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Review of the doctoral dissertation of Bartłomiej Rafał Białas, M.Sc.

titled *The Impact of Brand Management In Politics On Candidates' Competitive Advantage
In The U.S. Presidential Elections,*

Prepared under the supervision of Adam Figel, Ph.D., prof. UEK (supervisor)
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The Cracow University of Economics commissioned this review based on a work contract dated 20.11.2024.

The reviewed dissertation was prepared in English and is 302 pages long. It consists of an introduction, five chapters, a summary, a bibliography (more than 320 items) and lists of charts and tables.

1. The subject of the work

The topic of the dissertation is original and, at the same time, very topical, as it deals with the issue of brand management in the field of political marketing — using the example of the US presidential election. In his dissertation, the Author analyses the fundamental research question concerning the impact of the brand management process in the political market on the competitive advantage of a candidate in the US presidential election. The research topic fills an important research gap concerning the conditions and possibilities of using marketing strategies in brand management in markets and entities other than classic commercial enterprise markets.

The Author demonstrates vividly that brand management can be an important source of competitive advantage for various types of entities operating in commercial markets and the areas reserved for nonprofit social institutions. It also reviews various approaches to understanding the role of the brand and the planes of its analysis. These activities are part of the broader context of using marketing tools in nonprofit institutions.

The work is a development of classical marketing in political marketing. The Author rightly emphasises that the brand is a unique marketing tool widely used in markets other than the classic consumer goods markets.

According to the dissertation's Author, using brand management principles in electoral strategies can be an important source of competitive advantage for candidates in the US presidential elections. In this case, the Author looks for an analogy between the decisions of participants in the electoral process and the decisions of buyers in the market of consumer products.

2. Research questions and research hypotheses

The Author correctly formulated four research questions on various aspects of brand management strategies in the electoral market (p. 8).

Concerning these research questions, the Author also formulated five basic research hypotheses (p. 8). However, it seems that the formulation of some of these hypotheses could be slightly modified, as they are often like postulates, which gives them the character of theses (“is necessary...”, p. 8).

Specific formulations included in the hypotheses are vague (“significantly affects”, “considerably affects”, “is an important driver”, “facilitates”, “has an important impact”, etc.), which also affects the process of their possible verification (p. 8).

The whole set of hypotheses concerns the strong influence of various aspects of managing a candidate's brand in political elections on the electoral results achieved by the candidate and on the behaviour of voters who are the addressees of this political offer in the electoral process.

3. Research Methodology

In his research approach, the Author focused on qualitative research, emphasising the role of the triangulation approach at different stages of the research process. In addition to extensive literature studies, the research method used primarily includes the case study method and quantitative research, regarding the person of one of the candidates.

The technical conditions for conducting a survey of a sample of 600 voters in the US (participating in the 2020 presidential election) would require more commentary. This is especially true about sample size deviations for various elements of the survey being conducted.

The Author also used direct observation and in-depth interviews with selected voters in his dissertation.

Besides analysing a very well-documented case study, the most significant value of the dissertation is undoubtedly the extensive review of well-chosen Anglo-American literature on political marketing and marketing communications. The dissertation also analyses the chosen and competing candidates' election documents and materials.

The choice of the case study method as the basis for the dissertation seems appropriate given the nature of this study and the form of access to the subject of analysis.

Concerning the literature used, the dissertation is interdisciplinary, since in addition to the pure marketing literature on brand management strategies, competitive advantage, advertising and media, the Author also analyses the behaviour of the consumer-voter and his psychological conditions. The doctoral Student also used theoretical knowledge from the fields of cognitive science and consumer anthropology, as well as political science (p. 10).

The bibliography presented is dominated by Anglo-Saxon items, which seems justified given the topic and the language of the dissertation preparation. The bibliography collection exceeded 320 items, which should be strongly emphasized, as it required the Author to conduct extensive literature studies.

4. The structure of the work and the content of each chapter

The structure of the work is evident. The dissertation consists of an elaborate introduction (12 pages), five chapters of slightly varying volume (28 pages + 79 pages + 37 pages + 20 pages + 84 pages), and a conclusion (7 pages). The dissertation could be more harmonised regarding the number and volume of individual chapters, as significant disparities exist between its parts.

The work's first chapter is a theoretical analysis of a brand's meaning in the context of the socio-cultural environment. The Author presents various aspects of the concept of brand, which candidates can use in presidential elections in the political market to build their brand — strong and distinctive. The Author aims to define the basic concepts and show the brand's role in consumer-voter decision-making. Special emphasis is placed on the perception and perception of the brand and its attributes. The chapter is theoretical and developed based on analysing a broad and properly selected interdisciplinary literature. The Author also presents the brand associations of the two leading political parties, Democrats and Republicans, in the light of American research.

The second chapter presents various managerial aspects of the brand management process in the context of the specifics of American politics and the electoral market. The Author comprehensively presents brand management strategies in the political market, including brand positioning, authenticity, brand identity, brand image, and addressees' loyalty to the candidate's brand. All these elements play a key role in the research, the result of which the Author presents in Chapter 5. In the political market, brand loyalty plays a massive role and can be an important element of the competitive advantage of a party's candidate. Loyalty to a party's brand also has

an emotional dimension that plays a massive role in electoral decisions. Loyalty to political party choices is exceptionally high in the US market (p. 52).

Since the Author repeatedly refers to using the method of in-depth interviews with American voters in his work — this element of the research methodology would require a more precise presentation (p. 53. “numerous qualitative interviews”; also p. 60: the case of Elizabeth Warren).

The Author also elaborates on the role of strategic brand positioning in the audience's perception of it. The correct positioning of a brand influences its positive perception by the addressees of the strategy

An important element of this chapter is also a very well-documented consideration of brand authenticity and the impact of this attribute on brand perception. The entire chapter is written with great erudition and skill in transferring the threads related to brand strategies to the level of decisions and personal brand evaluations of various candidates in the 2020 US presidential election. This study required the Author to do a lot of bibliographic research, including in the American press, and the ability to synthesize the collected material. Given the most significant volume of this chapter, even more synthesis could have been proposed, as well as the possibility of introducing some tables to summarise various candidates' strategies.

Also exciting are the considerations of brand identity and brand image, supported each time by defining key concepts and discussion around them based on a diverse bibliography, often taking the form of mini-essays. Here, the Author demonstrates a skill in defining various concepts and presenting ways to use them in different markets. Also interesting from the cognitive side are the very well-documented reflections on the evolution of political branding.

Chapter 3 of the dissertation, in turn, was devoted entirely to the concept of competitive advantage and the role of the brand in building this type of advantage. The Author intended to show the dynamics that occur in the process of brand management in order for a candidate to gain a competitive advantage in the political market. The PhD Student's goal in the research process is to identify the key factors in the candidate's brand management process that enable the candidate to achieve a competitive advantage. The Author is particularly interested in the variation in the perception of the candidate as a source of competitive advantage. Here, the Author consistently refers to the analogy between consumer choices in the product market and consumer voters in the political market. The voter acts as a consumer for whom the candidates participating in the election compete. The issue of developing a unique competitive advantage for a candidate's brand in an election is at the centre of the Author's analysis.

In Chapter 4, the Author analyses the emotional and psychological factors that influence consumer decisions and choice decisions in selecting a favourite brand. Compared to its neighbouring sections, a highlight of this shorter (20 pages) chapter is the literature review on cognitive psychology and consumer decisions. Once again, the Author looks for parallels between the psychology of consumer choices, preferences and attitudes and participants in political elections. The individual chapters are subordinated to the search for answers to the research questions posed.

Chapter 5 and the final chapter present empirical research results emphasising success factors in brand management strategies in the political market. It reveals, in turn, the impact of the brand name and logo on its perception, voter behaviour in the electoral process and on building a candidate's competitive advantage. At the same time, this chapter is the most interesting because of the results of the empirical research presented in conjunction with the case study analysis. This part is intended to verify the adopted hypotheses, although the quantitative research results would require more commentary.

The first subsection, which uses a case study method to examine perceptions of candidate names and the modification of brand names for voters, is a fascinating study illustrated with examples of many presidential candidates in both primaries and elections. The material developed is cognitively engaging and based on many intervening cases of candidates. The strength of this part of the study is both the interesting selection of examples and the search for analogies between the rules used in brand management strategies in the commercial product market and in the electoral market.

The second subsection is also cognitively engaging, as it deals with the perception of the unique logo prepared for **Pete Buttigieg's brand strategy**, which is the key object of analysis within the case study

In addition to the case study method, the results of a quantitative survey of a sample of 547 Americans participating in the primaries ("the mall intercept method," p. 205), declaring themselves to have voted for Democratic or independent candidates, were used (p. 207). The empirical survey also focused on the candidate who is the subject of the case study, **Pete Buttigieg**.

The selected case study example of Pete Buttigieg's campaign logo seems interesting from a cognitive point of view, but — against the background of key presidential candidates from both leading parties — represents a more niche example of a unique approach to branding strategy. The uniqueness of this approach essentially conditions the research results obtained.

The paper lacked detailed information on the technical conditions for implementing the empirical study by the dissertation Author (“the mall intercept method”). This information should have been included more extensively in the dissertation, although the Author referred each time to a reminder of the specifics of this study

In the third subsection, the Author emphasises the importance of brand communication consistency, including the role of the entire visual brand identity system, the first impression effect and the role of personal branding. Here, he again uses the **Pete Buttigieg** brand case study, which is the axis of the entire dissertation, and the results of the survey (**512 American voters**, p. 219).

The Author does not explain the reasons for the difference in the number of respondents answering the various questions, which are still about one and the same politician. The Author's considerations are interesting, but it seems that they should have been at least partially disaggregated concerning key categories of voters to be able to assess how different groups of addressees (e.g., women *versus* men, older women *versus* younger women; educated *versus* less educated people) react to a politician's appearance and external attributes. This analysis was undoubtedly lacking, with the result that we learn little about the reasons for the diversity in candidate perceptions.

An analysis of the consistency and attractiveness of a politician's visual brand identity should be carried out concerning different groups of addressees, also considering the context of the environment from which the politician comes. It also seems that studying these aspects would require conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with representatives of different groups of voters, which would certainly not be easy but would enrich our knowledge of the choices of different groups of voters.

In the following sections of the dissertation, the Author “mixes” various candidates. However, it would be helpful to focus more on the leading ones who played a leading role in the elections. One also gets the impression that some parts of the dissertation take the form of cognitively interesting essays and collages from various media commentaries on the appearance and perception of candidates.

Another subsection deals with the authenticity of a politician's branding process as a basis for gaining a competitive advantage. The authenticity and expressiveness of a candidate are supposed to be the basis of his credibility and, further, the voters' loyalty. This part of the study, on the authenticity of the candidate, involved **549 American voters**. The problem of understanding authenticity and voters' perception of this characteristic is very crucial and ambiguous here (p. 236).

The asset of the approach adopted by the Author is the broad discussion based on various articles and media commentaries on the understanding of authenticity and the role of this factor in American voters' perception of candidates. At the same time, it seems that the results of surveys on the candidate of choice should be more widely commented on and discussed and not just presented in a synthetic form.

The last subsection deals with voters' perceptions of a candidate's political brand positioning in elections. The quantitative survey was again based on perceptions of **P. Buttigieg's** brand. It was conducted with a sample of **579 American voters** (which would require an explanation of the difference in sample size).

Analyzing the subject and scope of the study, one can ask: Isn't the doctoral dissertation a de facto in-depth case study of one candidate in the election, **Pete Buttigieg**? At the same time, the Author, giving the quantitative survey results, does not go into their more profound analysis. So we know what answers the respondents gave, but we do not know why, nor do we have any further information about the structure of the respondents themselves selected for this sample. All we know is that they did not vote Republican.

One also gets the impression that the Author focuses more on the candidate's electoral narrative and the story and values underlying the building of his electoral brand ("storytelling") and its positioning than on analyzing voters' perception of the positioning of this brand (p. 255). Of course, we are well aware of the impact of a story on the perception of its protagonist's brand. Once again, it seems that a politician's brand analysis should be conducted more in the context of the target group to which this message is addressed. The Author somewhat alludes to this problem by quoting research referring to concepts and values more commonly used by each leading party (Republicans and Democrats, pp. 265–266).

An important element in the context of American presidential elections, which the Author omits from his analysis, is the issue of election rules and the amount of budget available to each candidate to promote his political brand.

The Author rightly emphasises that his doctoral dissertation fills an important gap in the literature on brand management concepts and strategies in the political market. In particular, this applies to the brand management strategy in its broadest sense, and to the tools and process of marketing communication aimed at a wide range of voters-consumers of the brand.

In his dissertation, the doctoral student has undoubtedly demonstrated the role and importance of brand management strategies in the US electoral market, which is also an important reference point for this type of analysis and observation of various electoral strategies using this group of marketing tools.

In the conclusion of the dissertation, the Author rightly emphasises its innovative nature and the need for further empirical research in this area. It would be desirable to point out the future directions of this research while at the same time showing the limitations associated with the research carried out within the framework of this dissertation.

Conclusions

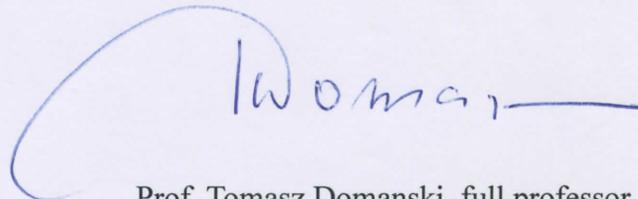
The doctoral dissertation of Mr. Bartłomiej Rafał Białas is an original scientific study and provides an original solution to the formulated scientific problem.

The content of the dissertation expands our knowledge in the field of brand management strategies in the political market, emphasising the analysis of marketing tools used to build marketing communications in the US electoral market. The Author has shown great erudition and ability to synthesize a broad marketing literature on brand management strategy and political marketing. The work clearly shows the Author's fascination with tools for building brand identity and communicating with message audiences.

The Author's contribution to the achievements of the discipline of management and quality sciences is to show the importance and relevance of marketing tools developed in the consumer goods market for their use in the area of brand management in the political electoral market. Using the case study method, the Author showed the process of creating a candidate's brand in the presidential election, emphasising the importance of a unique brand identity and a well-crafted narrative of its history. The work has an interdisciplinary dimension in line with the marketing approach.

In his study, the Author demonstrated the ability to conduct scientific work independently.

Evaluating the whole of the reviewed dissertation positively, I conclude that it meets the statutory criteria for this type of scientific work. I propose its admission to public defence at the Krakow University of Economics.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tomasz Domanski". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'T'.

Prof. Tomasz Domanski, full professor

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