective perception of American voters-consumers. Some – like Joe Biden, Michael Bloomberg, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth Warren – were instantly recognizable to millions of Americans. But one name on this list was neither recognizable nor – ironically – pronounceable. Pete Buttigieg. Who was Pete Buttigieg?

Buttigieg declared his candidacy on April 14, 2019, and surprisingly quickly gained a position as a potential leader among the next generation of Democrats. His political experience was relevant at best, peculiar at worst. The mayor of South Bend, Indiana (population 102, 245) since 2012, Buttigieg was not a poster boy for new Democratic leadership when he decided to run for president. But there is more to Mayor Pete than meets the eye. Buttigieg was born in South Bend, Indiana in 1982 to Joseph Buttigieg, a University of Notre Dame professor, a well-known and respected literary critic, originally from Malta, and Jennifer Montgomery, also an academic, a linguist, and a long-time professor at the University of Notre Dame. He earned a bachelor's degree in history and literature from Harvard University. He continued his academic endeavors at Oxford University – as a Rhodes scholar – where he studied philosophy, politics, and economics. Besides his native English, Buttigieg is proficient in seven additional languages: Italian, Maltese, Spanish, Dari Persian, Arabic, French and Norwegian. His professional career began in 2007 when – following the collective corporate ambition of other mid-aughts – he joined McKinsey & Company as a consultant specializing in economic development, business, logistics, and energy initiatives for government and private sector clients. His impressive résumé also includes volunteering work for the presidential campaigns of John Kerry (as a research director) and Barack Obama. In 2008 he worked as an advisor to Indiana gubernatorial candidate Jill Long Thompson. Buttigieg decided to run for treasurer of Indiana in 2010; he lost the general election to Richard Mourdock, a Republican candidate. Buttigieg enlisted in the U.S. Navy Reserve and became a lieutenant when he started his seven-month tour of duty in Afghanistan in 2014. He was deployed to Kabul where he participated in the Afghanistan Threat Finance Cell (ATFC) operation, which focused on the disruption of the financial systems of terrorist organizations. During his deployment he earned the Joint Service Commendation Medal for his contributions to counterterrorism. When he turned 29, Buttigieg became the South Bend mayor, with a staggering 74% of the vote. He became the youngest mayor of a city with more than 100,000 residents. Buttigieg's mayoral performance was applaudable: he considerably helped transform the city. Mayer Pete – a moniker that quickly became an important part of his political brand – is an Episcopalian. During his presidential bid, Buttigieg made his Christian faith a bedrock of his political identity. “Known for calling out religious

Republicans who vote against measures that undermine the needs of the poor, Buttigieg received praise from some and criticism from others in religious circles” (Pak, 2021). After he returned from his deployment to Afghanistan in 2015, Buttigieg decided to publicly come out as gay. He was 33 years old at that time and ready to be reelected for the second term by his fellow South Bendians. When Buttigieg made the decision to run for president, his sexuality became a blessing and a curse. “In this race” - says Olivia Nuzzi – “candidates like [Joe] Biden and Beto [O’Rourke] have received criticism for their privilege as straight white men. Buttigieg’s homosexuality – which also may confer a fundraising opportunity – has served to insulate him somewhat. [...] Jason Johnson, editor of The Root, said the “mostly white” reporters are “kissing his butt”, and, “looking for a white guy who makes them feel good about themselves” (Nuzzi, 2019).

Mayer Pete was not – by and large - a political wunderkind when he entered into politics, but he knew perfectly well how to develop and manage his political brand. “He has an eye for making his brand seem bigger and larger than it is. ... Everything he is projecting makes it look like a real campaign” (Nuzzi, 2019), one senior Democratic consultant told Olivia Nuzzi when she was prepping up for her comprehensive piece on Buttigieg for the New York Magazine just a few weeks after he announced his bid for presidency. Early in the campaign process, Mayer Pete quickly raised over \$7 million – not really a staggering number in the electoral politics – but serious enough to develop an operation in early primary states. Many opponents ridiculed him, pointing out his young age, inexperience, and sexuality. Stephen Rodrick, writing for the Rolling Stone magazine, points out that other candidates – including Donald Trump – tried to belittle Buttigieg’s political brand. “[Donald] Trump slagged him, saying the country was not going to elect a man who looks like Alfred E. Neuman, immediately cementing Mayor Pete as a credible candidate. Buttigieg zinged back, “I guess it’s a generational thing – I don’t get the reference”” (Rodrick, 2019).

Mayor Pete’s first most serious political branding challenge was his name. *Buttigieg* is a name difficult to be easily pronounced. When Buttigieg entered the presidential race, many American voters-consumers and media pundits immediately asked, ‘*How do you pronounce Buttigieg?*’. Countless research studies “in the domain of brand management suggest that brand names are key indicator of the products that have become

an imperative asset that influences consumer brand perceptions in today's highly competitive environment. Brand names simplify consumer choices by helping them to recognize products more easily . . . brand names contribute to the strength of the product. Brand names that are associated with positive attributes score higher on overall liking. Moreover, sounds (phonetic structure) of brand names may affect consumer attitudes" (Salciuviene et al., 2010, p. 1037). Research confirms that brand names should resonate positively with voters-consumers, especially in an era when political brands compete across different ethnic groups, subculture, and value systems. According to Fang Wu, Qi Sun, Rajdeep Grewal, and Shanjum Li, "brand name types vary along two dimensions, sound and meaning..." (Wu et al., 2019, p. 160). A brand name is a part of the brand identity system; it should be easily pronounceable and spellable. A brand name is composed of letters, numbers, or words. This combination – says Ahmud Nasrudin – "forms a name that identifies and distinguishes . . . [one brand] from those of its competitors" (Nasrudin, 2022). A brand name is a particularly important component of the entire brand identity system because it "represents a consumer's first point of contact and can therefore drive initial impressions, associations, and expectations. Just as with people, making a good first impression is important and can have cumulative, lasting benefits. [...] One goal of brand naming is to create a name that signals desirable attributes, and brand name developers have several tools for doing so" (Pogacar et al., 2021, p. 101). The brand name can surely be considered an important element in the process of establishing brand identity. An easily pronounceable brand name helps voters-consumers identify, recognize, and distinguish a political brand from its competitors. A political brand name also provides invaluable information about the image, ethnicity, and heritage of a political brand to voters-consumers. That gives them a signal about certain attributes, characteristics, and traits. Recently, phonetic symbolism has gained traction in the domain of strategic brand naming. The major tenet of the phonetic symbolism hypothesis is the notion that "there is a correspondence of some kind between the sounds of words and their referents, as opposed to an arbitrary relationship" ("Phonetic Symbolism", n.d.). Pogacar, Angle, Lowrey, Shrum and Kardes assert that "the sounds in a name can affect brand perceptions and judgments. For example, people prefer an ice cream called Frosh to one called Frish because the /a/ sound conveys the desirable attribute of creaminess. The sounds in a name

can also convey brand gender. For instance, front vowels (e.g., the vowel sound in “tea”, “tin”, and “tell”) convey femininity, whereas back vowel sounds (e.g., the sounds in “tool”, “tome”, and “tusk”) convey masculinity. Thus, a product with a front vowel in the name is perceived to be more feminine than the same product with a back vowel” (Pogacar et al., 2021, p. 101).

There is a consensus among linguists and brand naming scholars that the effective brand name should be based on the following criteria:

- Unique: The brand name should be distinctive and easy to remember.
- Provide information about the brand: The brand name should convey some information about the brand (e.g., ethnicity, heritage).
- Easy to pronounce in various languages: The brand name difficult to pronounce will lose the ability to leverage exposure advantage.
- Easy to remember: Difficult brand names are difficult to be remembered and embedded into the cognitive associative brand network.
- What is the meaning attached to the brand name? Some brand names have meanings that have been attached to them either arbitrarily, unreflectively, or serendipitously (Nasrudin, 2022).

One of the functions of strategic brand management is to increase brand awareness and memorability through advertising and other brand communication tactics (e.g., frequent brand name mentions within the ad, frequent placement of ads in various media, linking brand names to celebrity endorses (Lowrey et al., 2003, p. 7)). It has been acknowledged that many disparate factors affect brand-name memorability. According to psycholinguists, “features of the brand names themselves might also contribute to their memorability. That is, simple attributes of a brand name, such as the type of sound with which the name begins or whether the name of the product fits the product’s function, may influence the ease with which the brand is recalled or recognized” (Lowrey et al., 2003, p. 7). A good brand name has the ability to evoke certain – intended – brand associations, increase brand awareness, and enhance brand’s likability. “By contrast” – say Zhang, Li, and Ng – “a brand name that evokes unintended brand associations may cause the brand to perform poorly or even fail” (Zhang et al., 2022, p. 253). According to linguists, there are “four components that are thought to typify all languages: phonology, orthography,

morphology, and semantics. Phonetic devices pertain to vocal sounds and the letters that represent sounds in a given language. An example of a phonetic device is alliteration, as in the brand name Coca-Cola. Orthography is concerned with the spelling of words. Orthographic devices include unusual or incorrect spellings, such as Kool-Aid. Morphology deals with word formation through the combination of prefixes, roots, and suffixes. An example of a morphological device is affixation, which involves the addition of letters or groups of letters (morphemes) to words, as in Jell-O. Finally, semantics deals with underlying meanings of linguistic units (i.e., words, sentences, texts). One semantic device is metaphor, which occurs when a word pertaining to one kind of idea is used in place of another to suggest likeness between them, as in the use of the brand name Arrid to imply dryness. As the above examples of brand names suggest, when constructing brand names, these four classes of linguistic devices are commonly used, either alone or in conjunction with one another. The strategy involves creating names that have certain linguistic qualities that differentiate them from others in a cluttered media environment” (Lowrey et al., 2003, pp. 7-8).

Pete Buttigieg’s brand-name predicament started the moment he announced his bid for presidency. Many media pundits, journalists, and media personalities didn’t know how to pronounce his name. BUTT-i-judge, Butedgedge, Boudeguege, Bodicheck, Buddha-judge, Boo-tuh-judge, BOOT-i-gee, BOOT-i-jed, BOOT-eh-jed, BUUT-i-gig – these were the most common variations. There was an agreement among journalists that Americans would likely struggle with pronouncing his last name. The pronunciation problem lies in the perplexing sequence of G’s and atypical (at least for North Americans) configuration of vowels. In December 2019, The New York Times posted an online quiz in order to assess respondents’ ability to recognize public figures from their photographs. The results showed that less than one third of those who successfully identified Mayor Pete were able to spell his name correctly. “...Buttigieg generated an impressive 167 variations, suggesting that whatever the respondents thought the name was, maybe by reverse-engineering what they thought it sounded like, they were wrong” (Lyall, 2020). Donald Trump was particularly vitriolic about Mayor Pete’s last name: “Who wants to watch BOOT-ed-edge?” he once asked his supporters during a rally. “BOOT-ed-jedge. BOOT-edge-edge! You know that you pronounce it, I heard some guy say, no, no, ’cause it’s an

unpronounceable name. That's why they call him ...Mayor Pete. Mayor Pete. Mayor Pete! ... I've had you up to here [pointing to place in the middle of his chest], Mayor Pete" (Lyll, 2020). Peter Sagal, the host of NPR's comedy game show *Wait Wait Don't Tell Me*, once asked Buttigieg about his name: "Does it worry you that nobody with a funny name like yours could ever get elected president?". Buttigieg's response was equally strategic and voluble: "Around here it's actually an asset. This is a community, you know, a lot of East European settlements here in South Bend" (CBS NEWS, 2019).

Mayor Pete's brand-name strategy aimed at tackling this, rather challenging, issue was two-fold: (a) emphasize and heavily promote his political brand moniker: *Mayor Pete*, and (b) introduce an easy way to educate American voters-consumers about the proper pronunciation of his last name by "printing its go-to phonetic aide-mémoire — BOOT-edge-edge — on T-shirts" (CBS NEWS, 2019) and stickers.

The political brand manifests itself through brand identity, a carefully developed "intended representation, formulated by the brand's creator, and communicated to multiple stakeholders. Brand identity originates from brand managers who develop '*aspired associations*' into a focused visualization of what the brand symbolizes and therefore signifies its envisaged reality. In addition, brand identity is all about ...vision and values, and 'has to be coherent, integrated, adaptable, durable and therefore dynamic and ready to change'. Therefore, brand identity should be consistent yet flexible and routinely monitored to respond to environmental changes" (Armannsdottir et al., 2019, p. 722). The concept of identity – as was already mentioned - can be subdivided into three categories:

- Consistency: identity implies that something or someone remains unchanged within a certain timeframe. The constellation of identity characteristics acts as a foundation of the self. Without consistency, identity cannot be established, nor recognized.
- Continuity: identity can only assume palpable dimension if it is communicated in a uniform manner and over an extended period of time.
- Singularity: identity's essence must be distilled to the clearest unique 'DNA'. Identity's singularity points to a well-recognized proprietor. Singularity is what sets something or someone apart (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009, p. 110).

Following these brand identity strategic principles, Mayor Pete was fastidiously developing his political brand name awareness using *consistency*, *continuity*, and *singularity*. During the January 29th, 2020 interview with Inside Edition's Deborah Norville, Mayor Pete succinctly explained the rationale behind the BOOT-EDGE-EDGE linguistic strategy: "It helps people to figure out how to say it" ("Inside Edition", 2020). Moreover, in order to divert attention away from how difficult it was to pronounce his name, Mayor Pete employed yet another effective tactic: he started talking about his last name with tongue in cheek. To achieve this objective, Buttigieg teamed up with *The Tonight Show* host Jimmy Fallon for the segment *Slow Jam the News* (which, became immensely popular thanks to Barack Obama's performance in 2016). During the show, Jimmy Fallon joked about Pete's last name: "Court is in session and the honorable Booty-Judge is presiding," Fallon said, kicking off the jokes. "All rise, if you haven't already risen." The TV host went on to call Buttigieg other outrageous names, such as "PB-and-Bae," while the politician smiled in the background. At one point, the band broke into "Ms. New Booty" by Bubba Sparxxx, remixing the lyrics as "Butti, Butti, Butti, Butti, rockin' everywhere." Flaunting a cheeky smirk, Buttigieg chimed in, "Rockin' everywhere" (Stewart, 2019). According to Killian Branding, an independent strategic branding and advertising firm with headquarters in Chicago, "'Mayor Pete,' as he calls himself, offers a down-home, Midwestern-friendly solution to the difficult pronunciation of his last name, Buttigieg. Clearly, the humor here is strategically on-brand: a man who speaks eight languages (so far) will be regarded by many American voters as suspiciously intelligent" ("Mayor Pete's new way to brand a campaign", 2019).

On numerous occasions – including most of his political rallies – Mayor Pete would consistently greet his audience by saying: "My name is Pete Buttigieg, and where I come from, they just call me Mayor Pete" (Riotta, 2020). During his address - delivered in South Bend, Indiana on April 14, 2019 – to announce his bid for presidency, Pete Buttigieg said: "It's time to walk away from the politics of the past, and toward something totally different. So that's why I'm here today, joining you to make a little news: My name is Pete Buttigieg. They call me Mayor Pete. I am a proud son of South Bend, Ind. And I am running for president of the United States" ("A Different Story Than 'Make America Great Again'", 2019). In this same address, just a few minutes later, he repeated: "For the people from

around South Bend who are joining us today—thank you for giving me the chance to be “Mayor Pete”” (“A Different Story Than “Make America Great Again”, 2019). On March 1, 2020, Pete Buttigieg addressed his audience in his hometown - following the official announcement that he would end his 2020 Democratic campaign for president – by saying: “And it was in that spirit, with your help, that a year ago we launched our campaign for the American Presidency. We began this unlikely journey with a staff of four in a cramped office right here in South Bend, Indiana, right down Washington Street. No big email list. No personal fortune. Hardly anybody knew my name and even fewer could pronounce it, but South Bend showed everybody what to do. First name Mayor, last name Pete, so nobody got confused” (“Pete Buttigieg Speech Transcript on Ending Presidential Run”, 2020).

All these examples clearly and unambiguously demonstrate a deliberate strategy aimed at developing a political brand moniker – *Mayor Pete* – infused with well-defined and intended associations: mayor – politician – experienced – Pete (instead of Peter) – folksy – cozy – unpretentious – down-to-earth – approachable – boy-next-door. This intended constellation of associations was well-analyzed and necessary to build a political brand that would resonate positively with American voters-consumers. The unique amalgamation of the political role – mayor – and unpretentious name – Pete – would equally convey authority, experience, political acumen, insider status, approachability, down-to-earth attitude, and hominess. Buttigieg was promoting this political brand moniker in a consistent way whenever he introduced himself. This strategy was also predicated on the second and third principles of brand identity development, namely continuity and singularity. Buttigieg was continuously reminding American voters-consumers about his political brand moniker, juxtaposing it with his legal last name. Singularity means that identity’s essence must be distilled to the clearest unique ‘DNA’. Identity’s singularity points to a well-recognized proprietor. Singularity is what sets something or someone apart. Given the highly unique and well-crafted political brand moniker, Buttigieg was able – with laser-focus – to communicate all the pre-intended associations encapsulated in the *Mayor Pete* political brand moniker. His well-crafted political brand moniker surely met the brand name criteria for effectiveness:

- Unique: *Mayor Pete* political brand name was distinctive and easy to remember.

- Provide information about the brand: *Mayor Pete* provided the whole gamut of information about the political contender (political acumen, experience, approachability, one-of-us image).
- Easy to pronounce in various languages: *Mayor Pete* was very easy to pronounce by individuals from different ethnic groups.
- Easy to remember: Mayor Pete was characterized by remarkably high levels of memorability. It was also designed in such a way as to be quickly embedded into the existing collective associative political network.
- What is the meaning attached to the brand name? The scope of meanings attached to *Mayor Pete* included: mayor – politician – experienced – Pete (instead of Peter) – folksy – cozy – unpretentious – down-to-earth – approachable – boy-next-door.

The second strategy – revolving around his legal last name – was aimed at educating American voters-consumers about how his last name should be properly pronounced. This was important since *Mayor Pete* political brand moniker couldn't be used on the official ballot. By using his last name's go-to phonetic aide-mémoire – BOOT-EDGE-EDGE – he was able to easily, effortlessly, and – even – humorously teach American voters-consumers how to pronounce his last name.

By developing an easy to remember, easy to pronounce, and catchy brand moniker – *Mayor Pete* - Pete Buttigieg has considerably increased his chances of being noticed and remembered by voters-consumers. This brand strategy – developing a brand name that would be memorable, easy to pronounce, and associated with a constellation of culturally relevant meanings, is a potent and necessary strategic brand management tool employed by numerous brand-savvy politicians. For example, another presidential contender – Nikki Haley – representing the Republican Party, has also followed this strategy and changed her name to Nikki. Haley's full name is Nimrata Randhawa Haley. Eesha Pundit, writing for the SALON, explained sociocultural reasons for Haley's decision to change her name. These sociocultural reasons coincide with strategic branding reasons, especially within the electoral politics context. According to Pundit, "Niki Haley is not white, but her own political party touts xenophobic, anti-immigrant and racist policies and practices. Some of her colleagues are directly founded by white supremacists. Given the racism inside her party, and the hostility toward non-white immigrants in so many places in the U.S., it's no

wonder that Nimrata Randhawa would find it easier to maneuver the political terrain as Nikki Haley, that the Sikhism she was born into would be much more difficult to navigate than a conversion to Christianity. ...Haley is not the first Indian American Republican politician to make such accommodations to her identity. Bobby Jindal, the Republican governor of Louisiana, converted from Hinduism to Christianity and rarely uses his full name, Piyush Jindal. These politicians serve to remind us that the forces for assimilation and eradication of our immigrant heritage are strong here in the United States, but whitewashing isn't quite what Nikki and Bobby might hope. Aside from skin color, and other physical markers of race, which some of us don't have the ability to forgo, race in America is anchored to white supremacy. Assimilating into whiteness, by changing our names, our religion and in some cases even our physical appearance (for those who can), may allow some of us to pass for another race, but it does nothing to challenge the very systems of structural inequity that ensure that while we may "pass" we are never far from the consequences of being brought right back into the racial hierarchy. And even if one of us is able to do it successfully, motivated by internalized racism, or as a strategic means to survive, or simply to try to escape racial inequality in our society, it is an effort focused on an individual attempt to navigate a terrible system, and it does nothing for those who cannot pass, or would never wish to. It leaves everyone else to fend for themselves and elides the responsibility of challenging racism simply by trying to skirt it" (Pandit, 2015).

Brand name is a critical element of brand strategy. As Chiranjeev Kohli and Douglas W. LaBahn explain: "Brands with stronger images are able to influence customers' choices and command a premium. *The brand name is an essential part of the brand image, the anchor for its positioning* [emphasis added]. While the image associated with a brand name can be built with advertising and over time, brand managers realize that a carefully created and chosen name can bring inherent strength to the brand. Creating an effective brand name, however, is a challenging task. Brand names help identify the product, but more importantly take on their own meaning and presence because they represent a rich configuration of symbols and meanings that are embodied by products. Thus, a new brand name should not only appeal to the customers, but it should also have other desirable properties depending on the nature of the market. These may include connotations associated with the brand name, relevance to the product, memorability, and

the ability of the brand name to offer a distinctive image over competing products. Trademark requirements further complicate this process” (Kohli & LaBahn, 1997, pp. 67-68).

In their extensive research on the memorability of brand names, Chiranjeev Kohli and Douglas W. LaBahn demonstrated that memory is much stronger for brand names that conjure up certain culturally well-understood – and/or easy to grasp - images. (Kohli & LaBahn, 1997, pp. 70-71). Following their findings, it is easy to comprehend the brand naming strategy employed by Mayor Pete, Nikki Haley, Bobby Jindal, and many others who have decided to leverage this brand-naming strategy in order to appeal to voters-consumers. It is easier for voters-consumers to link the brand name Mayer Pete with the image of a young, approachable, unpretentious, and folksy mayor of a small town than to imagine a person behind the impossible-to-pronounce - and devoid of any American socio-cultural meaning – name Buttigieg. It is easier for voters-consumers to imagine - add socio-cultural meaning to – and generate positive feelings towards a woman from South Carolina named Nikki, than a woman named Nimrata Randhawa. It is easier for voters-consumers to visualize – and construct positive associations with - a politician from Louisiana named Bobby than a man called Piyush. Numerous research studies provide irrefutable evidence that indicates that memory for a brand name is directly related to the nature and size of the culturally relevant mental associations tied to the brand (Kohli & LaBahn, 1997, pp. 70-71).

Brand naming strategy is a critical part of strategic brand management. Presented in this subchapter evidence provides insights on the semiotic strategies that significantly contribute to the meaning, value, and strategic objectives associated with brand naming. These insights shed light on the importance of a well-formulated brand name for the brand owner’s success and the risk involved in making the bad choices. It is no small thing to formulate brand naming strategy because a great deal of the brand’s equity is tied to voters-consumers’ recognition, awareness, and retention of the brand name and its cultural associations. As numerous semioticians assert, brand names assign proprietary semiotic code to brands that creates value by differentiating the brand from rivals and contributes to the elicitation of loyalty. So important are brand names for political actors’ success and long-term performance that they are legally protected by trademark laws that bar

competitors from copying, tarnishing, or in any way infringing upon the brand owner's right of ownership (Oswald, 2020). Neuroscience and semiotics enter into the brand naming process and lead political actors to idiosyncratic, impactful, memorable, and easily pronounceable political brand names. First of all, the political brand name must resonate with the distinct cultural and lifestyle perspectives of the target audience while avoiding specific ethnic or regional associations that would either narrow the brand's attractiveness or potentially offend one group of another (Oswald, 2020). Political brand naming involves more than just coming up with an ethnic-neutral name. It involves uncovering the emotions, values, experiences, and connotations a political actor wants to evoke in the target audience. A well-selected political brand name has the capacity to embed itself into popular culture, driving brand equity and value. Crafting a political brand name that aligns with the audience's cultural values, concerns, identities, and reference groups ensures an emotional connection. Such a political brand name drives voter loyalty and elevates the overall voter experience. Strong brand names point to rich and multidimensional constellations of meaningful associations. As Alex Abad-Santos suggests describing Donald Trump's brand name: "Long before there was a presidency, long before there was even a campaign, *there was the brand* [emphasis added]. Stamped on building and golf courses and steaks and ties, *the Trump name* [emphasis added] was bigger in many ways than the Trump reality. Donald Trump positioned himself as a boos and kingmaker on *The Apprentice* and sold his lifestyle to consumers as something for the very rich and famous [...] before the presidency, the name Trump stood in for wealth. It stood in for business, and for being business savvy. There's this old interview that Tupac gave in like 1996, and he's like, you know, "we need to take money from the wealthy, from the Trumps of the world." Trump used that identifier, that brand, and all the thoughts and feelings that come to mind as a means of credence when he ran for office. He said, "I'm a great businessman, I'm so successful. We need to do better business when it comes to how we run our government." And people who would talk about Trump in those early days would say, "Oh, Trump, he's a businessman. He's successful, he'll run the country like a business." [...]. It's important to point out that there are actually two Trump brands that we're talking about. One is the Trump product brand, which is providing global luxury experiences like hotels and golf courses and residences. Then there's Trump as a political brand. The two brands are

interesting because they don't necessarily mesh well in the sense that they're not really targeting the same people. They have very different kinds of messages. If there's anything that might tie them together, it's this notion of Trump related to power and status and getting what's best. You know, that's what he was trying to cultivate from the political brand" (Abad-Santos, 2021).

Brand naming strategy is based on the semiotic idea that everything people see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and experience can be interpreted as a sign. Signs can range from a word or image to a gesture, sound, color, style, etc. As the case study dissected in this subchapter showcases, political brands should leverage semiotics in a variety of ways to communicate their identity, cultural values, vision, and promises to voters-consumers (Radwan, 2023). Neuroscientifically speaking, the brand name is the nucleus of the entire cluster of the brand's pattern of connectivity in the voter-consumer's brain. The brand's name acts as a hyperlink connecting other cognitive, conative, and affective brand associations that voter-consumer has come to internalize. And it is precisely this associative pattern that provides the brand with its symbolic meaning. The human brain is finely tuned to recognize patterns, make associations, and extrapolate meaning from language. Factors such as phonetic structure, syllable count, and semantic relevance serve a profound role in shaping the memorability of a brand name. Looking from the cognitive psychology perspective, the brand name characterized by an idiosyncratic phonetic structure has a high chance to be memorable. Brand names that are easy to pronounce and have a rhythmic flow tend to get embedded into memory easier and faster, due to the fact that they are closer to other words which people already use on a daily basis. A perfect example of this cognitive psychology principle is Apple. A word which is not associated with technology but connotes a popular and frequently eaten fruit. Virtually every person can understand this word, relate to it, and link it to a visual image, cultural meaning, and other associations relevant within the cultural milieu. The semantic relevance of a brand name can also have a profound impact upon memorability. Brand names that conjure up strong imagery and activate strong emotions are more likely to be quickly embedded in long-term memory.

Take, for instance, the name AMAZON, which evokes imagery related to vastness, immensity, abundance, rendering it highly memorable and replete with meaningful connotations, while also embracing and communicating the brand's positioning of having

the largest selection of products online. It is important to understand why certain brand names are memorable and others are pushed into oblivion. Understanding the neurological mechanisms underlying memory formation is crucial for formulating memorable brand names. The intricate process of encoding, storing, and retrieving information engages several regions of the human brain, including hippocampus, amygdala, and prefrontal cortex. When a person comes into contact with a brand name, the brain activates a process called encoding. This process transforms sensory information into neural signals. Numerous studies conducted by neuroscientists indicate that memorable brand names activate heightened activity in brain regions associated with semantic processing and emotional arousal. This has profound implications for brand naming strategy as it clearly indicates that brand names that resonate with voters-consumers on an emotional level are more likely to be stored in the long-term memory. It also proves that the amygdala, a critical brain region responsible for processing emotions, serves as a memory enhancer and consolidator. Brand names that elicit positive emotions – and/or curiosity – are shown to switch on amygdala. This emotional activation in turn sets in motion the process of encoding, rendering the brand name more memorable and embedded into the long-term memory. Moreover, the prefrontal cortex, which manages executive functions such as decision-making and attentional control, also plays a role in brand name memorability.

Brand names that activate attention and curiosity are more likely to activate the prefrontal cortex. This activation leads to memory strengthening, better encoding, and effortless recall. In addition to linguistic and neurological factors, other factors also contribute to brand name memorability. Perhaps the most important non-linguistic and non-neurological factors include repetition and familiarity. The meticulously analyzed in subchapter 4.1 mere exposure effect, emphasizes the importance of brand name presence in memory formation. The human brain is drawn to familiar stimuli. Being exposed to the same brand name (identity/appearance, logo, slogan, colors, jingle, authenticity, core message) profoundly enhances the neural connections associated with a brand, making it easier for voters to recall it when making voting decisions. This familiarity also strengthens a sense of trust towards the brand (Lancaster, 2023). For example, a brand name - like Nikki, Bobby, or Pete – logo, slogan, colors can all be used to communicate specific meanings and associations. Pete Buttigieg's brand naming strategy proved to be effective

and successful, contributing to the development of his strong political brand – and brand equity – and providing him with an army of loyal supporters. His brand name - Mayor Pete – infused with well-defined and intended associations: mayor – politician – experienced – Pete (instead of Peter) – folksy – cozy – unpretentious – down-to-earth – approachable – boy-next-door – was carefully developed following the principles of strategic brand management, linguistics, and cognitive neuroscience. This intended constellation of associations was well-analyzed and necessary to build a political brand that would resonate positively with American voters-consumers.

Although Pete Buttigieg was not elected, his use of strategic brand management catapulted him to political stardom and initiated a burgeoning political career. Buttigieg led the 2020 Iowa Democratic caucuses results with 26.2 percent to Bernie Sanders' 26.1 percent, winning 14 delegates to Sanders's 12. Buttigieg finished second behind Sanders in the New Hampshire primary. After placing a fourth in the South Carolina primary with 8.2 percent of the vote, behind Joe Biden (48.7 percent), Bernie Sanders (19.8 percent), and Tom Steyer (11.3 percent), Buttigieg dropped out of the race on March 1, 2020, and endorsed Biden. On February 3, 2021, Vice President Kamala Harris swore in Buttigieg as Transportation Secretary. Buttigieg's political future looks bright and exciting. Molly Jong-Fast, a New York author, journalist, and political commentator once famously remarked that “Even if Pete is not the [presidential] candidate, he is the future of the Democratic Party” (Allen & Vitali, 2019). And according to the research conducted by CNN, “Buttigieg is widely expected to run to succeed President Joe Biden – whether an open race emerges in 2024 or 2028 – and he's become the most requested surrogate on the campaign trail for Democratic candidates in the midterms ...” (LeBlanc, 2022).

The objective of this subchapter was to showcase how well-thought-out brand naming strategy contributes to the development of a strong political brand during the 2020 presidential election in the U.S. This subchapter was predicated on a case study of Pete Buttigieg's brand development during the 2020 United States presidential election.

5.2. The Influence Of Logos On The Voters-Consumers' Perceptions Of Political Brands

Brand equity – as was already explained numerous times in this dissertation – is the value of a brand determined by the voter-consumer's perception of its likability, authenticity, expertise, and affiliatability. Brand equity is what determines which political brands can secure a long-term success and which ones cannot despite having the same quality to offer. In other words, brand equity is a measure of how much voters-consumers value the political brand's name – and everything it is associated with. That way, strong brand equity enables a political brand to become a cultural symbol. If the brand becomes a cultural symbol – if it has a specific meaning within the culture – then the brand will be defined by that symbol and its meaning and associations shared within the cultural milieu. Barak Obama, Donald Trump, Bill Clinton, Martin Luther King Jr., Kamala Harris are examples of political brands that have become cultural symbols deeply embedded in the minds of people (not only in the U.S.). Brands are considered cultural symbols if they become embedded to some extent into the mainstream culture of the marketplace. That implies that those political actors who are attuned to the dominant culture of the marketplace, and the values, beliefs, stories, and myths that the culture creates and cultivates, will be at a significant advantage (Honick, 2023).

How does brand equity is being developed? There are many components of branding described in this dissertation – brand name, brand logo, brand identity/appearance, brand positioning – that directly contribute to and build brand equity. The impact of brand naming strategy has been already described and explained in the previous subchapter. This subchapter focuses on the impact of logos on the voters-consumers' perceptions of political brands. A logo is an important part of the bigger scheme of developing strong brand equity. It is the face of the brand identity, it encapsulates everything the brand stands for, the type of attitude the brand possesses, and the type of future the brand envisions and promotes. The brand logo communicates who the brand is and what its values are. A logo can make or break the first impression of the brand. When a potential voter-consumer looks at the brand logo, the first thought that comes to his/her mind – whether consciously or unconsciously – is “Can I trust this brand?”. The brand logo design serves an important role in answering that question for the

voters-consumers. In the era of dispersion and digital connection with voters-consumers, the brand must appear authentic, and the brand logo acts as the first visual brand touchpoint. Numerous research studies very clearly indicate that the more information the brand logo conveys and communicates about the brand, the more voters-consumers will be willing to trust the brand (Fullstop, n.d.). This subchapter is an attempt to address one of this research project’s hypotheses, namely that it is necessary for the U.S. presidential candidate to develop brand identity, brand authenticity, brand logo, and brand positioning in order to attract voters’ support. This subchapter is based on the case study of Pete Buttigieg’s political brand development and the empirical research - 547 respondents who voted in 2020 United States presidential election participated in this study - conducted for the purpose of addressing the aforementioned hypothesis.

When people think about brands, the first thing that comes to their minds is brand logos. Logos are “visual and textual marks used to identify brands and their products...” (Luffarelli et al., 2019, p. 863). Which brand logos are more psychologically persuasive and memorable? Is Apple’s logo of an apple with a bite taken out of it more effective than Hillary Clinton’s logo, which debuted in April 2016, distinguished by its pointing arrow? “The effective design of brand logos” - Say Ryan Rahinel and Noelle M. Nelson – “is a careful blend of art and science. Although logos should obviously hold aesthetic appeal, companies also spend a great deal of time and money crafting logo designs that “say something” important about the brand. These efforts are no misguided because research shows that consumers generate inferences from logo designs that are subsequently applied to the company” (Rahinel & Nelson, 2016, p. 478). The logo is an important part of the brand identity system. It is a visual representation of the brand, and, as such, logos are important for setting the right – positive – impression.

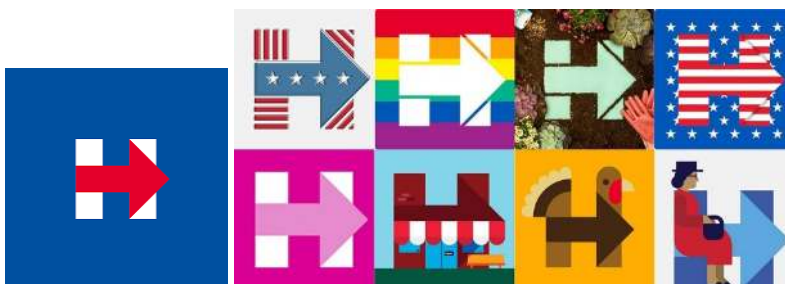


Figure 6. Hillary Clinton’s Logo variants
Source: Howarth, 2017.

Numerous research studies conducted by anthropologists, psychologists, and brand scholars provide explanations of how symbolic representation can fundamentally simplify complex web of ideas, culturally relevant associations and also provide persuasive value. Studying countless logos of presidential candidates, Geoffrey Bible, Molly Crain, Cecilia Daizovi, Hafsah al Habsi, and Baizhinan Zhao contend that “Logos are intended to represent and prompt recognition of brands across different languages and cultures” (Bible et al., 2016, p. 28). With increased competition among presidential candidates, it is imperative for them to apply strategic brand management principles to effectively differentiate themselves from one another. Logo is a well-researched concept in branding and marketing literatures. Many scholars – from strategic brand management to graphic design sciences – assert that “the complexity of the brand logo design impacts brand recognition and [voter-consumer] attitude” (Sadeghvaziri et al., 2022, p. 305). Well-designed logos can considerably “improve brand attitude and facilitate brand recognition. Extant work shows that the fonts, colors, designs, and forms of stimuli such as logos can affect brand equity by eliciting specific brand impressions. For example, logo dynamics, incompleteness, and asymmetry can influence consumer behavior by evoking impressions of modernity, innovativeness, and excitement, respectively” (Luffarelli et al., 2019, p. 863).

As was already mentioned, the latest advances in cognitive neuroscience and neuropsychology clearly demonstrate that the human brain ascertains “everyday images at a hedonic level, and further, that the effect these evaluations have on visuocortical processing is extremely rapid – emerging within the first 200 msec of observing a stimulus” (Handy et al., 2008, p. 127). Neuroscientists also contend that brands convey meaning to voters-consumers. This meaning can – and should - be conveyed through brand logos. Hossein Dini, Aline Simonetti, Enrique Bigne, and Luis Emilio Bruni contend that “Brand logos are symbolic visual elements, consisting of image and/or text cues that aim to represent a brand in order to differentiate it from its competitors” (Dini et al., 2022, p. 1). Alina Wheeler – a highly revered brand identity system scholar and consultant – has recently introduced seven brand logo principles that capture the profound relationship between logos and meaning:

- “Logos are vessels for meaning. The best logos stand for something and have meaning that is nurtured over time. Milton Glaser said it best, “The logo is the gateway to the

brand.” When you see a logo, it should swiftly unlock a series of associations that are built over time. [...] Logos and visual symbols are the fastest communication on earth. Like the flag of a nation, a logo should communicate who you are and what you stand for.

- Key decision makers should agree on what the brand stands for prior to seeing any design solutions. What the brand stands for and “we know who we are” is the foundation of building a brand. It is hard work whether the brand builder is a start-up or revitalizing an existing brand — and whether the work is evolutionary or revolutionary. [...] Focus first on “who we are”...
- Meaning is rarely immediate. Meaning is assigned and evolves over time. When the Nike logo was designed in 1971 by Carolyn Davidson, it was an abstraction of the wing of the Greek goddess of victory. Its current top-of-mind association is “Just do it.” The symbol stands for something that is deep and profound to its customers. Frequent and consistent exposure integrated the symbol and its meaning into popular culture. The three-pointed star of Mercedes Benz was designed in 1886 to symbolize Daimler’s ambition of universal motorization “on land, on water and in the air.” More than a century later, it stands for luxury and performance that is demonstrated through their product design and meticulous engineering.
- Meaning is the best catalyst for the design process. When a designer lives inside of the big idea, they have an opportunity to use their talent to fuse visual form with brand intelligence. Coupled with insights about the target audience, competitive and best-practice audits, the designer can achieve remarkable results that will be sustainable. ...
- Every opportunity and touchpoint to reinforce and demonstrate the link between the logo and what the brand stands for should be seized. During the process, each design presentation should begin with the big idea and then demonstrate how the logo, look and feel, core typefaces, color palette, and other brand elements express the big idea. Make meaning the campfire for decision makers. A logo should always be shown in context of a real application so that it appears real. When the logo is launched, the organization needs to communicate what the brand stands for. The standards need to begin with that, and not just clarify usage guidelines.

- Logos become recognizable when they are used consistently and frequently across touchpoints. The logo should be viewed as a brand asset that symbolizes what the brand stands for. Even in the tiniest organizations, the logo is seen thousands and thousands of times. It is important to make it easy to adhere to standards—the logo is a workhorse. Designing a logo and then not having standards is a huge waste. The logo and the look and feel are brand assets that need to be managed and protected. The best consumer brands benefit from frequency and consistency. Logos like Target, Starbucks, and Nike no longer need a logotype. Why? Because the brain sees shapes first, and then reads text.
- No one does it alone. Businesses do not succeed because they have a great logo. They succeed because they stand for something and create something that is relevant and needed. They deliver on their promise and know what their promise is. They succeed because they are relentless in their quest to be the brand of choice. It is not your logo; it is their logo. It is not your brand; it is your client’s brand. Building trust and listening carefully to the client and to the marketplace is what the best designers do, in addition to being the best designers they can be” (Wheeler, 2013, pp. 65-67).

Our contemporary consumer culture is characterized by an infinite hodgepodge of visual stimuli – “symbolic images such as logos, images designed to engender rapid and automatic hedonic response despite the passive viewing conditions under which they are typically observed. The premise of advertisers that logos can trigger such responses is by no means unfounded. Cognitive theory stipulates that valuation judgments are integral to normal human behavior—so much so that they are generated without conscious intent” (Handy et al., 2008, p. 124). An avalanche of research studies conducted by psychologists indicate that design properties of logos have a profound influence on perceptual processing. It has been recognized that “colors, forms, and patterns can all influence consumer responses to visual brand elements. In the logo design literature, it is well documented that logos – visual designs that uniquely identify brands – can affect consumer’s brand perceptions. For instance, logo dynamism, incompleteness, and circularity can make brands appear more modern, innovative, and customer-sensitive, respectively. Logos can thus improve brand image, facilitate brand identification, and lead to more favorable brand attitudes” (Luffarelli et al., 2019, p. 90). Another stream of psychology of learning

literature demonstrates that visual “stimuli that are easier to process are perceived to be more trustworthy and credible, and that trustworthiness and credibility are key dimensions of perceived authenticity...” (Luffarelli et al., 2019, p. 862). Numerous researchers have showcased the primacy of this perceptual processing phenomenon. For example, Jonathan Luffarelli, Mudra Mukesh, and Ammara Mahmood, have demonstrated that more (vs. less) descriptive logos are easier to process and – also – significantly contribute to the generation of stronger impressions of authenticity. The researchers have also demonstrated that “more descriptive logos can positively affect brand [authenticity] evaluations and purchase intentions” (Luffarelli et al., 2019, pp. 862-863). This last point is of paramount importance to the analysis of Mayor Pete’s logo. Buttigieg’s logo is a highly unique political brand logo. In the ocean of political-logo-design-sameness, Mayor Pete’s logo stands out by violating all the prevailing principles of logo design in the political marketplace.

The fieldwork in study on the effectiveness of brand logo examines voters-consumers’ perceptions of Pete Buttigieg’s logo. 547 respondents who voted in 2020 United States presidential election participated in this study. For the purpose of this research study, the author of this dissertation selected - using the mall intercept method (MIM) - a sample of 547 American citizens who voted in the 2020 presidential election and administered a standardized questionnaire to them. The study is an example of an exit poll survey conducted as voters left their polling places (inside shopping malls) on Election Day, Tuesday, November 3, 2020. Following Rich Rice and Linda Hancock, a mall intercept can be described as “a method of data collection frequently used by marketers in which an interviewer at a shopping mall intercepts a sample of those passing by to ask if they would be willing to participate in a brief research study. Passersby who agree are either interviewed on the spot or taken to an interviewing facility that has been set up elsewhere in the mall. It is important to note, however, that the mall intercept is not just a survey as this term is commonly understood. In fact, it is a brief dialogue between the interviewer and the participant. Thus, the intercept process allows for both quantitative data collection and the ability to qualitatively hear what respondents have to say [...]. While the intercept does collect some yes/no or fill-in-the-blank responses, if properly designed and conducted it can also capture what — in their own language — respondents think or feel about [the phenomenon being studied]. Clearly, a mall intercept is a kind of convenience

sampling, i.e., potential respondents are not necessarily selected at random and may therefore not be representative of the target population. Nevertheless, mall intercepts provide a relatively quick and economical way to do sampling, especially of hard-to-reach segments of a population, and their results can be triangulated with other data. Adapted for use in social norms projects, they are commonly conducted in high traffic areas, such as a student union, the lobby of a building, or a school cafeteria. Frequently, a small incentive is offered to bolster participation. To minimize the inconvenience and the personal "cost" to respondents, the intercept should be kept as brief as possible" (Rice, & Hancock, 2005, p. 4). According to Alan John Bush, "The mall intercept technique – interviewing shoppers in shopping malls – started in the early 1960s as a result of the development of the enclosed shopping center. These planned centers provide access to large numbers of shoppers from a wide geographic area in a controlled weather environment. Mall intercept interviewing is a personal or face-to-face interviewing method. Thus, it provides survey researchers with many of the major advantages associated with personal interviewing: the respondent can be shown product concepts and other stimuli, various techniques for improving speed or quality of data collection can be employed, personal contact between interviewer and respondent may enhance communication, etc. The mall intercept also offers survey researchers additional benefits--cost and control. For instance, the mall intercept is dramatically less expensive than door-to-door interviewing. The substantial cost reductions come from the elimination of interviewer travel time and mileage. Control has two aspects in regard to mall interviewing, one is primarily concerned with cost, the other with data quality [...]. The mall intercept also has many of the same disadvantages of personal interviewing. For example, mall intercept interviewing suffers from problems of obtaining personal information from respondents, the social desirability effect, and interviewer bias.

Mall intercept interviewing also has its own special problems that may impact negatively on data quality. First, shoppers are frequently in a hurry and even if they do consent to an interview, they may respond in a careless manner. Second, though an attempt is made to maintain a controlled interviewing environment, the presence of children, friends, and other shoppers may overcome these controls" (Bush, 1983, pp. 2-3). Reaching voters at that particular moment - on Election Day, Tuesday, November 3, 2020 - helps ensure that the people surveyed have actually voted. Each interview was conducted on an

individual basis. At the onset, each informant was asked to identify him/herself as either Democrat, Republican, or Independent. In order to eliminate the prejudice against, and biases towards Democratic candidate (Pete Buttigieg represents the Democratic Party) only Democrats and Independents were selected to participate in this study. Each informant answered four questions asking about their perceptions related to Pete Buttigieg's logo.



Figure 7. Pete Buttigieg's logo variants

Source: shortyawards, n.d.

Question 1: How visually appealing is this logo?

Question 2: Is this logo memorable?

Question 3: Is this logo trustworthy?

Question 4: To what extent would you agree with the following statement: This logo helps Pete Buttigieg stand out from his competitors.

Table 1. Informant responses to Question 1: How visually appealing is this logo?

LEVEL	VERY APPEALING	SOMEWHAT APPEALING	NOT SO APPEALING	NOT AT ALL APPEALING
VOTERS (n=547)	43%	37%	12%	8%

Source: compilation based on own research

Table 2. Informant responses to Question 2: Is this logo memorable?

LEVEL	VERY MEMORABLE	SOMEWHAT MEMORABLE	NOT SO MEMORABLE	NOT AT ALL MEMORABLE
VOTERS (n=547)	55%	33%	9%	3%

Source: compilation based on own research

Table 3. Informant responses to Question 3: Is this logo trustworthy?

LEVEL	VERY TRUSTWORTHY	SOMEWHAT TRUSTWORTHY	NOT SO TRUSTWORTHY	NOT AT ALL TRUSTWORTHY
VOTERS (n=547)	35%	21%	6%	2%

Source: compilation based on own research

Table 4. Informant responses to Question 4: To what extent would you agree with the following statement: This logo helps Pete Buttigieg stand out from his competitors.

LEVEL	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
VOTERS (n=547)	56%	36%	8%	0%

Source: compilation based on own research

The results of this study highlight the uniqueness, memorability, and potency of Pete Buttigieg’s logo. Overall, more than 70% of informants positively ascertained the logo.

According to HYPERAKT – a strategic brand agency responsible for Buttigieg’s logo development – “For the last century, presidential campaigns have relied almost exclusively on red, white, and blue. This election presented a different opportunity. Several candidates, primarily the women in the race, leveraged their personal identity to drive their visual brand. Pete’s fresh vision for the future of America called on us to reimagine what was possible in presidential campaign branding. Pete Buttigieg is a new kind of presidential candidate. He is a millennial, and he is mayor of a blue-collar city in the heartland. He is unapologetically substantive, yet refreshingly salt-of-the-earth. He is a millennial,

Episcopalian, Maltese American, gay, left-handed, veteran running for the highest office. He is progressive, yet pragmatic. He is uniquely positioned to bridge the divides tearing this country apart. With a trail-blazing candidate ready to rise from virtually unknown to nationally recognized, Pete's brand worked as a narrative storytelling vehicle. We intentionally crafted every aspect of the brand to reveal something about Pete. From his accessible intellectualism to his roots and life in a small Midwestern rust belt city, to his military background and love of sports, Pete's story was quintessentially American. The Jefferson Blvd Bridge is a concrete arch bridge built in 1906 over St. Joseph River in the heart of South Bend, Indiana. In 2015, in commemoration of the city's 150th Anniversary, Mayor Pete led an effort to reimagine the bridge as a beacon of South Bend's renaissance. He commissioned the South Bend River Lights, an interactive, public light sculpture that spectacularly lights up a small waterfall that stretches across the river. The bridge is a symbol of the innovative thinking Mayor Pete brings to leadership and the inspiration for our campaign's logo. South Bend's Jefferson Blvd. Bridge is a local landmark that connects the city's past and present. It is over 120 years old, but the interactive light sculpture that illuminates it at night is a symbol of the city's reinvention. As a mayor and presidential candidate, Pete has been adept at bridging the divides between blue collar and white collar, between heartland conservatives and coastal progressives, between millennials and baby boomers, between the past and the future. In a time of great division, we wanted to highlight his strength as a unifier. The metaphor of the bridge, grounded in the arc of the Jefferson Blvd Bridge is the heart of our brand story. Our color palette includes 9 colors rooted in Pete's perspective of a heartland city. The colors are intentionally evocative of the America Pete has lived in most of his life, with color names that pay tribute to South Bend's history, local lore or landscape. The brand [logo], and the way it was made accessible to the public, played an important role in cementing Pete's story at a time when he was attracting more and more attention on the campaign trail. But Pete isn't just a one-name guy. Early on in his bid, people had trouble pronouncing his last name. We turned his three-syllable Maltese surname into an asset and a rallying cry, using the phonetic spelling of his last name prominently—and almost completely foregoing the harder to read version of his last name in the brand. We wanted supporters of the campaign to be empowered to use and have as much fun with the brand as possible! We created a toolkit to give the public everything

they need to show support for Pete. All of the campaign logos, colors, and supporter signs were downloadable in multiple formats. Supporters could customize their downloads, choosing from multiple marks and color combinations” (Hyperakt, n.d).

Mayor Pete’s logo – and its various permutations – was designed according to the ironclad principles of psychology of learning, cognitive neuroscience, and strategic brand management. Due to its simplicity, descriptive characteristics, highly unique color palette, and innovative use of the symbolic landmark in South Bend, Indiana, Buttigieg’s logo significantly contributes to the generation of stronger impressions of political brand authenticity and trustworthiness. It is also easy to understand and process cognitively. And, ultimately, this logo is highly memorable. Mayor Pete’s logo also benefited from the *design stability effect*. According to Ryan Rahinel and Noelle M. Nelson, “Stability in the physical world is a function of both the width of an object’s base and position of its center of mass. Thus, holding other factors constant, design elements oriented to sit atop an imaginary horizontal axis upon a vertex (vs. edge), having unequal (vs. equal) area distributed across left and right sides, or having more area allocated to the top (vs. bottom) are typically perceived to be more unstable. Less formally, instability captures the extent to which a visual element appears likely to ‘tip over’ by imagined gravitational pull or perturbing external forces. Past research in this area has documented individuals’ responses to geometric shapes and letters oriented upon a vertex (vs. edge). For example, several studies have found that downward-pointing (vs. upward-pointing) V’s elicit negative feelings. Similarly, Pavlova found that people ascribed feelings of fear and suffering to unstable shapes, all of which were oriented on their vertices” (Rahinel & Nelson, 2016, p. 480). Buttigieg’s logo can be deemed perfectly stable, and, thus, contributing to positive perceptual processing on the part of voters-consumers.

Buttigieg’s logo has been applauded by numerous preeminent scholars and industry experts for its psychological persuasiveness and ability to capture the essence of Mayor Pete’s political brand. According to Armin Vit – BRAND NEW co-founder who provides an in-depth coverage and analysis of the most intriguing corporate and brand identity projects – Buttigieg’s logo is one of the most effective political logos ever created. “Without a doubt” – says Vit – “this is the best Presidential candidate campaign this time around...and I would say possibly ranks among the best ever. The color palette is excellent,

avoiding the traditional red-white-and-blue in favor of a set of colors that manage to look both warm and fuzzy but also industrial. The last-name logo easily translates into a campaign trail chant that many sports teams would kill to have. With little nods to some states — like Pennsylvania’s bell or Texas’ horns — each custom lettering job gives remarkable ownership and pride to supporters there and it makes for a hell of a group image. Buttigieg’s — well, Pete’s — logo is a strong, perfectly executed logo rooted in something meaningful and relevant to the candidate” (Hyperakt, n.d.).

Dr. Elizabeth Segran – who regularly writes for FAST COMPANY – said this about Mayor Pete’s logo: “A radical new approach to campaign branding. This is the first time a campaign has made a design tool kit so easily available to supporters” (Segran, 2019) In her extensive coverage of the Buttigieg’s campaign, Sergran applauded the use of the highly appealing logo: “The new logo features a yellow backdrop with the word “PETE” in bold blue in the shape of a bridge. This bridge represents the 120-year-old Jefferson Boulevard Bridge in South Bend, which Buttigieg transformed into a modern icon by installing an interactive light sculpture underneath, illuminating the river at night. The Pete for America campaign makes the case that this bridge is a metaphor for Buttigieg himself, who is trying to serve as a connecting force between America’s past and future; the center of the country and the coasts; and conservatives and progressives. In an unprecedented move, the campaign has created an online design tool kit that will allow supporters to customize campaign logos and images using the campaign’s nine official colors, then download them in whatever size they like to use them on social media, yard signs, or however else they choose. “People will be able to use this however they want, other than selling it,” Deroy Peraza, principal and creative director of Hyperakt, told *Fast Company* exclusively. It saves them time, it gives them more assets to work with, and it gives them a clear sense of what the full color palette is. It just makes it easier for people to rally around Pete. Peraza is well-versed in the design language that surrounds political campaigns. Earlier this year, he wrote an article in *Fast Company* about how the female candidates vying for the Democratic nomination have introduced new colors - like purples and pinks—into their campaign imagery, which is very different from the vast majority of presidential candidates over the past 80 years whose campaigns have been saturated in the colors of the American flag. This story came to the attention of the Pete for

America campaign, which is how Peraza and Hyperakt were brought on to design the campaign imagery. The campaign design is grounded in nine colors, spanning blues, browns, and golds. Each of these colors was pulled from Buttigieg's life and are named to reflect this. One color is called Calm Blue, reflecting Buttigieg's tendency to be soft-spoken and unflappable. Another is called Heartland Yellow. The orange is called Rust Belt. Buttigieg's two dogs, Buddy and Truman, each have their own brown. In an interactive mood board on the design tool kit website, you can see exactly how these colors came about: You can slide across various photographs from Buttigieg's world, seeing how they are made up of the nine campaign colors. Some of the images are of Buttigieg at home with his husband, Chasten Buttigieg, while others are of scenes around South Bend, from the factories that have closed to the new tech center that Buttigieg helped build. There are pictures of Buttigieg's favorite whiskey, Talisker, his shoes, and the watch that Chasten gave him as an engagement present. In other words, rather than shaping the campaign's colors around what might appeal to Buttigieg's constituents, Peraza felt it was important to create the most authentic visual representation of Buttigieg himself. "Our position is just that when you're branding a candidate, the most important thing is to reflect who that person is," he says. "Lead with that story, rather than focusing on whatever sector or space they're working within." In other words, rather than shaping the campaign's colors around what might appeal to Buttigieg's constituents, Peraza felt it was important to create the most authentic visual representation of Buttigieg himself. "Our position is just that when you're branding a candidate, the most important thing is to reflect who that person is," he says. "Lead with that story, rather than focusing on whatever sector or space they're working within." Taken as a whole, the colors have a Midwestern flair, calling to mind corn fields and industrial buildings. The colors are also reminiscent of collegiate baseball paraphernalia from the 1950s and 1960s, which often featured browns, yellows, and blues. Peraza says it makes sense to evoke team sports in the campaign, since it might spur people to rally around Mayor Pete the way they might rally around their favorite team. It's also true that sports tend to bring people of different political persuasions together. "If you go to the Midwest, sports are everywhere," says Peraza. "There's really great design in those meeting places where everybody, regardless of whether you're blue-collar or white-collar gets together around a team. We wanted to infuse a little bit of that into this brand, because

this is about rallying around a movement, around a campaign. We want you to root for this team” (Segran, 2019).

Several strategic branding firms publicly applauded Buttigieg’s logo – not necessarily endorsing the candidate - calling it truly brilliant, disruptive, and psychologically captivating. For example, Killian Branding agency, an independent strategic branding and advertising firm headquartered in Chicago, described Buttigieg’s visual brand identity system as groundbreaking: “Call his [Buttigieg’s] brand book clever, or innovative, or creative, but that would be a major understatement. It’s groundbreaking. For example, his color palette uses *nine* colors, a notable departure from the usual five or four. Beyond the sheer quantity is the inspiration-story for each. The colors come from his South Bend roots (1964 Studebaker blue!), his two dogs (Buddy and Truman browns), the color of his favorite whisky (Talisker 18), and even Rust Belt yellow. Amusing + thoughtful = serious + fun = an engaging narrative. Yes, the color story is mostly subliminal but subtly persuasive. No, this is not an endorsement – I haven’t decided on a candidate yet – but it did get me wondering if Talisker could replace Lagavulin in my single-malt affection” (“Mayor Pete’s new way to brand a campaign”, 2019).

According to numerous surveys, Mayor Pete’s logo was considered very innovative and attention-grabbing. “Some voters think Pete Buttigieg’s logo would look good on a bottle of beer. Others think it would work in the window of a classy restaurant. One man thought it was fitting for a sports team. “It feels like a high school basketball logo: The fighting Petes are going all the way to the finals!” said a Michigan voter [...]. Voters thought Buttigieg’s [logo] looked like the logos for Wrangler or Levi’s jeans” (Sikich, 2019).

Logo design deeply rooted in the principles of psychology of learning, cognitive neuroscience, semiotics, cultural anthropology, psycholinguistics, and strategic brand management can provide several important advantages, including self-expressive, aesthetic, and functional ones (Sadeghvaziri et al., 2022, p. 306). Numerous neuroscientists have discovered that odd, peculiar, and outré images are more emotionally arousing than ordinary and run-of-the-mill images. Brain research has recently shown that a significant rush of dopamine accompanies every exposure to fresh and unusual visual stimuli. Neuroscientists discovered that when the human brain is exposed to unusual images, the

‘pleasure centers’ of the brain, located mainly in the midbrain, get activated, resulting in a flood of dopamine. The part of the brain responsible for processing unusual stimuli is called substantia nigra/ventral tegmental area and is triggered when exposed to an unexpected stimulus. What follows is emotional arousal and/or behavioral response. The substantia nigra/ventral tegmental area exerts a profound influence on learning since it is functionally connected to both hippocampus, which is the brain’s memory and learning center, and the amygdala, which constitutes the brain’s center for processing emotional information. It can be argued, therefore, that Buttigieg’s logo clearly benefited from this neuroscientific insight; by violating the tacit norm that generations of political consultants followed blindly – political logos should be saturated with American Flag colors – Mayor Pete’s industrial-esque logo achieved all the necessary strategic and psychological objectives. Moreover – and as was already mentioned briefly before - since neuroscience has provided indisputable evidence that “individuals hold a metacognitive belief that the experience of processing fluency is diagnostic of truth and credibility, stimuli [logos] that are easier to process tend to be perceived as more trustworthy and credible [...]. Consumers might thus judge brands that have more descriptive logos to be more trustworthy and credible, as more (vs. less) descriptive logos are easier to process” (Luffarelli et al., 2019, pp. 863-864). Buttigieg’s logo can be deemed highly descriptive and thus highly effective. On top of that, ample neuroscientific evidence shows that brands “that are judged to be trustworthy and credible are often perceived as authentic. Because consumers might judge brands that have more descriptive logos to be more trustworthy and credible, and because trustworthy and credible brands are often viewed as authentic” (Luffarelli et al., 2019, p. 864), it can be argued that Mayor Pete’s logo considerably contributed to his perceived political brand authenticity. “Given that the consumption of authentic brands provides important identity benefits to consumers, consumers typically appreciate and value authenticity in brands. Brands that are perceived to be more (vs. less) authentic can thus, for example, form stronger relationships with consumers, benefit from more positive word of mouth. ... Authentic brands also tend to be evaluated more favorably and enjoy higher purchase [voting] intentions” (Luffarelli et al., 2019, p. 865).

The bedrock of a strong political brand is the personal narrative of the candidate encapsulated in the brand positioning strategy. This brand narrative “outlines the

politician's background, values, and vision in a relatable and inspiring manner. Barack Obama's HOPE AND CHANGE and Donald Trump's MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN are prime examples of narratives that captured the imagination of the American electorate, each appealing to different segments of society. A consistent visual identity helps in making the political actor's brand easily recognizable. This includes logos, color schemes, and typography used across all campaign material. Consistency in visual elements creates a sense of familiarity and professionalism, essential in building trust with voters [...]. Effective political branding goes beyond logic and policies; it taps into the emotional core of the electorate. Politicians employ storytelling, rhetoric, and imagery to evoke emotions such as hope, pride, or anger, driving voter behavior at the polls. The impact of effective branding in politics can be profound, influencing not just the outcome of elections but also public opinion on key issues. By presenting a cohesive image and clear message, politicians can create a loyal base of supporters who identify with their brand and are more likely to advocate on their behalf. However, the power of branding also comes with responsibility. Misleading branding or failing to live up to the brand's promises can lead to public disillusionment and erosion of trust. As the political landscape becomes increasingly complex and competitive, branding will continue to play a pivotal role in elections. By effectively using branding, politicians can not only win elections but also forge a deeper connection with the electorate, driving positive change. As voters, it's important to look beyond the brand and evaluate the substance behind the slogans and imagery, ensuring our choices are based on informed judgments about the policies and values of the candidate" ("Winning Votes With Brand Power," 2024). Throughout history, many politicians and political aspirants have used brand strategies to embed their names in the minds of the voters-consumers. Bill Clinton, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump, Barack Obama, George W. Bush, Pete Buttigieg, and many others leveraged on strategic brand management principles in their political journey. "Standing out can be challenging in the dynamic world of election rallies, passionate speeches, and spirited debates. For a political candidate, the secret to differentiating oneself lies in their campaign promises and how effectively they build and communicate their political brand. Creating a solid political brand is a complex task fundamentally connected to the election success of any candidate" ("Art of Branding in Politics", 2023). Successful politicians

increasingly turn to branding to effectively communicate with the audiences. In a conversation between Chris Wilks, Bo Bothe, Jonathan Fisher, and Laura Puente, titled ‘How Branding Plays a major Role in U.S. Politics’ and moderated by the strategic branding agency BRAND EXTRACT, the participants asserted that political aspirants who understand the principles of strategic brand management are more effective in communicating with the voters:

“Jonathan Fisher: I think that Trump came to this [political] market as a savvy brand since the beginning. He's familiar with the luxury brand concept, so he employed many of the techniques that he had used in business. That's where I saw the brand really step up in its role.

Laura Puente: And that helped him. Despite the turmoil within his campaign – like going through different campaign managers – his message stayed the same.

Bo Bothe: He was pretty true to his brand. That’s what he had been purporting himself as on TV and in the world; this pretty bombastic, loud, proud person. He stayed true to that. Whether we like it or not, the reality was he was the same and has been the same since” (Wilks et al., n.d.).

The competitive arena of electoral politics, where literally every single vote is precious, has forced incumbent politicians – and political aspirants – to turn to strategic brand management principles, developed in the world of commercial brands, to appeal to the voters-consumers and secure their place in office. The essence of political branding lies in the development of a compelling narrative – characterized by consistency, continuity, and singularity – that would resonate with the voters-consumers’ cultural values, beliefs, convictions, aspirations, desires, and concerns. The core elements of political branding include: 1. Evocative brand name, 2. Compelling, memorable, and culturally meaningful logo, 3. Consistent and relevant brand identity system, 4. Brand authenticity that revolves around trustworthiness, uniqueness, expertise, transparency, continuity, and cultural symbolism, and 5. Brand positioning that leads to emotional connection.

This subchapter presented the analysis of the empirical data for this research project. This subchapter was also an attempt to address one of this research project’s hypotheses, namely that it is necessary for the U.S. presidential candidate to develop an evocative brand logo in order to attract voters’ support. This subchapter was based on the

case study of Pete Buttigieg’s political brand development and the empirical research - 547 respondents who voted in 2020 United States presidential election participated in this study - conducted for the purpose of addressing the aforementioned hypothesis. The presented evidence clearly shows that having a well-devised brand logo significantly contributes to the development of a strong brand equity, which, in turn, helps political actors drum up voters-consumers’ support and loyalty.

5.3.The Impact Of Political Brand Appearance On Voter-Consumer Behavior

“In every encounter” – says Natasha Koifman, FORBES magazine’s Councils Member, contributor and president of NKPR Inc., a full-service public relations, advertising, talent, marketing, and digital agency that offers creative solutions tailored for each of our clients to meet their objectives – “whether you’re an established businessperson or a budding entrepreneur, you are being evaluated. The first few minutes of an interaction are when an impression is formed, and we all know how important that is because you never get a second chance to make a great first impression. Mere minutes aren’t enough for a person to actually get to know you, which is why you need something that sets you up for success at first glance—that’s where your personal brand comes in. “Me, a brand?” you might be thinking. Yes! Regardless of the line of business you are in, you are your own brand, even more so if you have a presence on social media. Essentially, your brand is a reflection of your personal and professional identity, a way of presenting yourself to the world and telling people what you stand for without actually saying it. And one of the most effective ways of presenting your brand is through fashion. A well-curated look puts you in control of what people see when they first meet you and conveys what makes you stand out from the rest. ...[...] Consistency is key. Once you pick a style, stick with it. Late legends Steve Jobs and Karl Lagerfeld, two of the world’s most successful people, were known to wear the same outfits to work daily. While Steve was regularly spotted in his signature black turtleneck, jeans and sneakers, Karl was known for his iconic uniform of black sunglasses, a black jacket and a high-collared, starched white shirt. Examples abound of successful people who have adopted a work uniform, which has become a significant part of their personal brand” (Koifman, 2022).

The primary objective of this subchapter is to address one of this research project's hypotheses: Appearance (Visual Brand Identity System) has an important impact upon voters-consumers' brand perceptions. This subchapter is predicated on the case study of Pete Buttigieg's political brand development and the empirical research - 512 respondents who voted in 2020 United States presidential election participated in this study - conducted for the purpose of addressing the aforementioned hypothesis.

Mayor Pete's visual appearance – an important part of the overall brand identity system – was – from the outset - carefully constructed, curated, and managed. The importance of personal branding, well-developed appearance, and self-presentation have been recognized a long time ago within the scientific milieu and later popularized around the world by the 73rd president of the American Sociological association, Erving Goffman. Personal branding – or image management – is the practice of branding oneself to society. According to Katryna M. Johnson, professor of marketing at the Metropolitan State University, “An individual's personal brand is a reflection of his or her skills, abilities and lifestyle. Developing a personal brand is an ongoing process that involves interactions with others in face-to-face communication and online. [...] Underpinning the concept of personal branding is self-presentation. Goffman discussed how each of us may try to influence the manner in which others see us. Self-presentation is the mechanism that allows an individual to convey information to the world to influence perception. Personal branding ...is the process of taking control of the impressions one is making. ...[Individuals] self-present on a daily basis as they choose what clothes to wear, which car to drive and how they interact with others” (Johnson, 2017, pp. 21-22).

The notion of a modern politician is multifunctional and traverses multiple platforms due to the fact that modern politician's influence extends from the town hall floor to culture, popular culture, and the business world. With the evolution of modern media culture, the modern politicians have become cultural symbols – brands. In politics, social capital – “an individual's social asset, built through social connectivity and self-presentation has gained momentum especially after the diffusion of Web 2.0 technologies like social media, where anyone can indulge in self-branding practices through investment in social relationships with return on reputation” (Vaishnav et al., 2022, p. 87). An important factor in presidential campaigns is - as was already mentioned – setting oneself apart from the

competition in terms of highly differentiated brand identity. By adopting a brand orientation towards one's political personal brand, politicians can proactively manage their public image and achieve electoral success. As Lysova, Oostrom, Khapova, and Gorbatov assert, "Indeed, promoting the professional self to develop greater personal brand equity (PBE), or 'the aggregation of all the attitudes and behavior patterns of the brand's stakeholders'" (Gorbatov, 2021, p. 506), has become a political necessity in an age of carefully crafted and mediated images.

Much has been written about self-presentation within sociology and social psychology sciences. It has been acknowledged by social psychologists and anthropologists that personal branding significantly contributes to the development of one's social capital. Social capital – says Johnson – "refers to the ability to use resources and engage in mutually advantageous social cooperation through" (Johnson, 2017, p. 22) social interactions. Personal branding is inextricably intertwined with the brand authenticity concept. Brand authenticity – as was already described – refers to "the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful and true toward itself and its consumers, and to support consumers being true to themselves" (Allison, 2020, p. 5).

The fieldwork in study on appearance-as-part-of-the-brand-visual-identity-system examines voters-consumers' perceptions of Pete Buttigieg's physical appearance and style. 512 respondents who voted in 2020 United States presidential election participated in this study. For the purpose of this research study, the author of this dissertation selected - using the mall intercept method (MIM) - a sample of 512 American citizens who voted in the 2020 United States presidential election and administered a standardized questionnaire to them. The study is an example of an exit poll survey conducted as voters left their polling places (inside shopping malls) on Election Day, Tuesday, November 3, 2020. The rationale behind employing this method was already explained in subchapter 5.2. Reaching voters at that particular moment helps ensure that the people surveyed have actually voted. Each interview was conducted on an individual basis. At the onset, each informant was asked to identify him/herself as either Democrat, Republican, or Independent. In order to eliminate the prejudice against and biases towards Democratic candidate (Pete Buttigieg represents the Democratic Party) only Democrats and Independents were selected to participate in this

study. Each informant answered two questions asking about their perceptions related to Pete Buttigieg's physical appearance and style.



Figure 8. Pete Buttigieg's signature look

Source: The Philadelphia Inquirer, February 7, 2020.

Question 1: To what extent would you agree with the following statement: Pete Buttigieg’s physical appearance and style is instantly recognizable.

Question 2: To what extent would you agree with the following statement: Pete Buttigieg’s physical appearance and style are memorable.

Table 5. Informant responses to Question 1: To what extent would you agree with the following statement: Pete Buttigieg’s physical appearance and style is instantly recognizable.

LEVEL	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
VOTERS (n=512)	47%	46%	7%	0%

Source: compilation based on own research

Table 6. Informant responses to Question 2: To what extent would you agree with the following statement: Pete Buttigieg’s physical appearance and style are memorable.

LEVEL	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
VOTERS (n=512)	44%	42%	12%	2%

Source: compilation based on own research

Pete Buttigieg was well-versed in the art and science of visual brand identity management. “At most media events and news conferences over his seven years as mayor, Pete Buttigieg wore the traditional male politician’s outfit: dark suit, white shirt and tie. Since launching his exploratory bid for president in January, candidate Buttigieg has kept the white shirt and tie – but lost the jacket and rolled up his sleeves” (Parrott, 2019). Mayor Pete carefully assembled a wardrobe of signature clothes that would define his branded look: white shirts, blue ties, blue pants, rolled up sleeves, brown shoes. Buttigieg consistently showcased his branded look, “appearing at nearly every campaign stop and media opportunity ... letting his pressed white shirt (its sleeves always rolled) suffice and his usually-blue necktie fly free. In the past, candidates from Barack Obama to George W. Bush occasionally went jacket-less (stumping in Iowa in August can get balmy) and this time many male candidates have occasionally worn casual attire—see Bernie Sander’s

windbreakers, or Joe Biden’s open—collared shirt and aviator sunglasses—but Mr. Buttigieg in particular seems to have made jettisoning a jacket his signature” (Gallagher 2019). When asked about his signature look, Mayor Pete’s chief of communications advisor, Lis Smith, called it his uniform. “The look has been so consistent, whether he’s speaking from a New Hampshire porch, visiting an Iowa hall or appearing on a TV talk show, that some writers have called it his “signature” look” (Parrott, 2019). According to Dr. Lynn Vavreck, a professor in the department of Political Science at UCLA and the co-author of *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America*, Mayor Pete “seems to be very comfortable in his well-thought-out political attire, and ‘that’s allowing him to go out and have these genuine interactions. That level of authenticity, or the genuineness, I think, is something that people pick up on” (Gallagher 2019). Numerous political strategists and consultants are of the opinion that Buttigieg’s signature look was well-researched. For example, Amanda Sanders, image consultant based in NYC, suggests that “Mr. Buttigieg’s casual uniform – even if not calculated and focused-grouped – is still functioning as *branding* [emphasis added]. On the stump, everything from how you wave to how you eat a slice of pizza to, yes, how you roll up your sleeves, can send signals to voters. So what else, besides pure practicality, is Mr. Buttigieg telegraphing by leaving the jacket behind? For starters, recognizable consistency. It’s already a trademark. His rolled sleeves and exposed tie function much like the Nike Swoosh or the red coke can, helping to visually delineate him from the 20-some odd candidates lobbying for voters’ attention” (Gallagher 2019). According to Patsy Cisneros, the founder of Los Angeles-based political consulting firm Corporate Icon, “This is garnering [Mr. Buttigieg] some really well-needed publicity to have people read up on him, look for articles about him and think, ‘Oh, there’s that guy’. You may now know much about his policies yet, but at the very least, you’ll know Mr. Buttigieg as that guy who *doesn’t wear a jacket* [emphasis added]” (Gallagher 2019).

At some point during the campaign Pete Buttigieg received a generous offer from one of the most respected and admired American fashion designers – Tom Ford. The fashion mogul offered clothing advice to “presidential candidate...of whom Ford is a ‘huge fan’. Ford met Mayor Pete at a lunch, and later texted Buttigieg’s husband Chasten to offer him some advice. Namely, he thought the suits were a bit too baggy (as is tradition for a

politician). The candidate's camp didn't take the advice" (Spellings, 2019). The decision to reject Mr. Ford's advice was a strategic and calculated one: had Mayor Pete accepted Tom Ford's advice and altered his signature look, his brand identity would've been diluted and – ultimately - eroded. As was already explained in the previous chapter, consistent brand identity is a foundation of a strong and socially and culturally appealing brand. When a brand's communications are consistent and delivered in a uniform manner – using the principles of brand identity development: continuity, consistency, singularity – when the tone of voice is consistently stable, when the same color palette is used, when logo, imagery (appearance, clothes, haircut), overall aesthetics are embraced and regularly communicated, a strong brand identity is being established.

Numerous politicians leverage unique – and consistent – branded style to drum up voters-consumers' support and develop instantly recognizable visual brand identity system. According to TIME's Ryan Teague Beckwith, Donald Trump is one of those politicians whose visual brand identity system reinforces his political brand. Donald Trump's choice of clothing on the trail – says Beckwith – “echoes his campaign's theme: “America was great once—probably sometime in the mid-1980s—but it's not anymore, and I'm going to bring the old days back. Either by accident or by design, the Republican nominee dresses like a Reagan-era Wall Street mogul, and controversies over his menswear line have put an unusual focus on fashion in the election. The characteristic Trump look begins with the suit. It's always a suit—never a sport coat and slacks, a look that Trump would likely consider too middle-management. The colors come from a limited palette of charcoal, gray and navy blue. Trump even wears dark suits when campaigning outdoors, though he sometimes skips the tie and puts on a Make America Great Again baseball cap, a look he favored at a rally in Phoenix and during a trip to his Scottish golf course. But Trump's choice of outfits makes an impression. It's an old-school look for a certain type of business leader, especially those in traditional industries like manufacturing, which Trump has promised to revitalize ... The suit is also boxy, not overly tailored. The boxy look conveys a more traditional view of masculinity, making the wearer look larger and more broad-shouldered. The focal point of the suit is the power tie. Trump favors bold colors—especially red, the classic 1980s power tie choice and a color now associated with Republicans. If he goes for a pattern, it's typically just stripes. The shirt is white, and the

suit unbuttoned, to accentuate the tie. With men's fashion, it's the small touches that make the difference. Like cufflinks, which Trump makes a point of wearing, but which most American men only wear on formal occasions, such as weddings. There's also one stylistic flourish that is specific to Trump: the extremely long tie. Many American men knot their ties poorly, resulting in uneven lengths, but generally the tie is supposed to end at the top of the belt buckle. Trump's almost always extends below that, typically a fashion no-no. Coupled with the unbuttoned jacket and the bold colors, the tie becomes the focal point of the outfit" (Beckwith, 2016).

According to Andrés Pérez, "personal branding is in charge of discovering, choosing and giving visibility to those elements or attributes that make us desirable, trustworthy and finally chosen" (Molares-Cardoso et al., 2020, p. 20). Looking from the brand identity theory perspective, it can be argued that voters-consumers are actively searching for trustworthy brands that exhibit consistent and culturally appealing identities in their social environment. It has been recognized that "those societal responses on potential or actual brand association influences consumers' brand preferences" (Zwakala & Steenkamp, 2021, p. 284). If – as the brand identity theory argues – brand identity system revolves around the constellation of "distinctive and relatively enduring characteristics of a focal brand" (He et al., 2016, pp. 1312), then Buttigieg's consistent commitment to his signature look can be deemed a well-calculated strategic decision aimed at building a strong, appealing, and culturally relevant political brand. According to brand identity scholars, brand identity system is developed through logos, slogans, signage, visual appearance, tone of voice, auditory elements such as music, sounds, and jingles, and the overall aesthetics that the brand embraces and communicates. Kuhle M. Zwakala and Pieter Steenkamp opine that "The consistency of these elements establishes the cohesiveness of a brand identity" (Zwakala & Steenkamp, 2021, p. 284).

Brand identity theory draws on multiple psychological theories and concepts, chief among them, self-concept and self-image congruity. Self-concept – says Fethi Klabi – "refers to the way a person thinks about himself or herself. Self-concept may include personality attributes, such as being friendly or impulsive. Four components of self-concept have been identified: actual-self image, ideal-self image, actual-social image, and ideal-social image" (Klabi, 2020, p. 70). Self-image congruence theory is predicated on a

psychological tenet according to which people tend to perceive others they like to be more similar to themselves than individuals they don't like. Ample evidence exists that the opposite effect also holds true: people like more the people that are like them and prefer less those individuals who appear to be different. Accordingly, voters-consumers would prefer political brands which they think people like them support. Self-image congruity theory in marketing – asserts Klabi – “fits into the symbolic-purchase research mainstream ...In this theory, people react positively towards brands showing that representations or images are concordant with one of the self-concepts. Several studies have confirmed the effects of self-image congruity on loyalty, emotional product attachment, brand trust, brand passion, brand preference, customer satisfaction, and purchase intention” (Klabi, 2020, p. 71). In other words, voters-consumers tend to express their self-image congruity when they support and vote for political brands that “confirm and reinforce their present actual self-image” (Klabi, 2020, p. 71). *Voters-consumers choose political brands because of what they mean to them, not because of what policies they propose* [emphasis added]. The meaning of a political brand can be construed twofold: “as external or social-symbolic and internal or self-symbolic. The social symbolic meanings of brands can be used to communicate to other people the kind of person we wish to be seen as. The self-symbolic meanings of brands are what their usage communicates to us about who we are or want to be” (Jukić, 2021, p. 287).

Mayor Pete's well-selected visual ensemble was carefully chosen to evoke well-intended associations and emotions in his potential supporters. For example, his rolled-up sleeves played an important symbolic role in his visual brand identity system. Even the cover of Buttigieg's book, “Shortest Way Home,” depicts him rolling up a sleeve — and even looking down at it (Parrott, 2019).

As Robin Givhan explains: “Among the Democratic presidential candidates, one of the most common fashion tics is the rolling up of the shirt sleeves as a symbolic gesture of informality, camaraderie and machismo. [...] The rolling of the shirt sleeves ... is the candidates' awkward attempt to step outside the safety of their dark-suited uniforms and show themselves as manly men who could lay bricks to support their family and throw a punch to defend its honor” (Givham, 2003).

The act of rolling up the sleeves has a very particular meaning in the American culture perfectly captured in the idiom *roll up one's sleeves*, which means *to do or get ready to do something difficult, intense, or demanding* ("Roll up sleeves", n.d.). In other words, rolling up the sleeves communicates the desire to get to work. The metaphorical meaning is widely understood in American culture and boils down to *getting down to business*. According to Kristin Quinn, "rolled sleeves have been a sign of rebellion, individualism and even a fashion statement. From the classic 'biker look' of the 1950s, to the grunge style of the 1990s, rolled sleeves have been a way to express yourself, stand out from the crowd and make a statement [...]. Rolling up one's sleeves can also be seen as a sign of readiness for physical labor or a challenge. For example, a person may roll up their sleeves when preparing to fight or take on a difficult task. Lastly, rolling up one's sleeves can be seen as a sign of confidence, as it may be seen as a sign of preparedness and a readiness to tackle any obstacle" (Quinn, 2023). It's important to understand that politicians use this cue to instigate well-intended impressions in their audience. By rolling up the sleeves they demonstrate their readiness to *get their hands dirty* (another idiom that captures the essence of hard, manual, or menial work). In a confrontation, the act of rolling up the sleeves can communicate that "aggression is immanent and signals to others that they should back off. Regardless of the context, when we roll up our sleeves it will be read by others as a willingness to get things done in a proactive sense" ("Body language of rolled up sleeves", n.d.). According to several body language experts, "Rolling up the sleeves body language is most powerful when done in a shirt and tie. Women usually perceive this body language as masculine and sexy since it puts the forearms on display. The suit and tie also indicate alpha male power traits, which adds to the appeal" ("Body language of rolled up sleeves", n.d.). Several prominent politicians – for example, Howard Dean, Barack Obama - have used this body language/brand identity gimmick to their advantage during their campaigns. "Accompanied by a knotted tie and a facial expression bordering on hostility, the pushed-up sleeves suggest that [the politician] is readying himself for a fight. If the presidential race were a bar brawl, he'd be asking the other contenders whether they wanted to 'take it outside'" (Givham, 2003). These are surely highly desirable meanings that every politician - Buttigieg included - would want to be associated with.

Mayor Pete's use of color symbolism also indicates that the development of well-intended brand associations was a primary objective of his campaign. His blue pants and blue tie played an important role in his brand identity system. Color psychology – contend Fetterman, Liu, and Robinson – “has a long and a short history. Its long history can be traced to popular ideas about the impact of color and scattered research reports of a brief and largely applied nature, typically rooted in aesthetics. Its short history represents a move toward more systematic and rigorous laboratory-based research designed to investigate links between color, meaning, and psychological functioning. A core “take-home” message from this new wave of research is that color can convey psychological meaning and, therefore, is not merely a matter of aesthetics. Additionally, color-meaning associations are thought to be implicit in several respects. They are non-semantic, they concern a non-focal property of objects (i.e., their color), and participants rarely have insight into the influence of color on their affective, cognitive, and behavioral responding” (Fetterman, 2015, p. 106). It has been acknowledged by psychologists that color has the capacity to evoke very specific emotions. Color also affects “people’s psychology, physiology, and imagination. Additionally, people’s psychological and physiological states will affect how they perceive and think about color [...]. The human imagination and memory can be stimulated by color, which can then further raise human emotional resonance” (Yang & Shen, 2023, pp. 2-3). Numerous studies conducted by psychologists and neuroscientists have recently confirmed that “color has systematic effects on the emotional state of a person viewing the color. The effect on arousal and valence as well as on skin conductance responses and heart rate is determined by the specific combination of hue, saturation, and brightness constituting a color” (Wilms & Oberfeld, 2018, p. 911). According to several psychologists, color blue evokes the following associations: serenity, peaceful, wisdom, hope, reason, transcendence, refreshing, eternal, restrained, methodical, broad-minded (Yang & Shen, 2023, p. 4). Investigations conducted by anthropologists demonstrate that some connotations concerning certain colors are largely shared across cultures. Others are culture specific (Fetterman, 2015, p. 106). In their extensive analysis of the U.S. presidential campaign logos from 1968 to 2016, Geoffrey Bible, Molly Crain, Cecilia Daizovi, Hafsah al Habsi, and Baizhinan Zhao fastidiously analyzed the meaning of colors in American political context. The scholars provide an illuminating anatomy of the use of color in the

U.S. presidential campaigns: “In American politics, it is widely known that Republican-leaning states are “red states” and Democratic-leaning ones are “blue states,” but do these colors matter when it comes to the campaigns themselves and their branding? Although these color-based terminologies are broadly used today, the concept of a state being classified as “red” or “blue” did not begin until 1976. As a result of the close election, this represented the first time that casual observers poured over maps extensively, well beyond the day of voting, and the blue-and-red state terminology entered the lexicon. The formation of this mindset creates a specific need to look at the color distinctions between the logos used prior to and after its adoption. Color has been shown to have a high effect on most decision-making, with the exception of low involvement decision-making. This has made consumer color preference less important than learned associations about colors. Numerous studies have shown that audiences perceive color to portray different traits about brands, varying by culture. In the United States, the use of red is viewed as exciting, blue as competent, white as sincere, black as sophisticated, and brown as rugged . . . U.S. students associated black with expensive and powerful; blue with dependable, trustworthy and high quality; red with love; gray with dependable and high quality; and yellow with happy” (Bible et al., 2016, p. 28).

Buttigieg’s commitment to the well-thought-out ensemble is not particularly unprecedented in the context of electoral politics. What is relevant though is the fact that Pete Buttigieg did not embrace this well-calculated signature look before his presidential bid. According to Jeff Parrott, “Since the beginning of civilization, politicians and leaders have obsessed over their appearance and the message it conveys to constituents. Many politicians hire stylists and image consultants to advise them on fashions, brands and colors to wear, always careful about what their appearance signals to voters. Buttigieg is by no means the first to frequently wear a certain style. During the 2018 U.S. Senate campaign, for example, Indiana Republican Mike Braun stuck to a blue, open-collared shirt, prompting opponent Joe Donnelly to run a TV ad mocking it as an attempt by Braun to look more like an everyday Hoosier” (Parrott, 2019).

Mayor Pete’s shoes also considerably contributed to his well-thought-out brand identity system. The color carefully chosen for Buttigieg’s shoes was brown. Brown – as numerous color psychologist argue – is associated with the following characteristics:

stable, reliable, upright, just, responsible (Yang & Shen, 2023, p. 4). Unlike other politicians whose shoes are typically black, Buttigieg's strategic intent was to communicate responsibility, stability, honesty, conscientiousness, candor, and a strict regard for what is morally right. Studies demonstrate that color black is associated with the following characteristics: independent, calm, reserved, mysterious, cold. From the color psychology perspective, Buttigieg's decision to choose brown shoes was a valid one. Two colors that dominated Mayor Pete's brand identity palette – blue and brown – are imbued with highly desirable and positive symbolic and cultural meanings and associations.

According to Jackie Mallon, “Uniform dressing represents consistency [...]. The uniform projects sobriety and authority ...” (Mallon, 2017). *Buttigieg's commitment to his signature look was also deeply rooted in neuroscience* [emphasis added]. The human brain – as was already mentioned – is hardwired to recognize patterns. Building a strong brand entails a commitment to consistency. When the “brand delivers the same experience with every interaction, meaning the *same* tone of voice, the *same* color palette, logo and imagery, the *same* user experience, people trust [the brand]. And trust is the most important component of loyalty” (Kramer, 2021).

Perhaps one of the most emblematic examples of the effective use of political branding predicated on excellent understanding of the importance of brand identity, is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's campaign. Her political brand strategy effectively captured and expressed AOC's personality and paved the way towards a victory. According to Diana Budds, who studied Ocasio-Cortez's political brand evolution during the elections for the Democratic primary in New York's 14th Congressional District, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's political brand strategy was meticulously formulated and fastidiously executed: “While she's [AOC] a vocal candidate with progressive ideals, she has an equally communicative, but silent, tool at her side: her visual brand. On the streets of New York's 14th Congressional District, which includes parts of eastern Brnox and northern Queens, you might spot vibrant yellow campaign posters printed with a portrait of Ocasio-Cortez with her last name bookended by Spanish exclamation points, and calls to action in bold type, set at an attention-grabbing angle. Ocasio-Cortez's platform is unabashedly far left, and her branding is equally radical. In comparison, Crowley's plain, inoffensive posters — surprise! They were red, white, and blue — signal the Democratic Party's centrist, safe

approach. Between the two, something as elementary as campaign posters has become an analogy of infighting on the left. As Democrats try to flip the house in the 2018 midterms, the party may need to decide which brand will serve them best [...]. Political branding [brand identity] tends to lean red, white, and blue. But Ocasio-Cortez requested that purple be a part of her branding since it represents red and blue coming together and is the color of the Brand New Congress. Tandem [strategic branding agency handling Ocasio-Cortez's political brand strategy] also used nontraditional yellow to associate positivity with Ocasio-Cortez's campaign. Blue is the third official color, which is the Democrat's traditional hue [...]. the Tandem team looked to revolutionary posters and visuals from the past to inspire Ocasio-Cortez's branding — particularly those of Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, Latino labor activists and co-founders of the United Farm Workers in the 1960s — and union badges. “That was the closest representation to a populist, social-minded, justice-inclined, inspirational campaign that was about positivity and taking back the power,” Starrett [Tandem's co-founder] says. The design process began with the posters and printed material. Since NY-14 has a large Spanish-speaking population, the designers knew the posters would need to be bilingual, which informed how they conceived of her logo. Placing exclamation points around her last name created a sense of excitement and embedded Spanish into her campaign's DNA. “You often see a second language slapped on [political material] without much thought,” Arenas [Tandem's brand strategist] says. “We took that opportunity to try something that would work with two languages.” Additionally, the points of the exclamation points are stars, not circles — a nod to the Puerto Rican flag and Ocasio-Cortez's heritage. “The demographics in her district aren't predominately white,” Starrett adds, “That gave us a lot of leeway to put the material on even ground. The majority of the audience we're talking to is Spanish speaking. So why would we put them in the back seat?” For outsider candidates, being unique pays off. In politics, image is key. In an increasingly visual world, candidates are looking to design to help them better communicate who they are and what they stand for. Barack Obama's presidential campaign was widely celebrated for using tools from corporate branding — a recognizable logo, a consistent identity system — throughout his 2008 presidential bid. Hillary Clinton took the same approach during her 2016 campaign, but with opposite effects; critics said it was too corporate and impersonal even though it adhered to the same

principles as Obama. Meanwhile Trump’s “poorly designed” hats were an effective branding tool, challenging the notion that adhering to commonly held “good design” principles translates to political success” (Budds, 2018).



Figure 9. Campaign posters: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez vs Joe Crowley

Source: The Washington Post, June 18, 2028.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was a political outsider, and her brand reflected this. Her brand identity system was visually bold, consistent, continuous, and singular, evoking revolutionary imagery that emotionally resonates with Latino voters in the U.S. Her opponent – Congressman Joe Crowley – used an unimpressive and devoid of any symbolism visual brand identity with the colors red, white, and blue. As Amanda Bowman observes: “When compared to the centrist, comparatively safe designs of Crowley’s traditionally styled posters, Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign materials stood out. Ocasio-Cortez used purple, yellow, and other bold choices to visually differentiate her campaign from her opponent. Her political branding strategy was to sound different and to look different. It’s no surprise that Ocasio-Cortez created a compelling argument for shifting toward a revolution – in design and in politics itself. Lindsay Ballant, an adjunct faculty member at the Maryland Institute College of Art, attributes the success of Ocasio-Cortez’s branding to her “fearlessness in taking on a comfy establishment figure.” Ballant explains that by doubling down on her persona in her election branding, Ocasio-Cortez clearly emphasizes her strength as a lawmaker and as a non-traditional, radical candidate. Ocasio-Cortez tapped Tandem Design NYC to create the design for her campaign. Tandem took

inspiration from past grassroots campaigns and movements by labor and civil rights activists to create the striking brand” (Bowman, 2023).

This subchapter was based on the case study of Pete Buttigieg’s political brand development and the empirical research - 512 respondents who voted in 2020 United States presidential election participated in this study - conducted for the purpose of addressing the following hypothesis: Appearance (Visual Brand Identity System) has an important impact upon voters-consumers’ brand perceptions. As the evidence presented in this subchapter clearly shows, appearance – as an important aspect of the visual brand identity system – has a profound impact upon voters-consumer’s perceptions of the political brand. Numerous studies conducted by neuroscientists indicate that the clothing people wear affects how other people perceive them. Cognitive science studies, for example, indicate that if a person wears a white coat that he/she believes is associated with a physician, his/her ability to pay attention increases sharply. But if the person wears the same white coat and beliefs it is associated with a painter, this ability will not be improved. This is a phenomenon cognitive scientists call *enclothed cognition* – the effects of clothing on cognitive processes (Katz, 2018). The former President of the United States once famously remarked: “You’ll see I wear only gray or blue suits. I’m trying to pare down decisions. I don’t want to make decisions about what I’m eating or wearing. Because I have too many other decisions to make” (Katz, 2018). Donald Trump – as was already described – has his own signature look, including a tie of solid color, oversized suit, and cufflinks. Abraham Lincoln had his stove pipe hat. Her Royal Highness, Queen Elizabeth II is known to have worn over 5,500 hats during her 64-year reign. Steve Jobs wore a black turtleneck, Levi’s 501 jeans, and New Balance grey sneakers. Iris Apfel is well known for her oversized glasses and distinct jewelry selections (Katz, 2018).

The human brain’s remarkable ability to recognize patterns determined natural selection. Hunters skilled at recognizing prey and predator and telling poisonous plants from edible ones had a better chance of survival than those whose pattern recognition skills were underdeveloped. This unique skill helps humans understand the world quickly and effortlessly. Humans are also immensely visual. Almost 50% of the human brain is involved in visual processing. When a voter-consumer is exposed to a political brand’s logo, his/her eyes send a signal along the fusiform gyrus, a part of the cerebrum, the largest

region of the human brain. The fusiform gyrus participates in human visual processing and recognition, including facial recognition and differentiating familiar objects from one another, like the difference between an apple and an orange. Certain neurons located in the fusiform gyrus also participate in high-level recognition of words, numbers, and colors. This part of the brain recognizes whether a brand name, a logo, and appearance are new and familiar or vague, new, and ambiguous. Brand familiarity has a profound impact upon voters-consumers' perceptions of the political brand. According to numerous studies, 60% of consumers-voters around the world prefer to buy and vote for familiar products and politicians. Unknown brands and politicians can even activate regions of the brain associated with negative emotions (the insula or insular cortex) when people first come into contact with them (Harake, 2016).

Mayor Pete's branded look (appearance) was an important element of his political brand's identity. A branded look is a repeating visual element that reinforces the brand's identity and authenticity, creating a cohesive and memorable experience for voters-consumers. This consistent and unified visual identity fosters recognition and enables voters-consumers to easily identify the brand. Whether this branded look appears on the website, social media posts, political rallies, TV interviews, or promotional materials, a branded look acts as a visual cue that connects voters-consumers to the brand. It becomes a recognizable element that reinforces the brand's presence and boosts brand recall. Several studies conducted by neuroscientists indicate that simply seeing a familiar pattern (like the signature look developed by Pete Buttigieg), can activate the reward center in the human brain, activating the same areas associated with pleasure and gratification. Political brands, through strategic management of branded look (appearance), can tap into voters-consumers' subconscious and influence their voting behavior on a neurological level. In today's over-saturated political marketplace, where voters-consumers are bombarded with countless choices, fake news, and disturbing messages, creating a brand that espouses a well-developed branded look is more crucial than ever. That is why understanding neuroscience has become a game-changer within the field of political branding (Mandaliya, 2024).

5.4. How Authentic Political Brand-Building Wins Over Voters-Consumers And Contributes To Competitive Advantage In Political Competition

Voters-consumers' trust and loyalty towards a political brand is also a function of perceived authenticity of the political brand. Authenticity in the political environment has become – as was demonstrated in previous chapters – a necessity. There is no doubt that modern electoral politics puts candidates' personalities and personal characteristics front and center of campaign activities. As Stiers, Larner, Kenny, Breitenstein, Vallee-Dubois, and Lewis-Beck explain: “Media attention, throughout the electoral cycle, often attributes the political success of parties and candidates to the personal characteristics of political actors. This increasingly personalized political arena has been driven, in part, by the changing way in which voters interact with political actors through the different media. Following a trend of what some political scholars refer to as the ‘presidentialization of politics’, more than ever before, political candidates are increasingly visible and their character more exposed [...]. The last decade has also seen the rise of so-called “anti-politics”, with growing distrust in politics and even political cynicism. This has been presented as a reaction to the professionalization of politics in the second half of the twentieth century, and to the increase in senior political figures lacking substantial first-hand experience of the world outside politics. Lacking attachments to “ordinary” or “real” people, the stereotypical politician comes to be seen as primarily interested in obtaining office above all else, even if this means advocating policies they know they cannot deliver, perhaps putting the interests of their funders above their own or those of their constituents. Such changing perceptions of the political class have been related to an erosion in political trust and to a fueling of anti-politics sentiment. In this context of an increasing prominence of candidate personalities and distrust in politicians, candidate “authenticity” has recently received much media and public attention as a potentially desirable characteristic for candidates to possess in the eyes of voters” (Stiers et al., 2021, p. 1182).

One of the hypotheses of this research project is that Brand Identity, Brand Authenticity, Brand Logo, and Brand Positioning have impact upon voters-consumers' perceptions of the US presidential candidate (brand authenticity is an important driver of brand loyalty). Brand loyalty has already been thoroughly analyzed in subchapter 2.1. This

chapter delves deeper – using empirical studies (549 respondents who voted in 2020 United States presidential election participated in this study, conducted for the purpose of addressing the following hypothesis: Brand Authenticity is an important driver of brand loyalty) - into the evidence supporting the argument that brand authenticity significantly contributes to the development of a long-term political career. This subchapter, thus, partially contributes to the overriding objective of this research project by providing a comprehensive anatomy of brand authenticity and how it ties in with other brand concepts, such as brand loyalty, brand identity, and brand positioning.

The political science literature offers a thorough analysis of various personal traits of politicians, chief among them competence, integrity, and charisma. However, the singular characteristic gaining prominence these days revolves around such traits as warmth and humility. “Relatedly, there is emerging evidence that it has become more important to citizens in recent decades that politicians appear more ‘human’ to them. ... The expectation that politicians be ‘human’ appears to have developed from a relatively minor and undemanding expectation that politicians be genial, warm, and sympathetic to a relatively major and more demanding expectation that politicians be ‘normal’ in a variety of ways and situations and especially ‘in touch’ with the ‘real’ lives of ‘ordinary’ people” (Valgarðsson et al., 2021, p. 859). According to Ben Jones, there is a subtle difference between these various - sometimes used interchangeably – concepts, such as humility, sincerity, integrity, and authenticity. Jones defines authenticity twofold: “as (1) consistently upholding the values and commitments that define one’s identity for reasons that one deems legitimate, and (2) a second-order commitment to accurately represent these values and commitments” (Jones, 2016, p. 490). Jones’ definition of authenticity overtly emphasizes the importance one’s consistent identity plays in communicating authenticity. This is an important point since – it is argued - consistent brand identity considerably contributes to the development of a strong political brand.

However, the perceived authenticity seems to be in the proverbial *eye of the voting beholder*. According to Gilad Edelman - who studied perceived authenticity of 2020 presidential contenders – authenticity in electoral politics has recently been elevated to an incredibly important role: “‘Be authentic’ - there may be no more ubiquitous piece of advice to candidates for office. Yet there’s little agreement on what authenticity actually

means, perhaps because the concept is often applied in ways that seem contradictory. An authenticity deficit was widely seen as one of the reasons Mitt Romney lost to Barack Obama in 2012. Four years later, it contributed to Hillary Clinton's defeat to Donald Trump. How can the same quality account for the success of two figures as different as Trump and Obama? How can Trump in particular—an inveterate fabricator born to fabulous wealth who poses as the self-made tribune of the working class—come across as so authentic to so many? The answer is that, when we talk about authenticity in politics, it turns out we're usually describing something specific: Candidates from Obama to Trump to the Democratic presidential hopeful Pete Buttigieg seem authentic to the extent that they seem to be saying what they're really thinking, rather than what they're "supposed" to say. The key word here is *seem*" (Edelman, 2019).

Authenticity has become an important component of political brand strategy. Many U.S. presidential candidates falter on this dimension. When describing the 2020 U.S. presidential candidates, Tara Golshan observed that "Beto O'Rourke quite literally *drips with authenticity* [emphasis added]; he's the cool punk rocker dad on the campaign trail. Joe Biden's love of trains and off-color jokes has earned him the affectionate nickname Uncle Joe. No one doubts Bernie Sanders's passion for democratic socialism. But some candidates have a harder time proving they're the real deal. When Kamala Harris told the Breakfast Club radio show she listened to Tupac and Snoop Dogg, she was accused of lying about her musical taste, in an apparent questioning of her blackness. Elizabeth Warren has been called "aloof" for her focus on policy, and the scandal around her claims of Native American heritage earned her a comparison to Hillary Clinton. As the 2020 Democratic presidential field grows, the fight over "authenticity" is becoming difficult to ignore — and a clear gender divide is forming. "We have seen many, many men run over time who have different personalities," Jen Lawless, a political scientist with University of Virginia with an expertise in women in politics, said. "We are accustomed to different presentations of men that we see as authentic." Winning the "authenticity" primary can mean the difference between being "scandal-plagued" Hillary Clinton and "Teflon" Trump. Democrats' No. 1 priority is to unseat Trump. And despite the president's prolific record of lying, he is seen as an authentic, shoot-from-the-hip politician — which makes this completely subjective test an important one in the 2020 Democratic primary.

Authenticity is hard to pin down. But conversations with political scientists, including Rutgers University's Kelly Dittmar and Lawless, explained what goes into it in four buckets: 1) The ability to interact in an informal way. Not seeming too polished. This speaks to a candidate's performance style. Are they the Bill Clinton type who plays the saxophone and trades jokes on late-night television? Would you have a beer with them? Do they sound like they're speaking off the cuff, rather than rehearsed? It's the quality that can make eating food on a stick at the Iowa State Fair effective instead of just awkward. And what makes Trump's style of unfiltered speaking resonate. 2) Having a credible personal narrative. This is about making politics personal. Biden talks politics with stories about his family, riding back and forth on the train between Wilmington, Delaware, and Washington, DC, or his memories of the late Senator John McCain. He's selling a personal narrative for people to have an emotional response to. Sanders recalls fighting for the same issues in the 1970s as he is today, creating what appears to be a credible political record. On the flip side, as much as Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) wants to present herself as the "Senator Next Door," allegations that she abused her staff raise serious questions about what kind of leader she actually is. 3) Aligning with voters' perceptions. "Authenticity" becomes more complicated when it gets into people's biases and preconceptions about what a politician should look and act like. Can a politician fit the mold of how an average voter thinks a president should look and act? 4) Electability. In many ways, the previous three attributes determine this last factor. Is the candidate presidential? Can they win? It's particularly relevant in this election, as Democrats see defeating Trump as a top priority. It is also the most quantifiable of the bunch; there is polling data that shows head-to-head matchups with Trump . . . "Authenticity" and "electability" are intrinsically linked. Dahlia Lithwick's explanation of Hillary Clinton's downfall explains this best: She was also unerringly slammed as being some version of "guarded," "secretive," "evasive," and, above all other things, "inauthentic." There are thousands of articles and entire books devoted to Clinton's alleged "authenticity" problem, and indeed, of all the fake scandals that stuck to her like glue, the apotheosis was the claim that she had used a private server as secretary of state and deleted emails before handing her files over to State Department record-keepers. She was thus confirmed, in the popular imagination, to be a keeper of secrets, a hider of truths, a chameleon always shifting with the political winds, as she held

her true self away from our gaze. Clinton was deemed unelectable” (Golshen, 2019). Other presidential candidates – like Donald Trump – are perceived as the apotheosis of authenticity. Fellow billionaire businessman Mark Cuban best described Trump’s authenticity when he said: “I don’t care what his actual positions are. I don’t care if he says the wrong thing. He says what’s on his mind. He gives honest answers rather than prepared answers. This is more important than anything any candidate has done in years” (“Authenticity emerges as major theme in presidential election”, 2017). “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn’t lose any votes,” Trump said at a January 2016 campaign rally in the state of Iowa. According to Ulrich Jensen, authenticity within the electoral politics context can be equated with the candidate’s ability to create a sense of collective identity: “You feel like you’re one of them, and they are one of you, right? And so, kind of creating that collective identity, propelling values – all of those things can be done by framing the message, providing the substance and articulating in a way that’s engaging and present” (Herman, 2023). ““I never, ever tell you anything I don’t mean. I never tell you anything I don’t believe, even when I know it’s not popular,” said Biden as a presidential candidate at Wofford College in South Carolina on Feb. 28, 2020. “Creating that identification through showing people that you care and you’re willing to listen to their stories is one of the things Biden is known for,” said Jensen. “And what he does well is then reuse and repurpose those stories for the storytelling aspect and his own rhetoric. It’s an incredibly powerful way to help create that identification [with voters].” (Herman, 2023).

Kathleen Hall Jamieson – who is considered one of the most important and prolific scholars within the political marketing discipline – claims that “voters want someone who can create a sense of spontaneous interaction with an audience, or at least ... of a deeply held conviction being voiced in real time. You’re not hearing from advisors. You’re not hearing from pollsters. You’re hearing from that individual with all the flaws that individual has on clear display” (“Authenticity emerges as major theme in presidential election”, 2017).

The fieldwork in study on brand authenticity examines voters-consumers’ perceptions of the perceived authenticity of Pete Buttigieg’s political brand. 549 respondents who voted in 2020 United States presidential election participated in this

study. For the purpose of this research study, the author of this dissertation selected - using the mall intercept method (MIM) - a sample of 549 American citizens who voted in the 2020 United States presidential election and administered a standardized questionnaire to them. The study is an example of an exit poll survey conducted as voters left their polling places (inside shopping malls) on Election Day, Tuesday, November 3, 2020. Reaching voters at that particular moment helps ensure that the people surveyed have actually voted. Each interview was conducted on an individual basis. At the onset, each informant was asked to identify him/herself as either Democrat, Republican, or Independent. In order to eliminate the prejudice against Democratic candidate (Pete Buttigieg represents the Democratic Party) only Democrats and Independents were selected to participate in this study. Each informant answered four questions asking about their perceptions related to Pete Buttigieg's authenticity.

Question 1: To what extent Pete Buttigieg is perceived by you as trustworthy and genuine in how he presents himself and his political vision to the American people?

Question 2: To what extent Pete Buttigieg is perceived by you as different or atypical compared to other presidential candidates?

Question 3: To what extent Pete Buttigieg is perceived by you as competent, possessing necessary acumen, experience, and skills to be a president?

Question 4: To what extent, in your opinion, Pete Buttigieg reflects American values, culture, and shared principles?

Table 7. Informant responses to Question 1: To what extent Pete Buttigieg is perceived by you as trustworthy and genuine in how he presents himself and his political vision to the American people?

[REDACTED]				
VOTERS (n=549)	29%	64%	7%	0%

Source: compilation based on own research

Table 8. Informant responses to Question 2: To what extent Pete Buttigieg is perceived by you as different or atypical compared to other presidential candidates?

VOTERS (n=549)	20%	56%	15%	9%

Source: compilation based on own research

Table 9. Informant responses to Question 3: To what extent Pete Buttigieg is perceived by you as competent, possessing necessary acumen, experience, and skills to be a president?

VOTERS (n=549)	31%	33%	27%	9%

Source: compilation based on own research

Table 10. Informant responses to Question 4: To what extent, in your opinion, Pete Buttigieg reflects American values, culture, and shared principles?

VOTERS (n=549)	71%	27%	2%	0%

Source: compilation based on own research

Overall, informants participating in this study expressed *overly positive* [emphasis added] views on Pete Buttigieg's perceived authenticity.

Mayor Pete's perceived authenticity wasn't – at first – his forte. At the beginning of the campaign, Buttigieg struggled initially to embrace his true authentic self and communicate it effectively to his potential supporters. Asked about Buttigieg's authenticity, his husband Chasten once said: "He did everything to climb every ladder without being his authentic self" (Cramer, 2021). Chasten's remark referred to the fact that Buttigieg didn't come out of the closet until 2015, when he was 33 years old. It also implied that Buttigieg's life experiences made him struggle with how much he should reveal of himself. There were numerous instances of Buttigieg's inability to effectively exude authenticity during his campaign. For example, during one of the debate prep sessions,

when Buttigieg rehearsed his responses to an incident involving shooting of a Black man in South Bend, his senior advisor Lis Smith was heard saying: “He’s comin’ across like the f---ing tin man up there” (Cramer, 2021). During another prep session, rehearsing his response to a question regarding his life as a gay man, Lis Smith told him that he was “reading a f---ing shopping list” (Cramer, 2021), and added “You’re not, like, f---ing, an anthropologist here” (Cramer, 2021). Nevertheless, Buttigieg’s almost monumental dedication to tackling and – ultimately – improving this important part of his political brand bore phenomenal fruit. In the words of Gilad Edelman: “Of course, authenticity isn’t exclusively about public speaking. A candidate’s biography, political positions, and track record all play a role. But public speaking has outsized importance, at least at the national level, simply because voters overwhelmingly get their input about a candidate’s personality by seeing them give a speech or interview or participate in a televised debate. What does that tell us about the 2020 race? Among the current crop of presidential hopefuls, several have the knack for authenticity. Bernie Sanders paces the field with his ragged self-presentation and his blunt criticism of the wealthy and capitalism itself. Kamala Harris has an effective natural style. But the candidate who most fully embodies the Obama brand of authenticity-as-effective-performance—and whose surprising prominence is utterly inexplicable without it—is Buttigieg [...]. What sets Buttigieg apart as a political talent, then, is not really his intellect. It’s his ability to give a speech, or answer questions onstage, in a way that makes it seem as though he’s earnestly thinking through his beliefs in real time. “Like Obama before him, like [Bill] Clinton before that, he ruminates in public,” said the journalist Ezra Klein by way of introducing Buttigieg to his podcast audience. “Unlike a lot of politicians, he’s willing to say quite a bit.” Klein probably understands, on some level, that these men aren’t really ruminating; Clinton and Obama were deeply calculating politicians, and all indications are that Buttigieg—a former Rhodes Scholar and McKinsey consultant who took seven months away from his mayoral duties to serve in the Navy Reserve in Afghanistan—is one too. But just as Trump’s most loyal voters can’t help but be taken in by the billionaire president’s man-of-the-people routine, well-educated liberals can’t help being drawn to someone who plays the part of the thoughtful intellectual” (Edelman, 2019).

Buttigieg was able to captivate his audience by offering sincere-sounding responses to a deluge of various questions. For example, in a speech at the LGBTQ Victory Fund's annual brunch on April 7, 2019, Mayor Pete talked about his struggle with sexual orientation and moved his audience to tears when he said: "If you could have offered me a pill that could make me straight, I would have swallowed it before you could give me a swig of water. It's a hard thing to think about now. If you had shown me exactly what it was that made me gay, I would have cut it out with a knife [...]. Thank God there was no pill. Thank God there was no knife" (Lederman, 2019). These heart-wrenching words had a profound impact on his audience and significantly boosted his perceived authenticity. This highly emotional speech has already become one of the most-quoted political speeches in the history of the United States.

During one of the rallies, Buttigieg gave another powerful speech that reverberated throughout the entire American media ecosystem. He talked about his husband and "emphasized how he and his husband are similar, not different from heterosexual couples across the country, hoping to defuse an issue that evangelicals and other opponents of same-sex marriage could raise if he becomes the nominee. Taking direct swipes at Vice President Mike Pence, he said his marriage last year to schoolteacher Chasten Buttigieg had made him a better man, "and yes, Mr. Vice President, it has moved me closer to God. [...] That's the thing I wish the Mike Pences of the world would understand: That if you have a problem with who I am, your quarrel is not with me," Buttigieg said. "Your quarrel, sir, is with my creator" (Lederman, 2019). This was a powerful speech that solidified Buttigieg's perceived authenticity and attracted many voters-consumers whose values revolved around religion and morality.

Of course, different politicians achieve authenticity through different means. For example, according to Edelman, "Trump achieves authenticity in a more unusual way. First, of course, he brazenly violates all kinds of taboos - against racism, sexism, authoritarianism, and so on. This scans as authentic because, even if it's a calculated play to his supporters' worst instincts, it's clearly not what any political consultant would tell a candidate to do. Second, even more uniquely, Trump really does speak extemporaneously. In his rallies and TV appearances, he ad-libs and rambles wildly off topic. (Ditto his Twitter feed.) This is why, as so many others have noted, Trump is at his least Trump-like when

he's reading a scripted speech like the State of the Union address. It also may be why aspiring mini-Trump's haven't been particularly successful at the ballot box: When standard Republicans try to rebrand as MAGA diehards without re-creating Trump's gonzo showmanship, voters don't buy it. So the paradox of a serial liar such as Trump coming across as authentic isn't much of a paradox at all. Trump *lies authentically*. He is so committed to saying whatever he feels like that he doesn't let the truth get in the way" (Edelman, 2019).

Buttigieg's authenticity was considerably boosted by his countless speeches that had the capacity to galvanize his audiences in many different parts of the country. In a speech he gave in New Hampshire on Tuesday, February 11, 2019, after the primary results were in, Buttigieg uplifted his audience by saying: "And I want you to know that *you don't just represent me well, you inspire me* [emphasis added], and I cannot say enough how thankful I am to our extraordinary team. And we know that team stretches across the country. We go forward fueled by hundreds of thousands of grassroots supporters from the woman in Minnesota who donated in honor of the wife she lost to lung cancer, to the veteran from Connecticut who sent \$19.68 in honor of the year that he served in Vietnam. This campaign belongs to them. And if our campaign moves you, I hope you'll go to PeteForAmerica.com and chip in whatever you can. And we go forward knowing that this is our chance, our only chance, not just to end the era of Donald Trump, but to launch the era that we know must come next. And the stakes could not be higher. We cannot afford to miss the mark or to miss this moment. We must get this right. With Americans living under an unaccountable president, who will cut taxes for corporations and then cut Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security for the rest of us. We must get this right. When people of color fear for their own place in their own country, while infants are torn from their parents at the border, we must get this right. *And when a commander-in-chief pardons war criminals and punishes war heroes* [emphasis added], while systematically demolishing the credibility of our country in the eyes of the world, we dare not risk four more years of this presidency. We must get this right" (Daniels, 2020). Listening to his words, people felt inspired and motivated. Buttigieg's authenticity was percolating throughout the fabric of American society leaving many voters-consumers with great admiration and respect for him.

During the campaign, many media pundits and political commentators emphasized the role political brand authenticity played in the presidential elections. Several journalists agreed that Pete Buttigieg's authenticity had become his greatest asset. According to Ruben Navarrette Jr., who prepared a comprehensive piece on Mayor Pete for The San Diego Union-Tribune, "Pete Buttigieg has that base covered. With a Bill Clinton-like blend of book smarts and emotional intelligence, the fiery but plainspoken Harvard graduate, Rhodes Scholar and Navy veteran who served in Afghanistan — hailing from a Red State — offers something that doesn't seem fake or pre-packaged. Mika Brzezinski nailed it. The co-host of MSNBC's "Morning Joe" drew a contrast between Buttigieg and the candidate formerly known as Robert Francis O'Rourke — who prefers to spice things up by going by "Beto." Referring to "this Kennedy concept, this young new millennial candidate concept" that some Democratic presidential hopefuls are selling, Brzezinski pushed back against the manufactured nature of Beto-mania. "I feel like that concept has been forced on me," she said. "I'm not comfortable. Like don't tell me that this candidate is 'the one.' You hear about all these Democratic operatives flocking to Beto, and you feel this sort of contrived candidacy." Tell me about it. Imagine you're Mexican-American and you're being told by Beto Bots and the liberal media not to worry, that a rich white guy from El Paso who speaks Spanish will stand in for you. You talk about contrived. Yet something different is brewing in South Bend. "Then you look at Mayor Pete, who has literally come out of nowhere, and it feels much more natural," Brzezinski said. "*It feels real. You hear him, and he touches you*" [emphasis added]. It does feel natural. Buttigieg first landed on my radar about a month ago, thanks to his sharp intellect. His answers during a March 10 "CNN Town Hall" were sophisticated but honest. I was impressed that he speaks multiple languages; this week, he expressed sympathy to the French people for the destruction caused by the fire in the Cathedral of Notre Dame — *in French*" (Navarrette, 2019).

Buttigieg's authenticity was considerably affected by his trustworthiness and accountability. This is perfectly illustrated by one incident that took place in Washington, D.C., on April 4, 2019. When Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, the President of Respect Ability, asked Mayor Pete an important question: "Will you be putting people with disabilities in your campaign ads and will you be putting them on your staff?", his answer was a laconic "Yes". What really turned the attention of many media pundits and political commentators

was what followed; "...by the end of the month, Buttigieg had kept his promise by hiring Emily Voorde, a wheelchair-user, to work for his campaign. This occurred only days after sending a video message using American Sign Language to a deaf supporter to thank him for his support" (Baker, 2019). This action immediately reverberated throughout the entire American media ecosystem, contributing considerably to the development of his political brand perceived authenticity.

Buttigieg's political authenticity was also significantly bolstered by his strategic decision to increase his brand awareness and name recognition among American voters-consumers by being constantly available to political pundits and journalists. Mayor Pete understood that – as Matthew Yglesias so eloquently put it – "in a crowded field, attention is the scarcest commodity, and it's worth seeking wherever it can be found" (Yglesias, 2019). Buttigieg's decision to say "yes" to all sorts of media invitations and embrace media agnostic philosophy became the linchpin of his brand communications and public relations strategy. Commenting on the success of Mayor Pete's brand communications strategy, Charlotte Alter, the TIME magazine correspondent said: "Pete was able to will himself from a no-name mayor of South Bend, Indiana to top-tier presidential contender partly because he talked to the press: in the early parts of his campaign, he talked to everyone all the time. [...] His campaign made it easy. You could get an interview with him. His staff would pick up the phone and comment and not stonewall you. This was all part of Lis Smith's [Buttigieg's campaign strategist] 'go everywhere' strategy, and it worked: Where other campaigns try to shelter their candidate from the news media, Pete was giving so many interviews to so many outlets that it sometimes felt like an exclusive with him would only last for a couple days or hours before he'd talk to someone else" (Stelter, 2020). Alter also acknowledged the effectiveness of this brand communications strategy for a political contender with virtually zero name recognition: "It also worked well for a candidate as disciplined as Pete – in all those interviews, and in several bus tours full of press, he rarely made any gaffes" (Stelter, 2020). Alter's last comment is an important one since it touches upon the critical role consistent brand identity plays in the brand development and management process. Walter Shapiro – a highly revered American political journalist – applauded Buttigieg's authenticity and brand communications strategy when he said: "I want to praise Pete Buttigieg and Lis Smith for running the most press friendly and

accessible major presidential campaign since the heyday of John McCain. I hope that someone saves the tapes of all Buttigieg's countless interviews as a lesson for all future candidates" (Stelter, 2020). According to Howard Dean – the former Democratic National Committee chairman – Buttigieg's authenticity was also amplified by his moderate stance on many issues. In the words of Dean: "He [Buttigieg] thinks clearly, is not particularly ideological; open to new ideas. The fact that he is gay and married and running for president is a huge signal to his generation and below that he gets it" (Wren, 2019). Buttigieg's authenticity was also a function of his varied experience, expertise, and education. During an interview on CBS THIS MORNING on January 31, 2019, Buttigieg addressed the issue of his experience head-on by saying: "Look, I've got more experience in government than the president of the United States [Donald Trump]. I've got more years of executive experience than the vice president [Mike Pence]. And I have more military experience than anybody behind that desk since George H.W. Bush. It's not a conventional background, but I don't think it's time for a conventional background" (Wren, 2019). Several political journalists called Mayor Pete a politician characterized by "an uncanny sense of public opinion" (Shepard, 2019). This description was explained by pointing out that Buttigieg was able to adamantly avoid "talking sides in the political and cultural battles that have defined American politics for the past three decades, instead arguing that he's the one who can bridge the divide between coastal states and fly-over states, between the party's left wing and its center, between an anti-LGBT – but delicious – chicken chain [Chick-fill-A, the American fast-food chain whose politics have supported groups that opposed same-sex marriage] and everyone else" (Shepard, 2019).

According to Alex Shepard, Buttigieg's authenticity was a vital part of his strong and compelling political brand: "Buttigieg's appeal rests on his authenticity. In *Shortest Way Home*, he casts himself as a regular guy who just happens to be mayor. He writes about what it's like to attend festivities that often involve heavy drinking as a politician ("retail politics is never fun among the intoxicated"), an angry and bigoted constituent who happens to be a neighbor and trying to figure out how "a gay mayor—or any mayor" navigates the dating scene. His willingness to peel back the curtain has found him a number of admirers already. "Perhaps his success to date tells us the secret to unifying the country does not rest with fighting Trumpian fire with fire nor in being a celebrity candidate of the

left,” wrote Jennifer Rubin, of all people, in *The Washington Post*. “The secret to unifying the country, to underscoring Trump’s total unfitness to hold office and to breaking through the media noise is to eschew cynicism and artifice. Refusing to sound like a politician running for president or to buy into the media narrative makes him unique in a pack of sameness”” (Shepard, 2019).

In summary, political brand authenticity is increasingly playing a profound role in electoral politics in the United States. According to Anna Inés Langer, political authenticity has its roots in two interconnected and interdependent processes: “the presidentialisation of power (accumulation of political power in the hands of individuals) and the personalisation of politics. The latter is further broken down into two elements: an increased focus in the public arena on the politician's leadership qualities, and a focus on personal life and human qualities. This focus on the personal ... is a relatively new expectation within politics: an increasing demand that politicians make their personal lives and qualities publicly available. Furthermore, the personal has now become a key criterion for assessing, and as a reason for identifying with, a politician. In other words, we are invited to judge politicians through the lens of their "authenticity." The character of the politician becomes revealed in her personal life, and mass media play a crucial role here. By virtue of being positioned as the gatekeepers of democracy, media certainly promise to make politicians "known" to us, the citizens. Other trends, such as the weakening power of political parties to elicit citizens' loyalty, the politicisation of personal lifestyle and consumer choices, and the increasing preoccupation with the intimate lives of public figures coalesce in creating the conjuncture within which "authenticity" becomes the lens through which we evaluate a politician and decide to place our faith in her” (Dumitrica, 2014, p. 56). Mayor Pete’s political brand perceived authenticity played a significant role in his political brand development endeavor and – subsequently - his rising popularity. His highly evocative and – at times – personal and heart-wrenching speeches, combined with his *boy scout* demeanor, signature look, eloquent and yet plain-spoken way of expressing his ideas, and varied experiences - including his Harvard education and military service - constituted the nucleus of his political authenticity, highly valued and respected by his supporters.

This subchapter attempted to address the following hypothesis: Brand Authenticity is an important driver of brand loyalty. To that end, an empirical research study was

conducted that included a quantitative survey of 549 respondents who voted in 2020 United States presidential election. This subchapter was also based on the case study of Pete Buttigieg's political brand development during the 2020 presidential election in the U.S. It has been recognized by several scholars that political brand authenticity leads to increased levels of voter-consumer loyalty towards the brand (Valgardsson et al., 2020). Voters-consumers' trust and loyalty towards a political brand is a function of perceived authenticity of the political brand. The presented in this subchapter evidence proves that authenticity has emerged as a prominent concept in the current context of electoral politics. Its immense popularity in political brand management has also inspired an increasingly growing – but still highly fragmented – body of research in political branding discipline. Since political branding academic discipline lacks an integrative conceptualization, this subchapter's objective was to clarify the concept of political brand authenticity for academic discourse and as a research object for political branding discipline. This subchapter provided a comprehensive review of research on brand authenticity in political branding and offered an understanding of political brand authenticity as a multifaceted psycho-socio-managerial construct which is developed and negotiated in complex communication processes among political actors, voters-consumers, and the media. The author – based on the meticulous analysis of the body of research on brand authenticity – conceptualized brand authenticity as a function of voters-consumers' perceptions of political brand's: 1) trustworthiness and genuineness, 2) typicality vs atypicality relative to other political brands, 3) competency, necessary acumen, experience, and skills to be a president, and 4) the degree to which the political brand reflects country values, culture, and shared principles. Political brand authenticity can be succinctly defined as a political brand's accurate presentation of beliefs that define its own self. While brand integrity – a concept that is commonly confused with authenticity – implies that a political brand is committed to morally right principles, authenticity revolves around a political brand's commitment to one's principles, whether right or wrong. For example, if Donald Trump doesn't behave according to the moral principle of kindness, he appears low on integrity, but is still perceived as highly authentic, as long as kindness is not a moral principle that Donald Trump publicly embraces (Luebke, 2021). Political brand authenticity serves as an antecedent of voter-consumer loyalty; it is inextricably intertwined with consistency

(authenticity is often synonymous with predictability), spontaneity (spontaneous individuals are seen as genuine), ordinariness (simple tastes and habits resonate with the average voters-consumers and render the political brand authentic) , outspokenness (frankness is associated with authenticity), and outsider status (outsider status contributes to authenticity) (Enli, 2024). Pete Buttigieg's brand authenticity was recognized by voters-consumers who praised this feature and provided him with impressive levels of loyalty that catapulted him into political stardom and facilitated his burgeoning political career.

5.5. The Impact Of Political Brand Positioning Strategy On Voters-Consumers' Perceptions

When Pete Buttigieg officially entered the 2020 Democratic presidential race on Sunday, April 14, 2019, he immediately acknowledged his young age in his speech; he also set the groundwork for his political brand positioning by saying: "I recognize the audacity of doing this as a Midwestern millennial mayor. More than a little bold, at age 37, to seek the highest office in the land [...]. The forces of change in our country are tectonic. Forces that help to explain what made this current presidency even possible. That's why, this time, it's not just about winning an election – it's about winning an era" (Burnett, 2019). Buttigieg began his presidential run by immediately positioning himself as an ardent critic of Donald Trump. In his first speech he criticized Trump's campaign slogan – "Make America Great Again" – by saying that the only way to move the country forward, and instigate progress, is not to cling to an old way of life but to embrace tolerance and progressive values. "There's a myth being sold to industrial and rural communities: the myth that we can stop the clock and turn it back. It comes from people who think the only way to reach communities like ours is through resentment and nostalgia, selling an impossible promise of returning to a bygone era that was never as great as advertised to begin with" (Burnett, 2019). At the same launch event, he later said: "It's time to walk away from the politics of the past and toward something totally different [...]. I take that long view because I have to. I come from that generation that grew up with school shootings as the norm, the generation that produced the bulk of the troops in the post-9/11 conflicts,

the generation that is going to be on the business end of climate change for as long as we live” (Oliphant, 2019). These words set the stage for his laser-focused brand positioning captured in his political brand slogan “WIN THE ERA” and other taglines used in his brand communications, such as “Freedom. Democracy. Security” and “Respect. Belonging. Trust. Teamwork. Boldness. Responsibility. Substance. Discipline. Excellence. Joy.”. This political brand positioning very quickly catapulted him to the position of a top-tier contender.

The purpose of this subchapter is to address one of this research project’s hypotheses: Brand Positioning facilitates voters-consumers’ positive brand perceptions. To that end, an empirical research study was conducted that included a quantitative survey of 579 respondents who voted in 2020 United States presidential election. This subchapter is also based on the case study of Pete Buttigieg’s political brand development during the 2020 presidential election in the U.S. Brand positioning was already analyzed in the subchapter 2.2. This subchapter dives deeper into the concept of brand positioning and attempts to prove that well-formulated brand positioning contributes to the development of positive perceptions of Pete Buttigieg’s political brand among voters-consumers.

When Buttigieg visited Seattle just a few months later, on July 23, 2019, he promised his audience to “break the spell of the Trump presidency and usher in a generation of new political leadership” (Brunner, 2019). He positioned himself as a leader of a forward-looking social movement that would break ties with everything that was even remotely associated with Donald Trump and his policies. “What’s not going to work is promising a return to ‘normal’. We only get here because something was very wrong with normal” (Brunner, 2019). He reiterated his long-term progressive orientation by saying: “There is only the future and our determination to make sure the future is better than the past” (Brunner, 2019). Buttigieg also emphasized his “Freedom. Democracy. Security.” tagline by urging Democrats to start paying more attention to these concepts and not let Republicans distort the true meanings of freedom, democracy, and security in the American culture. He said that freedom should be redefined to include the right to universal care, education, and abortion. He also vowed to appoint judges who agree the landmark Roe vs. Wade decision is a settled law (Brunner, 2019). When Mayor Pete visited Las Vegas on

January 11, 2020, he emphasized that as a veteran, he knew what it meant to be an American patriot and protect the country: “When I was deployed, I can feel the way -- one of the things that protected me was the flag on my shoulder. That it was known to our enemies and our allies to stand for a country that kept our word. If we lose that, we lose everything. If you just think about the 21st century threats that we are dealing with, terrorism, savers -- cybersecurity, election security, that will take more cooperation than ever. I will never hesitate to use the tools of the U.S. strength when necessary, but I will also never hesitate to make sure that we reach out and include our allies, to build up the friendships that do the bulk of the work of keeping us safe” (author’s recording of Pete Buttigieg’s speech during his January 11, 2022 Las Vegas rally).

From the outset, Buttigieg’s political brand positioning was predicated on the singular idea that a young, experienced politician – a polyglot with a veteran status under his belt and impressive resume – would instigate change by ushering in a new era of millennial politics, a change of inclusiveness, common objectives, and prosperous future. This brand positioning was meticulously developed over the course of the campaign.

The fieldwork in study on brand positioning examines voters-consumers’ views on Pete Buttigieg’s political brand positioning. 579 respondents who voted in 2020 United States presidential election participated in this study. For the purpose of this research study, the author of this dissertation selected - using the mall intercept method (MIM) - a sample of 527 American citizens who voted in the 2020 United States presidential election and administered a standardized questionnaire to them. The study is an example of an exit poll survey conducted as voters left their polling places (inside shopping malls) on Election Day, Tuesday, November 3, 2020. Reaching voters at that particular moment helps ensure that the people surveyed have actually voted. Each interview was conducted on an individual basis. At the onset, each informant was asked to identify him/herself as either Democrat, Republican, or Independent. In order to eliminate the prejudice against Democratic candidates (Pete Buttigieg represents the Democratic Party) only Democrats and Independents were selected to participate in this study. Each informant answered four questions asking about their perceptions related to Pete Buttigieg’s authenticity.

Question 1: How effectively has Pete Buttigieg communicated his political vision during the campaign?

Question 2: Has Pete Buttigieg been clear about his beliefs, values, and political vision?

Question 3: Would you say you understand Pete Buttigieg's campaign message?

Table 11. Informant responses to Question 1: How effectively has Pete Buttigieg communicated his political vision during the campaign?

LEVEL	VERY EFFECTIVELY	EFFECTIVELY	HE COULD'VE DONE A BETTER JOB	HE FAILED TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY
VOTERS (n=579)	27%	48%	18%	7%

Source: compilation based on own research

Table 12. Informant responses to Question 2: Has Pete Buttigieg been clear about his beliefs, values, and political vision?

LEVEL	VERY CLEAR	CLEAR	HE COULD'VE DONE A BETTER JOB	HE WAS NOT CLEAR AT ALL
VOTERS (n=579)	24%	51%	21%	4%

Source: compilation based on own research

Table 13. Informant responses to Question 3: Would you say you understand Pete Buttigieg's campaign message?

LEVEL	I UNDERSTAND HIS MESSAGE VERY WELL	I BELIEVE I UNDERSTAND HIS MESSAGE	I AM NOT REALLY SURE IF I UNDERSTAND HIS MESSAGE	I DON'T UNDERSTAND HIS MESSAGE AT ALL
VOTERS (n=579)	30%	48%	15%	7%

Source: compilation based on own research

Overall, the vast majority of respondents expressed favorable views of Pete Buttigieg's core message, communication effectiveness, and political vision, which indicates that Mayor Pete's political brand positioning was well-thought-out, clearly and effectively communicated, and memorable.

Brand positioning is built through perceptions, images, emotions, and how voters-consumers compare one political brand with competing political brands (Pratisthita et al., 2022, p. 183). The brand positioning is at the core of a brand strategy; it is a unifying framework connecting brand identity, brand image, and brand authenticity strategies. It has been demonstrated that brands predicated on strong positioning strategies are on average 10-20% more successful than brands without consistent positioning strategies (Patel, 2022). According to many brand scholars, a strong brand is a function of a well-thought-out positioning. Several studies have demonstrated that a culturally relevant brand positioning “will make a brand more embedded” (Pratisthita et al., 2022, p. 182) in voters-consumers’ memories. When a cohesive brand identity is consistently communicated, the intended brand image will be increasingly embedded in voters-consumers’ memories. In other words, intended brand image is a consequence of a well-formulated and well-executed brand positioning strategy. Intended brand image is created when a cohesive and unique constellation of associations is consistently attached to a brand name – via brand communications - in the minds of voters-consumers. “Brand image is represented by all perceptions formed from past experiences. Therefore, perceptions formed from the past result in a person [having positive attitude towards the brand] because the brand must make a person have a good and meaningful emotional experience” (Pratisthita et al., 2022, p. 182). Numerous scholars from a wide range of disciplines – from psychology through anthropology to neuroscience – agree that emotional attachment acts as an affective basis of brand loyalty. According to several psychologists, deep psychological commitment is a foundation of brand loyalty. This commitment is inherently different from more cognitive views of commitment, and is characterized by “affection, devotion, and adoration” (Grisaffe & Nguyen, 2011, p. 1052).

Buttigieg’s brand positioning strategy was well-formulated and even better implemented. His tv commercial, introduced on February 26, 2020, captures the essence of his political brand positioning. Over the span of 2 minutes and 13 seconds, the viewer is introduced to the little-known city of South Bend, Indiana, where Pete Buttigieg is from. During the duration of the commercial, we hear a male voiceover saying: “In Northern Indiana, where the St. Joe River turns towards Lake Michigan, is an American city, a place called South Bend; with the son of a first-generation immigrant and fifth generation

Hoosier; grew up in the shadows of shuttered factories; where he later returned home serving as mayor, creating opportunity; representing everyone; helping bring his city back to life. It's where he enlisted to defend our country; learning no matter how great our differences, they stop at the flag on our shoulders. From this experience a big idea was formed; politics is not about who we reject but how we bring everyone along; one that won't be shaped by looking to yesterday but by our common future; public service is about helping people in their everyday lives; and this campaign is about real change to deliver the help and hope we need. This isn't a story about one place or one person; it's our story; our shared vision for the country we love; and it only happens if we act; together we will turn the page" ("Our Story, Pete Buttigieg for President", 2020).

This tv ad captured all the important elements of Mayor Pete's political brand positioning: his ethnic heritage, military service, political experience, uniqueness (a young mayor revitalizing the washed-out city), vision of a better tomorrow, compassion, inclusivity, and unity. Given that brand positioning requires that voters-consumers quickly grasp the essence of the brand and understand what makes it a superior competitive choice in a crowded political marketplace (YingYen, 2022, p. 55). Buttigieg's brand communications were delivered in a consistent matter emphasizing his overarching campaign idea revolving around themes of American future, unity, inclusiveness, and progress. When Buttigieg rolled out another set of tv commercials in Iowa on Friday, September 6, 2019, his message was consistently aligned with his overarching positioning strategy. "I've seen what we can achieve when we have each other's backs. But in today's divided America, we're at each other's throats" (Clark, 2019) - Buttigieg said in the ad. His passionate message of unity and common American objectives oozed through every image and every word of this commercial. He talked about climate change, rising health-care costs and kids "learning active shooter drill before they learn to read" (Clark, 2019). Mayor Pete's message was entirely based on his brand positioning strategy: "To meet these challenges, and to defeat this president, we need real solutions, not more polarization. I'm Pete Buttigieg and I approve this message, because acting together to conquer these challenges is the only way forward" (Clark, 2019).

According to Charlotte Alter, Buttigieg's ability to skillfully use the right words to communicate his brand positioning message – and not his policy - was instrumental in the

development of his strong political brand. As Alter explained: “He knows how to use words to create a narrative, and there’s a reason why his campaign was always rooted in message and not policy. He believes in politics as a form of storytelling, and the media is a crucial part of that strategy” (Stelter, 2020).

It’s not a coincidence that Alter used the word *storytelling* to describe Buttigieg’s brand communications strategy. A growing number of brand scholars argue that *storytelling* is an important concept in strategic brand management and brand positioning in particular. Storytelling - as Jonathan Bacon contends – “...or providing consistent and compelling content to build a picture of [a brand], is becoming more important as people scrutinize brands and businesses. And while storytelling is a broad concept that means different things to different marketers, exclusive research suggests that some brands are doing better than others with their stories and how they tell them. The study by research firm OnePoll, which was commissioned by brand storytelling agency Aesop, attempts to define storytelling according to 10 criteria, including whether brands “have a clear sense of purpose”, whether consumers are “intrigued to see what they’ll do next” and whether those brands “create their own world”. [...] “Every story needs to have content and emotion,” says P&G corporate marketing director Roisin Donnelly. “The brands that really succeeding today are the ones that differentiate themselves through storytelling.” [...] Ed Woodcock, strategy director and co-founder of Aesop, believes that a clear and popular purpose is crucial to a good brand story. For example, he argues that Apple’s top ranking is the result of its almost evangelical commitment to creating technology that improves people’s lives and the clarity with which it tells that story. “Its sense of mission manifests itself in everything it does: from the design of its products and stores to the simplicity of its advertising,” he says. Apple is currently running a campaign using long copy to explain the story behind its products” (Bacon, 2017). Numerous brand scholars are currently researching the storytelling phenomenon from the perspectives of various academic disciplines, including psychology, anthropology, neuroscience, and linguistics. According to Professor Arch G. Woodside from the Boston College, a growing body of research provides solid evidence that “stories move audiences to action” (Woodside, 2010, p. 531). Stéphane Ganassalia and Justyna Matysiewicz assert that “Storytelling is a fundamental human activity in that it provides the primary mechanism by which people construct and

understand representations of the world and then share those perceptions with one another” (Ganassalia & Matysiewicz, 2021, p. 437). Anthropological evidence unequivocally shows that “The art of storytelling is the oldest cultural activity in human history. People have been telling and sharing stories for entertainment and educational reasons since the beginning of time. In fact, storytelling is much more ancient than writing. Well before written text, people had conveyed their stories through cave painting, rock art, ritual chanting, and oral narration. It seems human beings have an inherent need to weave narratives to understand the surrounding world and their own lives” (Rogers, n.d.). The latest cognitive neuroscience discoveries provide new evidence that “Human memory is story-based [...]. Information is indexed, stored and retrieved in the form of stories. A story is useful because it comes with many indices (i.e., touch points to the lives of listeners/viewers or to others that cause implicit and/or explicit awareness and emotional connection/understanding in the minds of listeners/viewers [...]. Indices in stories can cause automatic (implicit) awareness, comprehension, and empathy among listeners/viewers. The concept of indices and constructing indices in stories is central to creating good stories. These indices may be locations, decisions, actions, attitudes, quandaries, decisions, or conclusions. “The more indices we have for a story that is being told, the more places the story can reside in memory. Consequently, we are more likely to remember a story ... and to relate the story to experiences already in memory. In other words, the more indices, the greater the number of comparisons with prior experiences and hence the greater the learning”. The proposition that indices in stories serve as touch points of a story’s core message to the listener/viewer is central to Escales’s proposal that narrative processing creates or enhances self-brand connections (SBC) in consumer theory because people generally interpret the meaning of their experiences by fitting their interpretations of experiences into a story” (Woodside, 2010, p. 532).

Buttigieg’s campaign – deeply rooted in message and not policy – benefited greatly from storytelling. Brand positioning and storytelling are inextricably intertwined phenomena. The major objective of brand positioning is to create a cohesive brand story with all the necessary components from the narrative (brand communications) to imagery (brand identity). A compelling brand story – rooted in well-defined brand positioning – is not only capable of differentiating the brand from the competition but also can induce

voters-consumers to perceive the political brand is a specific way (Rogers, n.d.). Brand story – having a foundation in a well-formulated brand positioning – can trigger an emotional response from voters-consumers and make them emotionally engage with the political brand (Rogers, n.d.).

It has been recognized – and confirmed – by anthropologists, linguists, and semioticians that all stories consist of certain common structural components of stages found universally in myths and legends of various cultures around the world. According to notoriously revered literary critic Joseph Campbell, there is a well-identified code in the stories of the world, a code predicated on – what Campbell called – *the hero's journey*. This journey consists of 17 steps that recur in the stories found around the world. Campbell dissected thousands of myths and legends and identified the universal theme – the hero's path, or the monomyth. The hero's journey boils down to the protagonist's evolution. It is a process of hardship, adventure, challenge, struggle, success, and self-discovery to – ultimately – become a role model – and contribute to the betterment of humanity. Countless stories, myths and legends, from Prometheus to Luke Skywalker, follow this code – “a set of narrative designs, motifs, character types, images, or elements” (Flynn, 2021). The 17 steps, as Campbell described them, begin with a call to adventure, a challenge or quest that an ordinary person is confronted with. Initially, the protagonist is reluctant to address the challenge and refuses to embark on an adventure. But with support and mentorship from a sage (or text), the protagonist finds the courage within and decides to embark on the journey. The journey is replete with challenges, obstacles, tests, hardship, foes and friends, and acts as a prelude to the ultimate task, which the protagonist successfully completes. The protagonist becomes a hero, is rewarded, and his/her act of valor contributes to the betterment of humanity. The reward – however - is not the end of the journey. The hero must get back to the ordinary world where his journey began and share his knowledge and experience with others. Campbell carefully delineated and explained his paradigm in his seminal book *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*. The first – initial – stage is called Departure or Separation Stage. This stage consists of five steps: (1) Call to adventure, (2) Refusal, (3) Supernatural aid, (4) The crossing of the first threshold, (5) Belly of the whale. The second stage is called Initiation Stage and consists of six steps: (6) The road of trials, (7) The meeting with the goddess, (8) Woman as the temptress, (9) Atonement with the

father, (10) Apotheosis, (11) The ultimate boon. The final stage is called Return Stage and consists of six steps: (12) Refusal of the return, (13) The magic flight, (14) Rescue from without, (15) The crossing of the return threshold, (16) Master of two worlds, (17) Freedom to live (Campbell, 2004, pp. 33-35).

Buttigieg's skillfully used Campbell's literary paradigm in his tv commercials and numerous speeches to position himself as an ordinary person who – confronted by numerous events threatening the freedom and prosperity of the U.S., such as horrific terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and the plummeting economy in his hometown of South Bend – decided to find *the courage to reimagine the future and win the era*. Despite his impressive – and elitist – education (Harvard University and Oxford University), Buttigieg – the protagonist – decided to enlist and join the U.S. Army. Sent to Afghanistan, he performed heroic acts of valor and was rewarded with the Joint Service Commendation Medal. He returned to his hometown as a hero to embark on a noble mission to revitalize his city and help his fellow South Bendians to achieve prosperity. And finally, when the country is threatened by the unpatriotic leader – Donald Trump – the hero responds to his inner call to save the country and embarks on the journey to the House White.

An attempt to dissect Mayor Pete's campaign kick-off speech can demonstrate his skillful use of storytelling and Campbell's paradigm. Buttigieg's began his speech by setting the locational context of his brand narrative: "And for everyone who came here from far and wide — welcome to South Bend. It's a deep source of pleasure to share our hometown with you. I'm glad you can see this for yourself, because this city's story is a big part of why I am doing this. I grew up here in South Bend – in the same neighborhood where Chasten and I live today with our two dogs, Buddy and Truman" (Burns, 2019). Buttigieg then opened his act one, his emotionally evocative origin story, deeply embedded in the American culture and history: "My father immigrated to this country because he knew it was the best place in the world to get an advanced education. He became an American citizen and he met my mother, a young professor who was the daughter of an Army colonel and a piano teacher. They moved here for work, settled into a house on the West Side, and pretty soon after that, I came on the scene" (Burns, 2019). Two sentences later, Buttigieg used parallel sentence structure, which is considered a distinguished characteristic of effective storytelling: "Think of the forces that built the building we're

standing in now, and countless others like it now long gone. Think of the wealth created here. Think of the thousands of workers who came here every day, and the thousands of families they provided for. And think of what it must have been like in 1963 when the great Studebaker auto company collapsed and the shock brought this city to its knees” (Burns, 2019). He then painted a bleak picture of the city’s economic decline: “Buildings like this one fell quiet, and acres of land around us slowly became a rust-scape of industrial decline, collapsing factories everywhere. Houses, once full with life and love and hope, stood crumbling and vacant. For the next half-century, it took heroic efforts just to keep our city running, while our population shrank, and young people like me grew up believing the only way to a good life was to get out. Many of us did. But then some of us came back. We wanted things to change around here. And when the national press called us a dying city at the beginning of this decade, we took it as a call to arms” (Burns, 2019). Buttigieg went on to talk about his work as mayor of South Bend: “I ran for mayor in 2011 knowing that nothing like Studebaker would ever come back — but believing that we would, our city would, if we had the courage to reimagine our future. And now, I can confidently say that South Bend is back. More people are moving into South Bend than we’ve seen in a generation. Thousands of new jobs have been added in our area, and billions in investment. There’s a long way for us to go. Life here is far from perfect. But we’ve changed our trajectory and shown a path forward for communities like ours” (Burns, 2019). In this paragraph, Buttigieg masterfully inserted the essential element – the core - of his brand positioning: “*the courage to reimagine our future*”. And then Buttigieg transformed his personal story into his grand narrative, his vision of America’s next great chapter (Gallo, n.d.): “If America today feels like a confusing place to be, it’s because we’re on one of those blank pages in between chapters. Change is coming, ready or not. The question of our time is whether families and workers will be defeated by the changes beneath us or whether we will master them and make them work toward a better everyday life for us all. Such a moment calls for hopeful and audacious voices from communities like ours. And yes, it calls for a new generation of leadership. The principles that will guide my campaign are simple enough to fit on a bumper sticker: freedom, security, and democracy” (Burns, 2019). According to Alexander Burns, this section of Buttigieg’s speech captured his philosophical approach to politics. In the words of Burns: “This is a core part of Mr.

Buttigieg's theory of politics: that simple arguments and sweeping themes matter more than the specifics of policy" (Burns, 2019). Indeed, Buttigieg shied away from introducing a well-articulated governing agenda, "opting instead to describe a philosophical direction for his administration..." (Burns, 2019). This section also acts as evidence that Buttigieg employed brand orientation as a dominant ideology guiding his political campaign; focusing on well-crafted and emotionally evocative description of America's future instead of hard-to-grasp policy talking points. Approaching the end of the speech, Buttigieg launched – once more – into parallel structure to reiterate the essence of his political brand narrative: "If I could go back into the past, it wouldn't be out of a desire to live there. No, if I went into the past, it would be just twenty years back, to find a teenage boy in the basement of his parents' brick house...wondering how he could belong in this world. Wondering if his intellectual curiosity means he'll never fit in. Wondering if his last name will be a stumbling block for the rest of his life. Wondering what it means when he sometimes feels a certain way about young men he sees in the hall at school — if it means he'll never wear the uniform, never be accepted, never know love. If I found him, and told him what was ahead, would he believe me? If could tell him that he would see the world and serve his country. That he would not only find belonging in his hometown but be entrusted by its citizens with the duty of leading it and shaping it. That he would have a hand in fixing the neighborhoods he knew as a boy, and that he would help lights come back on in that giant factory whose broken windows loomed like the face of a ghost over the ballpark he used to go to with his dad, wondering if this city was his own. To tell him he'll be all right. More than all right. To tell him that one rainy April day, before he even turns forty, he'll wake up to headlines about whether he's rising too quickly as he becomes a top-tier contender for the American presidency. And to tell him that on that day he announces his campaign for president, he'll do it with his husband looking on" (Burns, 2019). According to Alexander Burn, "This is the most deeply personal component of the speech, tapping both into Mr. Buttigieg's unique story as a gay presidential candidate but also more generally into the sense of alienation and anxiety that appears widely shared among voters of his generation. Though he presents his biography as an ultimately optimistic story, Mr. Buttigieg also describes feelings of loneliness and fear with an emotional honesty that we have not heard from too many other candidates, melding the

intellectualism that appeals to many Democrats with something more intimate” (Burns, 2019).

Despite the fact that Buttigieg’s lack of specific policy initiatives would expose him to some form of criticism, Buttigieg knew that what really resonates with people are compelling and easy-to-grasp stories, not elaborate policies. Carmine Gallo opines that Buttigieg’s well-calculated decision to resist articulating a clear governing agenda was predicated on his intimate understanding of the role storytelling plays in human interactions. As Gallo asserts: “Story is the vehicle of human connection” (Gallo, n.d.).

According to Will Barron – whose expertise revolves around brand positioning strategy – “You only get the opportunity to position your brand when you’re doing something remarkable. Anything else and it’s just comparison” (Patel, 2022). Buttigieg’s brand positioning was fundamentally different from the positioning strategies of his opponents. His peculiar name, violating-all-the-conventional-norms logo, signature look, well-selected color palette, perceived authenticity, and highly compelling and culturally relevant core message of unity, inclusiveness, progress, and new era constituted Mayor Pete’s unique brand positioning communicated in a hyper-consistent matter across all possible brand touchpoints. As a result of all these activities deeply rooted in strategic brand management principles, Mayor Pete developed a strong, compelling, culturally relevant, and emotionally evocative political brand within a highly saturated political marketplace. According to James Forr – head of insights at Olson Zaltman research firm, a pioneer in the use of brand science for market research and consulting: “[Buttigieg] is the only top Democratic candidate projecting anything resembling a forward-looking message. Yes, other prominent candidates have long lists of policy ideas, but that is not a message. And, yes, Bernie Sanders has a clear message, but it is one rooted in anger (justifiable anger, perhaps, but anger nonetheless), and historically that has not been a successful path for Democratic candidates or progressive causes. Finally, how would a Republican opponent go after him? Often, Republicans have made subtle attacks (or, in Trump’s case, not-so-subtle attacks) on male opponents’ masculinity. Buttigieg is gay and a veteran so those kinds of slurs may not stick, for a variety of reasons. They can’t frame him as a coastal elite, given that he is a small-town mayor in Indiana. It would be hard to paint him as a fringe radical, given his demeanor, appearance, and small-town bonafides” (Forr, 2019).

Strategic brand management – and brand orientation – can be successfully used to galvanize people into action and bring them for a common cause, value, vision, or idea. When the principles of strategic brand management are applied to electoral politics, the outcome constitutes a merged communication tone and voice, brand identity, brand positioning, and brand authenticity that has the capacity to unify the masses. The brand orientation – thoroughly discussed in this dissertation in the previous chapters – can be successfully used to connect the political aspirant with her/his audience “on an emotional level – the strongest way to send your message and build a lasting, and profitable, relationship with your target audience” (Robertson, 2018). According to Re Perez – founder of the strategic branding agency **BRANDING FOR THE PEOPLE** – “Branding and brand identity is as important to a politician as it is to businesses. The American election has been one of the most debated topics for months, but what do people really talk about when they compare Romney to Obama? Do they talk about the candidates themselves? Or do they talk about the ideas that they deliver? When I see political debates, I see two brands in the same industry fighting for the same goal, which is **TO SELL!** What they sell is not a tangible product, but it is an idea. They are selling the same idea, to make America a better place, in a different manner [...]. Why is branding so important? Because your brand distinguishes you from other brands. It speaks to your audience about what you do and where you position yourself in the industry. It represents the idea behind the creation of your company, and it tells your audience what you stand for and what you offer. If your audience can’t see the differences between you and your competitors, then they will have no real reason other than price to choose you over them.... For species such as gazelles, merging into the herd and not standing out is a good thing — it increases their chances of survival. However, unlike gazelles, entrepreneurs **MUST** stand out. Otherwise, they will never be known, recognized or remembered. And these elements are all key to survival in business today. Branding yourself is a way of telling your audience who you are. If they like what they see, they will become your clients and your friends. Effective branding is when you communicate with your consumers and respond to their needs. Branding tells your story through a series of messages. Remember: these messages must be clear, relevant and memorable. Most importantly, they must be consistent with your overall desired perception or impression that you wish to create in the minds of your target audience. When

you are congruent with your brand it is easier to maintain a consistent set of messages” (“Political Branding”, n.d.).

Viewing electoral politics through the lens of strategic brand management allows a political actor to develop a compelling, appealing, and emotionally evocative brand whose relevance can drum up voters-consumers’ support and loyalty. Political aspirants and incumbents alike can leverage the principles of strategic brand management by focusing on 1. Core messaging, 2. Brand awareness, 3. Targeting, 4. Brand equity, 5. Party brand equity, 6. Exposure.

Core Messaging revolves around brand positioning and constitutes the very foundation of brand development process. Core messaging – according to Lee Frederiksen – provides the words that help voters-consumers understand a brand’s relevance – why it’s relevant in the lives of voters-consumers – and values – what it believes in. (Frederiksen, 2022). Effective brand communication is predicated on consistent core messaging that is well understood by voters-consumers.

Brand awareness refers to the degree to which voters-consumers are familiar with the brand’s identity and name. A high level of brand awareness allows a brand to enjoy a competitive advantage. Color, for instance, can have a profound impact on brand awareness. Consumers instantly associate the color green with Starbucks. Starbucks’ earthy green – according to Akin Kevin – “is more than just a part of their logo; it’s a testament to the brand’s values and the experience it offers. This color not only enhances the perception of freshness and quality but also resonates with the brand’s commitment to the environment and ethical practices (Kevin, 2023). Political brands with high levels of voter-consumer recognition can also become synonymous with the entire political establishment. Politicians can use logos, brand identity systems and visual appearances, slogans, audio branding, and brand names to ensure that their brand messages are disseminated to the largest number of voters-consumers. Presidential candidate Bernie Sanders used a bold slogan – “A political revolution is coming” – to drum up voters-consumers’ support. This slogan also summed up the way his campaign portrayed him as an outspoken defender of women’s right, LGBTQ equality, patients wellbeing (“Fighting to Lower Prescription Drug Prices”), and students’ future (“It’s time to make college tuition free and debt free”). His core message was entirely predicated on a well-formulated brand positioning strategy.

Targeting refers to the process of identifying and choosing a well-defined group of people to receive brand messages. After political candidates have their core brand messaging developed (brand positioning) and are preparing to increase awareness levels among voters-consumers, they must select their target audience. It is imperative for political brands to connect with voters-consumers at the right time, at the right place, and on the issues that matter most to them. Targeting aims at tailoring political brand communication to potential voters-consumers based on their specific psychographics and political leanings. For example, voters-consumers in Texas might see a television ad emphasizing immigration reform.

According to Abigail Willimas, "Brand equity is a multi-dimensional and complex concept, but its understanding remains central to a brand fulfilling its competitive potential. Its complexity is demonstrated by a wide range of perceived interpretations and attempted definitions by both academics and professionals. A popular definition of brand equity is that of renowned marketing theorist and Professor David Aaker, who defines brand equity in his book 'Managing Brand Equity' as: "A set of assets or liabilities in the form of brand visibility, brand associations and customer loyalty that add or subtract from the value of a current or potential product or service driven by the brand." Put simply, brand equity represents the value of a brand. It is the simple difference between the value of a branded product, and the value of that product without that brand name attached to it" (Williams, 2024). Some political actors are extremely well known - the Heinekens of the political world - and others emerge from obscurity. However, regardless of the level of their recognizability, their major objective is to build strong brand equity. Given how important brand equity is, one might assume that well-known political incumbents would start off with a great footing. "That's not always the case, though. True, the public already knows about them, but oftentimes this means that the public has had more time to build up preconceived notions about the candidate. In these cases, politicians must not only make sure that their core messaging is strong but work on rebranding themselves to fight against the public's initial opinions of them. Less well-known politicians don't tend to have to fight against negative public opinion because no one knows them. At best, they might be faced with public opinion about the party they are a part of. However, they have to struggle to build their brand equity up, which in a world of political disinterest can be quite difficult

and expensive. They have the advantage and disadvantage of a blank slate” (“Behind the presidential brand”, n.d.).

Party brand equity refers to the extent a party’s brand influences voters-consumers’ decisions. Brands – as was explained in chapter 1 – are represented in memory as an associative network. This network is composed of (a) a central node signifying the name of the brand and (b) a cluster of associations that have become linked to the central node through learning (classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and observational learning) (Nielsen & Vinaes, 2014). Following the spreading activation theory of memory, it can be argued that the activation of a political party brand in the voter-consumer’s memory triggers a number of connected associations. These associations mostly revolve around subjective feelings, images, experiences, symbols, and conative intentions. The party names such as “Democratic” or “Republican” have highly specific cognitive properties which quickly discriminate one party brand from another. The party name REPUBLICANS in the United States could conjure up images of individuals who tend to be more religious and more socially conservative than those who identify themselves as Democrats. According to public opinion research conducted by the Pew Research Center in February 2021, “Republicans, along with independents who lean to the Republican Party, are much more likely than Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents to mention words like “God,” “freedom,” “country,” “Jesus” and “religion.” Democrats are much more likely than Republicans to mention words like “new,” “dog,” “reading,” “outside,” “daughter” and “nature”. Democrats are most likely to mention “new” in the context of learning something new. But some also mention it in the context of new experiences, meeting new people or other forms of exploration. Republicans are more likely than Democrats (12% vs. 6%) to bring up freedom and independence as something that gives their life meaning. Democrats are more likely than Republicans to cite physical and mental health as part of what gives them meaning in life. Democrats are more likely than Republicans to find meaning in hobbies and recreation, nature and the outdoors, and pets. Conservative Republicans are particularly likely to mention their country or where they live as a source of meaning. Among Republicans, 16% mention the country, patriotic and national sentiments, or the state of America’s economy or society as a source of meaning, compared with 12% of Democrats. But conservative Republicans (21%) are particularly likely to

mention society relative to moderate and liberal Republicans (9%), while there are no major ideological differences among Democrats” (Silver & Van Kessel, 2021). These party brand associations have a profound impact on the development of political brand strategy and, in particular, brand positioning strategy. Political brand communication should leverage concepts, words, and associations already existing in the minds of voters-consumers. Political candidates’ brands are inextricably intertwined with the party brands they are affiliated with. “No matter how much brand equity a candidate brings with them, as a general rule they get to share in their party’s brand equity. That means instant access to a dedicated voter base. These safety nets of voters still must be marketed to, though to a lesser frequency and oftentimes with an altered message that’s tailored more around party ideals rather than the specific candidate. In business terms, candidates would use retention marketing techniques to target party voters and acquisition marketing methods to target new voters. A good politician, and business, keep efforts focused on both. In short, as far as brand equity is concerned, well-known politicians must keep their brand equity strong and fight against negativity, where unknown politicians must build theirs from the ground up. Either way, they need to keep their core messaging strong and know who best to target their marketing towards” (“Behind the presidential brand”, n.d.).

Exposure refers to the actions taken to ensure a brand is seen, heard, noticed, experienced, and recognized by voters-consumers. This may be accomplished by brand communications (advertising, media presence, etc.). Increasing brand exposure and achieving high levels of brand recognition can only be done through establishing a clear, consistent, continuous, and singular brand message. Marion Andrivet contends that “Brand exposure can be defined as any moment or opportunity where the brand can reach an audience and be noticed by people. It is a key component of branding that mainly aims to increase brand awareness ... brand exposure is about the deliberate effort to make the brand visible and increase its reach. It involves actively creating opportunities for the brand to be seen by potential customers and other audiences, increasing the likelihood that they will become aware of it. One of the goals of brand exposure is to build brand awareness” (Andrivet, 2024). Andrivet is of the opinion that in order to increase brand exposure, two questions should be answered: (1) What emotions does a brand want to evoke through the interactions with the audience? and (2) What does a brand want people to remember from the exposure?

By answering these two questions, brand strategists can develop a clear and compelling brand exposure intent to help the brand stay focused and effectively achieve intended strategic objectives (Andrivet, 2024).

In today's noisy and hyper-saturated media environment, strategic brand management is more important than ever. By following the principles of strategic brand management, political actors can cut through the clutter and develop relevant, memorable, impactful, and meaningful brands that genuinely resonate with voters-consumers. The key is always keeping the target audience and brand DNA at the forefront. Brand communication should be predicated on the well-formulated brand identity system, brand naming strategy, brand authenticity, and brand positioning. Consistency, authenticity, continuity, and singularity in every touchpoint with voters-consumers lead to meaningful and strong brand connections with voters-consumers over time.

This subchapter attempted to address the following hypothesis: Brand Positioning facilitates voters-consumers' positive brand perceptions. The presented evidence indicates that Pete Buttigieg's political brand benefited greatly from the well-formulated brand positioning strategy. This brand positioning also contributed to the development of voters-consumers' positive perceptions of Mayor Pete's political brand. These positive perceptions translated in turn into high levels of loyalty towards Mayor Pete and elevated him into the upper echelons of the political world. It is important to remember that the only accepted currency – and capital - in politics are votes, public support, and voters' loyalty. As Abraham Lincoln had said at the initial Lincoln-Douglas debate in Ottawa, Illinois in August 1858: "In this and like communities, public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed" (The Lehrman Institute, n.d.). The political brand positioning formulated by Pete Buttigieg successfully differentiated him from other political competitors and embedded his political brand in the minds of the voters-consumers. The necessity of formulating effective brand positioning strategy in the political environment has been precipitated by the growing importance of personalization in politics. Personalization in politics is the process of moving from an era of party-based political communication to an era of politician-centric media coverage. Given the increasing importance of personalization in politics, numerous political actors (both parties and politicians) seeking to differentiate themselves and influence electoral decisions have

adopted the concept of brand positioning (Hammami & Baghdadi, 2024). This subchapter zeroed in on the exploration of Pete Buttigieg's political brand positioning strategy by analyzing the empirical data. The evidence collected during empirical research demonstrated the impact of political brand positioning on voters-consumers' positive perceptions of Mayor Pete's political brand.

CONCLUSION

Branding is an emerging concept in politics. From its humble origins in business, the brand concept has migrated to a plethora of other social domains such as religious institutions, universities, countries, artists, and political parties. Political branding is currently underpinned by a myriad of debates about how and why voters-consumers are attracted towards certain political actors, and the role brand concept plays in electoral politics. Market saturation, media fragmentation, and brand savvy consumers have forced political actors to seek effective tools and strategies to cope with increased electoral volatility, valance issues, and high campaign costs (Farhan at al. 2020)

According to Naomi Klein, the purpose of branding is to nudge the hosting culture into the background and make the brand the star: “it is not to sponsor culture but to be the culture” (Klein, 2001, p. 30). This correlates well with the emergence of political branding as a strategic orientation which seeks to establish a certain level of trust and loyalty between the brand and its stakeholders. A brand is the idiosyncratic identity and perception of a product, service, company, institution, place, idea, political party, or individual in the minds of its audience. Understanding the brand-building process, as it transpires in the minds of voters-consumers – can provide invaluable insights into many different brand-building strategies that political actors might employ, including which ones are most feasible and effective, and why each strategy works best in any given context. “Neuroscientifically speaking, the brand is ultimately a pattern of connectivity in consumers’ brains. It is the totality of the emotional and semantic associations that consumers have come to understand that the brand represents. And it’s this associative pattern that gives the brand it’s symbolic meaning [...]. A strong brand doesn't just exist in the mind of the consumer. It profoundly influences how consumers interact with and experience the world. And in doing so, it impacts every other area of marketing. For example, strong brands provide flexibility in pricing, protection against competitor innovation, encouragement for word-of-mouth marketing, and much more ... Perhaps the most impressive is how a strong brand can transform consumer psychology. Human perception is subjective, giving the brand ample opportunity to shape the consumer's direct experience. As the Pepsi challenge taught us, people generally prefer Pepsi over Coke when the blindfolds are on. But when consumers know what they're drinking, Coke reigns

supreme. When we think we're consuming the product, we're actually consuming the brand' ("The neuroscience of branding", n.d.). Brands are inextricably intertwined with human memory. But what is memory? Ivan Hideyo Okamoto, a neurologist specializing in human memory, answers this question elegantly: "What is memory? It's a path that builds up in your brain. If you want to keep some information, it needs to have an emotional valence and to be important enough for you to be willing to record it. Your brain makes a connection path between a neuron and the other neuron related with that subject. And this is physical, an extension of the cell connects with the other, named synapses" (Oliveira & Rodrigues, 2018, p. 5). Memory formation is based on a process called *emotional tagging*. The emotional tagging concept refers to a process by which the activation of the amygdala in emotionally arousing events marks the experience as important and aids in enhancing synaptic plasticity in other brain regions" (Richter-Levin & Akirav, 2003). In other words, emotional tagging is how the human brain stores a memory of an event, experience, individual, brand, or an action, and also stores a unique singular emotion associated with that event, experience, individual, brand, or an action. "Brands exist in people's mind as an associative network [...]. Brands also interact based on associations and create a consolidated memory structure in consumers' minds" – contend Juliana Oliviera and Maria Carolina Rodrigues (Oliveira & Rodrigues, 2018, p. 12). The associative network memory model argues that the human mind is a network of interconnected and interdependent nodes and connecting linkages. From the perspective of the network memory model, brand strategy revolves around building awareness to establish a strong mental foundation, then developing linkages to positive and idiosyncratic nodes to establish an attractive, meaningful, and relevant brand identity that matches target audience's values, needs, desires, aspirations, and convictions. This neuroscientific conceptualization of a brand coincides with Jean Baudrillard's assertion about the ascendance of the *sign value* of objects over their *use value*. According to Baudrillard, the symbolic dimension – what is *means* – "untethered from its material referent – what is *does* – represents the essential, desired component and propels commercial exchange ... Such patterns find parallel in politics. For instance, the demagogic force of feeling – defined as "affect," "emotion," or "passion" – has long been conceived as distinct from, lesser to, and intruding upon the sober wisdom of reason – defined as "thinking or cognizing". Research has shown that an

emotional soft-sell approach in political advertising by and large dominates, as images and music can be exploited for their powerful, yet subtle, influence” (Serazio, n.d., p. 3).

A brand encompasses the name, logo, audio messages, unique identity, values, experiences, and emotions linked to the brand, generating recognition, trust, and loyalty. There are many misconceptions about what a brand is, therefore, it should be clearly stated what a brand is *not*: A brand is not a logo. A brand is not a name. A brand is not an advertisement. A brand is not a trademark. A brand is not a unique palette of colors used in marketing communication. A brand is not a jingle. Yes, these components are systematically employed by a brand, but a brand is much more than these components. A brand is a sum total of all the experiences and impressions a voter-consumer has, based on every interaction she/he has had with the brand. Each one of these interactions contributes to the development of the brand in the minds of the voters-consumers.

This dissertation investigated the process of building a strong and appealing political brand and the impact of a well-devised political brand strategy on voters-consumers’ perceptions of the political presidential candidate. There is no doubt that both political and branding processes have a profound impact on virtually all societies (democratic or not and capitalist or not). Politics has a tremendous impact on individuals’ lives, and so too does branding, especially within the context of the excessive nature of overconsumption and hyper-branded American culture. Although, applying marketing techniques in politics is not a new phenomenon, in the latter part of the twentieth century commercial branding concepts and theoretical frameworks have been applied to politics with growing sophistication (O’Cass & Voola, 2011, p. 627). It has been argued that a brand’s value to voters-consumers is strengthened “when it is associated or identified over time with a set of unique elements that define the brand concept”. (Erdem et al., 1999, p. 302). One of the underlying tenets of branding is its ability to reduce voters-consumers’ search costs and perceived risk by establishing coherent, continuous, and singular identity, personality, message, communication, attributes, and promises. As such, brands should strive to maintain their defining and idiosyncratic brand identities (Roll, n.d.). It should be pointed out that “branding exists in two formats, namely brand management and a consumer-centric approach [...] which talks about the experiential learning which consumers engage in when they come in contact with a particular brand and in the process

are motivated to show their allegiance to the same. It is this approach which advocates the coming together of politics and branding thereby resulting in political branding. This holds significance because this aspect of branding has much to do with the preferences formed in the minds of the consumers owing to their experience with that brand. They take help of mental shortcuts to arrive at a decision with regard to that brand, developing an emotional connect in the process. The field of political branding functions in similar fashion and the advocates of the same vouch for this approach towards political branding” (Kumar & Dhamija, 2017, p. 77).

Although new presidential candidates are central to the health of a democratic country, large numbers of these new contenders fail each election cycle and are cast into oblivion. It is therefore a long-standing and central question in management to explain why some brands fail and some succeed. This thesis seeks to be a step in that direction by linking a plethora of research methodologies – including a quantitative survey of 600 American citizens who cast their votes in the 2020 United States presidential election, case study, observational method, comprehensive literature review, and document analysis – to ascertain which branding strategies discriminate successful brand in terms of the impact on voters-consumers’ perceptions of the political presidential candidate. This approach has been instrumental in attempting to accomplish the research objectives of this thesis: 1. Proving that the application of brand management principles and strategies in the U.S. electoral politics increases the incidence of success in presidential elections, and 2. Proving that existence of voting-consumption analogy justifies the application of brand strategies in the U.S. electoral politics. Several insightful observations have been unearthed:

- By studying several presidential candidates – and one in particular - and their campaigning strategies, this research attempted to isolate key success factors whose impact upon voters-consumers perceptions would be considerable. The empirical evidence presented in this dissertation demonstrates that a select number of brand components – key success factors - has a profound impact on voters-consumers’ perceptions of the political presidential candidate. These include: 1. Brand naming strategy, 2. Logo, 3. Brand identity system, 4. Brand authenticity, 5. Brand positioning.
- Following the principles of strategic brand management within the context of electoral politics increases the chances of being elected. Although Pete Buttigieg was not

elected, his use of strategic brand management catapulted him to political stardom and facilitated his burgeoning political career. Buttigieg led the 2020 Iowa Democratic caucuses results with 26.2 percent to Bernie Sanders' 26.1 percent, winning 14 delegates to Sanders's 12. Buttigieg finished second behind Sanders in the New Hampshire primary. After placing a fourth in the South Carolina primary with 8.2 percent of the vote, behind Joe Biden (48.7 percent), Bernie Sanders (19.8 percent), and Tom Steyer (11.3 percent), Buttigieg dropped out of the race on March 1, 2020, and endorsed Biden (Wikipedia, n.d.). On February 3, 2021, Vice President Kama Harris swore in Buttigieg as Transportation Secretary. Buttigieg's political future looks bright and exciting. Molly Jong-Fast, a New York author, journalist, and political commentator once famously remarked that "Even if Pete is not the [presidential] candidate, he is the future of the Democratic Party" (Allen & Vitali, 2019). And according to the research conducted by CNN, "Buttigieg is widely expected to run to succeed President Joe Biden – whether an open race emerges in 2024 or 2028 – and he's become the most requested surrogate on the campaign trail for Democratic candidates in the midterms ..." (LeBlanc, 2022).

- The human brain is hardwired to use selective perception when attending to a plethora of stimuli coming in from the external environment. Selective perception is a process in which a person only perceives what he/she desires and sets aside or ignores – subconsciously - other perceptions or viewpoints. There are different factors that may influence selective perception. All of a human's previous experiences have an effect on his selective perception mechanism (Marshall, 2022). Selective perception transpires when people search for, analyze, give meaning to, and recall information that confirms their beliefs, values, opinions, and discard opinions different from their own, such as supporting news sources that agree with one's political affiliation or religious background, while ignoring any opposing arguments from other sources. Selective perception has a profound impact on strategic brand management since consumers pay attention only to brand messages that are congruent with their existing attitudes, values, beliefs, and aspirations and ignore those that are incongruent.
- Given the abundant evidence supporting the voting-consumption analogy presented in this dissertation, it is highly plausible to call voters political consumers. As was

indicated in chapters 3 and 4, political brands are susceptible to the same mental processes of brand assessment as commercial brands. It has been well recognized within the academic psychology milieu that consumers' purchasing behavior influences how other consumers, friends, or even strangers think about them. This phenomenon is called expressive consumption. There is growing research evidence that corroborates the validity of a political science theory – whose major tenets overlap with the premise of expressive consumption - called *expressive voting*. “The idea of *expressive voting* captures the idea that voting may be motivated by concerns other than a concern for the eventual outcome of the election; concerns that are more directly and immediately linked to the act of voting, or of voting for a particular candidate or option, itself. A now-standard line of argument in support of the idea of expressive voting in large-scale elections begins with the observation that for an ordinary member of a large electorate, their individual vote is extremely unlikely to determine the electoral outcomes. Any *instrumental* calculus that focuses on the expected benefits associated with the outcome of the election, and admits that voting is at least somewhat costly, is therefore likely to show that voting is irrational. By emphasizing aspects of the act of voting, or of voting for a particular candidate or option, that do not depend on the outcome of the election, voting may be portrayed as individually rational; and such aspects have been labelled *expressive*. The basic idea here seems clear enough: voting, or voting in a particular way, may *express* some aspect of the voter's beliefs, values, ideology, identity or personality regardless of any impact that the vote has on the outcome of the election, and such *expression* may be valuable to the individual in its own right and so provide sufficient motivation to vote” (Hamlin & Jennings, 2011, p. 646).

The implications of the concept of political branding are far-reaching and have been thoroughly analyzed and presented in this dissertation. This thesis highlighted the various aspects related to the phenomenon of political branding and how it can be applied to increase political capital and cachet. During the length of this thesis, it was revealed that voters can – and should – be conceptualized as consumers due to the fact that they “look for mental short-cuts (known as heuristics) whereby they could decide which political brand they would prefer over others” (Kumar & Dhamija, 2017, p. 81). In exploring the

concept of political branding, the author has attempted to understand the essential nature and structure of key success factors in electoral politics using the lens of strategic brand management. Contribution to knowledge means developing new knowledge based on the existing available knowledge by conducting extensive and innovative research. It has been the author's intention, and objective, to proactively seek to contribute to the current body of knowledge in the field of management. The author is cognizant that more methodological and empirical work is needed on how to robustly capture the impact of political brand strategies on voters-consumers' perceptions of presidential candidates within the context of electoral politics.

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