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# **Political Marketing: Understanding and Managing Stance and Brand Positioning**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the strategic stance of a political brand and the factors that affect its positioning. The question related to the positioning of a political brand is complex. Nowadays, political leaders should be able to define the characteristics of their political brand. To succeed in the political arena, they must understand, identify, and utilize the most appropriate mechanism of communication to create an accurate perception of their political image in the market that is strictly linked to the characteristics of their brand and to reach these targets. For these reasons, it is mandatory to have measurement methods and comparable results over time.

It was decided to divide the overall research problem into four different research questions to explore and explain the mechanism of political brand creation and the interaction between political brands and the electorate and to do so through four different papers.

In paper 1, the political environment has been observed and studied. Subsequently, a theory of consumer and product orientation has been identified and utilized to both understand and to strategize how politicians can better position and present themselves to the public and voters. Paper 2 proposes a methodology to measure political positioning and constituent perception. The specific aim of the research is to explore interrelations between a political party's positioning in two different periods to discover possible discrepancies and changes over time. Paper 3 investigates whether the

negative impact of a political brand can influence a country's brand. The fourth paper tried to measure how the quality, readability, and frequencies of political messages could provide insight into the effectiveness of viral communication using a political blog.

This thesis contributes to the understanding that influence in a political environment happens in a bidirectional manner, where politicians are influenced by voter sentiment and voters are influenced by politicians.

The key strategic question then becomes not whether the stance is right but if it is appropriate for the environmental condition in which the party or brand finds itself. If it is, then the party or brand must both reinforce and maintain the mode of focus; if it is not appropriate, then strategists need to identify a more appropriate stance and engineer ways for the brand to move in that direction.

Political marketing managers could find the results of this thesis useful for revealing the difference between a political party's positioning and its perceived positioning as well as monitoring it in different periods to discover possible discrepancies over time.

## **Keywords**

Political marketing, political brand, brand positioning, brand strategy, political communication.



## Abstrakt

Denna avhandling undersöker den strategiska inställningen till ett politiskt märkesnamn och de faktorer som påverkar dess positionering.

Frågan som har att göra med positioneringen av ett politiskt märkesnamn är komplex och politiska ledare borde kunna definiera sina märkesnamns utmärkande egenskaper och förstå, identifiera och använda de lämpligaste kommunikationsmekanismerna för att skapa en riktig uppfattning om den politiska profilen i en marknad som är strikt kopplad till kännetecknen för märkesnamn. För att uppnå dessa resultat är det obligatoriskt att ha mätmetoder och jämförbara resultat över tiden.

För att utforska och förklara mekanismen i skapandet av politiska märkesnamn och den ömsesidiga påverkan mellan politiska märkesnamn och väljarkåren har det övergripande forskningsproblemet därför bestämts och delats upp i fyra olika forskningsfrågor.

I första avdelningen observerades och undersöktes den politiska miljön och därefter användes en konsumtions och produktinriktning för att både förstå och skapa en strategi för hur politiker skulle kunna positionera och presentera sig själva för allmänheten och väljarkåren på ett bättre sätt. Andra avdelningen föreslår en metodik i syfte att mäta politisk positionering och väljarnas perception. Forskningens bestämda målsättning är att utforska det inbördes förhållandet mellan ett politiskt partis positionering under två olika

perioder för att upptäcka möjliga avvikelser och förändringar över tiden. Tredje avdelningen undersöker om den negativa effekten i ett politiskt märkesnamn kan påverka ett lands märkesnamn. Den fjärde avdelningen försökte mäta hur kvalitén, läsbarheten och det ideliga upprepadet av politiska meddelanden skulle kunna ge kunskap om effektiviteten i viral kommunikation genom användning av politisk blogg.

Denna avhandling bidrar till att ge kunskap om att påverka i politikensker på ett sätt som går i båda riktningarna där politiker påverkas av väljarnas känslor och väljarna påverkas av politikerna. Den strategiska nyckelfrågan blir då inte om inställningen är rätt men om den passar för det miljöbetingade tillståndet i vilket partiet eller märkesnamnet befinner sig. Om inställningen är rätt måste både partiet eller märkesnamnet förstärka och behålla inriktningen på metoden; om den inte är rätt, måste strategen hitta en mer passande inställning och verka för att märkesnamnet går i den riktningen.

Politiska marknadschefer skulle kunna tycka att slutsatserna i avhandlingen är användbara för att visa på skillnaden mellan ett politiskt partis positionering och positioneringen som den uppfattas, likaväl som att kontrollera inställningen under olika perioder för att upptäcka möjliga avvikelser över tiden.

## **Dedication**

To my children Riccardo and Zoe—and my love,  
Michelle.

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This is another step in my personal life, and it has been surprisingly tough. Several special persons supported me in this adventure. A few years ago, my excellent friend Anjali Bal called me and, out of the blue, asked me, “Have you ever thought about getting a PhD?” I must say that Anjali is responsible for my decision. Prof. Leyland Pitt is a great professor who patiently but firmly supported me. Leyland has not just been supportive, but he is and will be an example of how you can enjoy life deeply loving your job. An important column of my experience has been Prof. Esmail Salehi-Sangari, who worked hard to create and develop the program in which I am involved, welcomed me, and pushed me towards the end, when it was necessary.

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Finally, I have an enormous debt to my wife, Michelle. She has trusted me since we were in high school and never stopped, even during this adventure. She has been a beautiful and strong supporter, and she never lost an occasion to demonstrate her support. Last but not least, I want to recognize my children, Riccardo and Zoe. From the day he was born well before the expected date, Riccardo demonstrated what a real fighter is and that life is full of opportunities to explore. Zoe never forgot to show up to kiss me at bedtime, with the sweetest smile I imagined every day of this beautiful journey.

My family is my strength.



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## **Chapter 1: Overview of the research**



## 1.1 Introduction

What is political marketing? Who was the first to talk, write, and think about this subject?

The first hints of political marketing began five centuries ago, when Machiavelli formulated perhaps the most effective definition of political marketing. «Niente procura tanta stima a un principe quanto il fatto di compiere grandi imprese e di fornire un'eccezionale immagine di se stesso. [...] Un principe deve soprattutto sforzarsi di dare un'immagine di uomo grande e di ingegno eccellente. [...] Deve anche, nei momenti opportuni dell'anno distrarre il popolo con feste e spettacoli» trad. "Nothing brings such estimate to a prince as making great businesses and providing an exceptional picture of himself. [...] A prince must, above all, strive to be a man of great talent and excellence. [...] He must also, at the appropriate times of the year, distract the people with festivals and shows" (Machiavelli, 1992, pp. 199, 201, 207).

The research problem for this dissertation was developed on the basis that marketing theories, paradigms, and tools have recently been applied to the political field and sometimes done so partially. In particular, the research problem of this work focuses on strategic positioning of a political brand and recognition of factors that can affect desired and perceived positioning of that political brand.

## 1.2 Widening the concept of marketing

Kotler and Levy proposed the possibility of marketing for politics for the first time in 1969, arguing that marketing, hitherto confined to businesses and commercial organizations, could be extended to all organizations. Bagozzi (1975, p. 180) saw marketing as an exchange between parties. He argued that “Marketing exchanges often are indirect, they may involve intangible and symbolic aspects, and more than two parties may participate”. Based on their interpretations of marketing, political marketing is a part of the paradigm, even though it is not focused on goods or services.

The American Marketing Association (AMA) officially defines marketing (approved July 2013; [www.ama.org](http://www.ama.org)) as “the activity, set of institutions and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large”.

When comparing this definition to the previous one—“Marketing is an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders” (AMA, 2004; [www.ama.org](http://www.ama.org))—it is clear that, with the inclusion of “clients”, the definition explicitly recognizes non-commercial marketing activities and presents an opportunity to revisit the interplay between commerce-derived marketing theory and the application of political marketing (Hughes & Dann, 2009).

Following the definition of traditional marketing, political marketing is more precisely described as “a set of activities, processes, or political institutions used by political organizations, candidates, and individuals to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange promises of value with voter-consumers, political party stakeholders, and society at large” (Hughes & Dann, 2009, p. 359). That is to say, the marketing aim of a political party or candidate is to communicate, deliver, and exchange offerings (policies for votes). Hence, traditional marketing and political marketing have similar objectives.

Passion and involvement seem to be the real difference between this field of marketing and the mainstream (Savigny, 2010). While classical marketing rarely inspires heated discussions, politics often fuels strong opinions. Therefore, political marketing strategies aim to target not only “voters” minds but also their hearts. Studies have revealed that political campaigns can elicit emotional reactions in voters (Schemer, 2012).

Both passion and a passionate approach to politics verify that voters have a clear image of the parties in mind; therefore, the importance of incorporating what constitutes value for the voter in the political brand can be created for the voter-citizen, instigating a voter-centric view of marketing. This is a priority political marketers must consider.

Scammell (2007) studied how the utilization of brands and brand identity provide a conceptual framework to establish links between the functional and

emotional attributes of political parties. This provides the ability to impart the positioning and communication of policy clearly. Smith and French (2009) also supported the theory of political parties as brands, having identified the means by which a political brand forms in consumers' memories and how, in order to be successful, political brands must achieve meaningful connection and a sense of community and authenticity while maintaining core brand values that are relevant and useful to voter-consumers.

This consumer-facing approach to value is one of the core foundations of branding and is supported by Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000), Duffy and Hooper (2003), Walvis (2010). De Chernatony and McDonald (2007, p. 144) identified the attributes of “love and passion, self-concept connection, interdependence, commitment, intimacy, partner quality, and nostalgic attachment” as necessary for a good brand relationship.

However, political marketing is a hybrid sub-discipline that draws on the parent disciplines of traditional marketing and political science. In this chapter, the aim is to focus on the need to adapt and adjust to changes in the parent discipline of marketing given the developments in commercial marketing practice.

### **1.2.1 Political marketing**

Butler and Collins (1994, p. 19) stated that political marketing is “the marketing of ideas and opinions,

which relate to public or political issues or to specific candidates. In general, political marketing is designed to influence people's votes in elections". Notably, political marketing employs many of the same techniques used in product marketing such as paid advertising, direct mail, and publicity.

Kelley (1956) is often credited with the first usage of the term "political marketing". In his view, political marketing was virtually synonymous with propaganda because its essential aim was persuasion. Lock and Harris (1996, p. 21) said that "political marketing is concerned with communicating with party members, media, and prospective sources of funding as well as the electorate". In this narrower perspective, political marketing is the process of communicating the value of a product or service (policies, political programs, and leader image) to customers (voters and non-voters) in order to sell that product or service (gain votes and trust).

However, political marketing is much more than political advertising. Shama (1976) argued that many terms used in conventional marketing, such as consumer behavior, market segmentation, image, brand loyalty, product concept, and product positioning, can be used similarly in political marketing. The link between politics and the marketing discipline was also reinforced by Rothschild's (1978) study on political advertising effectiveness, segmentation, social policy, and political policymaking.

In a wider perspective, political marketing is the process of applying tools developed for the commercial

marketplace into the political field (Egan, 1999; Farrell & Wortmann, 1987; Harrop, 1990; Henneberg, 2003; Lees-Marshment, 2001; Llyod, 2003; Newman, 1994; Niffenegger, 1989; O’Cass, 2001; O’Shaughnessy, 1990; Reid, 1988; Scammell, 1995, 1999; Wortmann, 1989; Wring, 2002).

Political marketing offers systematic processes for evaluating the desires and needs of the masses and specific instruments used to influence large groups of people as well as more focused target markets. Thus, political marketing offers theoretical frameworks and methodologies to study voters’ behavior and parties and candidates’ positioning strategies (Blumenthal, 1980; Nimmo, 1999; Sparrow & Turner, 2001) and also addresses governments in modern democratic countries (Butler & Collins, 2001; Henneberg & O’Shaughnessy, 2007).

In this sense, political marketing is “marketing designed to influence target audiences to vote for a particular person, party, or proposition” (AMA, 2007; [www.ama.org](http://www.ama.org)).

### **1.2.2 Political marketing vs. political science**

Therefore, as previously stated, political marketing is the junction between marketing and political science because it applies the specific marketing concepts (product, customer, sales, etc.), marketing theoretical frameworks and models, market-orientations, and activities (market intelligence, market segmentation,



internal marketing, etc.) to political science and molds them into an integrated theoretical framework.

In social science, political science includes the foundations of the state and the principles of government. According to Garner (1910), politics initiates and finishes with the state. Similarly, Gettel (1928) wrote that politics is the “study of the state in the past, present, and future”. Laski (1935) stated that the study of politics concerns itself with the life of men and women in relation to an organized state. Thus, political science focuses on those aspects of individuals that relate to their activities and their organizational affiliations associated with seeking power and resolution of conflicts within an overall framework of the rule and law, as laid down by the state.

The study of political science comprises state theory, the concept of sovereign power, forms and functions of government, the creation and execution of laws, elections, political parties, rights and duties of citizens, policy functions, and the study of welfare activities of the state and government.

Marketing’s application to politics and its development are strictly correlated to the evolution of political systems. Political scientists have been skeptical in their acceptance of political marketing (Lees-Marshment, 2001; Scammell, 1999). In contrast, political marketing is often considered of limited value due to its merely descriptive role. Political science scholars are more interested in the consequences than in how and why governments shape and mold public opinion.

The transition from a political and electoral system based on party affiliation to a system based on the candidates has increased the use of technical support, which has provided professionalism that is indirectly related to the field of politics. Echoing comments on political professionalism, Weber observed that, in his professional definition, the one who lived for politics was responsible for politics; new politicians are often professionals in other fields who provide expertise that was previously nonexistent within the political world.

The entry of new professionals into the political arena has opened the door to the use of new technologies, especially related to the media, electronic processing, and the election polls. These new technologies have in turn required additional technical professionalism (even more with the growing use of new media). Therefore, media coverage of politics induces political professionalism and becomes linked to the possession of different skills.

Many authors have studied election campaign development. Norris (1997) proposed the division of the evolution of election campaigns into “pre-modern” (until about 1950), “modern” (up to the mid-80s), and “post-modern” (current). The differences between these three phases concern not only campaign duration, which passes from short to long and then becomes permanent, but also other elements.

Firstly, electorate orientation changed; voting was initially characterized as stable, then became floating, and finally became intermittent (O’Shaughnessy, 1987; Wring, 1999). Indeed, once parties could count on

faithful followers, even after failing to keep campaign promises, the need for immediate and concrete answers to the problems of daily life prevailed (Lusoli & Ward, 2004; Mair & Van Biezen, 2001). Electoral choice tends to reward the most credible and coherent personality—a person who appears to be trustworthy and who will not betray the electoral mandate.

Furthermore, campaign organization moves from mainly local to exclusively national and finally to local and national in tandem. The presence of political consultants has changed. In particular, they have increased in number and improved in their level of professionalism. The type of prevalent political communication has also evolved. It was initially interpersonal, and then became national, and, finally, integrated between the local and national. Campaign costs have ascended from low to high to very high. Meanwhile, many authors have revealed increasing political disengagement and external members' disinterest in political activity in Western democracies, especially among voters (Dermody & Scullion, 2005; Miron, 1999; Spogárd & James, 2000; Teixeira, 1992).

Farrell and Webb (2000) constructed a similar pattern of tripartite division of electoral campaigns. This analysis includes a new exemplification of professionalization's development and, more generally, of election campaigns, which are divided into three phases.

The first phase is characterized by low technological and communication activities that are entirely managed by the party. In addition, the party is the main agent

with regard to resources and fund collection; activist volunteers are the main people involved. Still, the local arena is predominant, with limited centralization and coordination. Regarding themes, events are constructed on the basis of a leader in direct relationship to an audience, which is made up of groups from established social origins. Hence, the will of mobilization is much stronger than persuasion.

The second phase is firstly characterized by technological developments of the mass communication media, particularly the advent of television. This determines a series of consequences including the lengthening of election campaigns, the need for professionals with specific skills and the ability to drive candidates, and a greater need for funds. The campaign is nationalized; hence, power and resources accumulate in the center, and the party leader gains more importance. Finally, it also changes the target audience, which becomes large and socially diversified internally.

The third phase of professionalization lies in the era of the latest technological developments of the mass communication media such as satellites and the Internet. The characteristics of this third phase are the advent of a permanent campaign and the realization that the election campaign is usually entrusted to a staff of professionals. As for the message, it increasingly trends toward targeted messages, with copious use of feedback and subsequent adaptation of the message to the public.

During campaign evolution, particularly when entering the third phase, analysis and management of competition become technically complex new

commitments that require the professional approach offered by political marketing. Consequently, political campaigning has, over time, evolved from party-centered, labor-intensive campaigns, which relied on volunteers, to candidate-centered affairs with mass media advertising, marketing techniques, and professional campaign consultants (Gunlicks, 1993; Rayner, 2014; Strömbäck, 2007).

Many types of political consultants can be involved (Dulio, 2004; Dulio & Nelson, 2005; Kinsey, 1999): campaign strategists or managers (Goldenberg & Traugott, 1984; Rosenbloom, 1973); media consultants; direct correspondence specialists, who prepare and disseminate written reports; polls experts; and fundraising experts. Thus, the professionalization of political marketing has also permitted the application of mainstream marketing trends in politics. Mass customization started with the direct mass production of customized services for each user (Peppers & Rogers, 2001). Experiential marketing, which aims to create a complete experience for potential voters, has been introduced, for example, in the organization of special events (Schmitt, 1999). Real-time marketing aims to provide services that adapt in real time to changing preferences and needs of users (Oliver, Rust, & Varki, 1998).

### 1.2.3 Political marketing evolution

In this section, an overview of the evolution of political marketing concepts and theories will be provided.

The transactional approach, which focuses on the model of the “four Ps” (product, place, price, promotion) (McCarthy, 1960) and constitutes the foundation of marketing theory (Jobber, 2001; Kotler, 2003), was initially applied, with necessary adjustments to political marketing. Kotler and Levy’s (1969) suggestion was that political candidates could be marketed as well as soap. From this perspective, political marketing, as well as products or services marketing, must implement a varied marketing mix while creating a connection with the consumer.

The political product consists of the party and the candidates together with their image and the electoral program (Farrell & Wortmann, 1987; Shaw, 1994). Distribution depends on the organization of the party and the initiatives of the campaign at the local level. Promotion includes communication activities with the electorate. Electoral success is thus reached through the payment of a price by voters, which is represented by economic and psychological hope or insecurity (Wring, 1996).

However, some authors have outlined the difficulty of applying the marketing mix model to politics (Baer, 1995; Henneberg, 2003; Scammell, 1999). Indeed, the political product has a poor analogy to commercial products (Baines, Brennan, & Egan, 2003;

O'Shaughnessy, 2002) and is instead described as a complex and intangible product (Egan, 1999) comparable to services (credence qualities) (O'Shaughnessy, 1990). Long-term services in mature markets can be more realistically compared to political activity (Collins & Butler, 2003; Johansen, 2005; Lock & Harris, 1996; Scammell, 1999).

According to the abovementioned new definition of marketing and when considered with the radical shift from the transactional theory, a new definition of political marketing that focused on value creation, communication, and delivery emerged. Political marketing is “a set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering promises of value to voters and for managing voter relationships in ways that benefit the political organization and its stakeholders” (AMA, 2004, 2006; [www.ama.org](http://www.ama.org)).

### **1.3 Widening the concept of brand**

Kotler *et al.* (2005, p. 549) defined brand as “a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of these intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors”. Kim (1990, p. 65) argued that brand has no tangible properties, and it is a mental translation—an abstraction of that object or service. It exists solely as a “mental construct”, “typification”, or “idea” in the minds of those who behold it” (Kim, 1990, p. 65). This definition holds particular relevance when examining the concept of the brand outside of

traditional marketing. A brand is a form of physical stimulus harnessed by sellers to denote ownership. It gives a means of differentiating products and provides a guarantee of quality. Brands are often identified as elements that influence consumer behavior and offer shortcuts that enable faster and simpler choices (Maheswaran, Mackie, & Chaiken, 1992; Park & Lessing, 1981).

Brand is now recognized as performing a central role in business, and brand-related concepts underpin research in customer value, market positioning, consumer experience, and management performance.

According to Keller (1993, p. 1), “In a general sense, brand equity is defined in terms of marketing effects uniquely attributable to the brand, such as when certain outcomes result from the marketing of a product or service because of its brand name, which would not occur if the same product or service did not have that name”.

The expansion of the brand concept from its origin in industry and commerce to a more complex and greater number of subjects, such as universities, churches, and political parties, indicates the potential of applying brand analyses, ideas, and applications to political entities (Speed, Butler & Collins, 2015).

From the perspective of the firm, Neumeier (2005, p. 161) argued that brand equity is explained as the “accumulated value of a company’s brand assets”. From the perspective of the consumer, the study of brand equity concentrates on the ethereal aspects, such as



thoughts, feelings, emotions and associations, which are connected to a brand (Yoo & Donthu, 2001).

Branding analysis utilizes the associative network memory model to conceptualize the way brand associations are built in the minds of consumers (Anderson, 1983; Keller, 1993). The model conceptualizes memory as a network that consists of several small pieces of information (nodes), which are connected by associative links. Each node has a set of pre-existing associations that relate to that object. The connections between the nodes are established through different kinds of experiences (direct, indirect) (Grunert, 1996), and the information is recalled when the node is stimulated. The stimulus can be both direct (from an external source) and indirect (from a linked node being stimulated). This process is called “spreading activation” because it spreads through the network until the strength of the stimulus falls below the point of activation of the next stimulus. Learning is the modification of this structure, either by the creation of a new associative link or by addition of a new concept into an association set.

In business branding, research nodes can represent any form of information, such as concepts, values, ideas, and the concept of association sets, which have been utilized to help understand the structure of consumer knowledge about brands. Consumers have association sets for brands based on their past experience and direct or indirect knowledge. The association set can change based on new information or experiences. The value of a particular brand derives from its association set held in the mind of consumers (Keller, 1993).

Strong and favorably evaluated brands are therefore able to promise something valuable that competitors cannot. Accordingly, consumer behavior will be different and more favorable regarding negatively evaluated brands.

Therefore, brand managers have two main tasks: identifying the association held by the public and the customers about their brand, known as “brand heritage” (Speed, Butler & Collins, 2015), and favorably changing the association set.

### **1.3.1 Political Brand**

Short-term marketing campaigns, which were intended to influence specific and limited targets at particular periods of time, have gradually been replaced by long-term activities, which instead seek to increase the brand image of political parties. Candidates must now remain active; image creation via online communities must never stop. The key to governing and policy success is permanent campaigning (Bennet, 2003). Shifting from short-term to long-term communication enables the creation of a political brand.

Branding is increasingly used in non-traditional social markets such as politics. Notably, several non-commercial organizations are working on their brand such as the London Metropolitan Police (BBC, 2005), The Roman Catholic Church (Zinkin, 2004) and universities (Jevons, 2006).

“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” (Keller, 2002, 151). Political parties are therefore organizations where people can exchange ideas and opinions and organize strategies to reach a target.

Brand is defined as the following: “A name, term, sign, symbol, 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; [www.ama.org](http://www.ama.org)). If we extend the definition of sellers from goods to ideas and values, it is clear that political parties satisfy this definition. The electorate have symbols, names, and finally leaders to recall. All these elements, in the case of elections, are elements that influence voters’ behaviors by offering shortcuts that enable electors to make faster and simpler choices. Therefore, consumers have an innate motivation to learn about and decide on brands, both to know where and where not to spend their money (vote/not vote) and to cope with the increasingly complex and over-communicated world.

As stated previously, brand has been studied using cognitive psychology learning theory, particularly via the associative network model. Regarding political parties, every party, every leader, and every symbol can be viewed as an information node associated with other nodes. Every time this information node is stimulated (seeing the logo on television, hearing the name, reading it in the newspaper), it activates association with other nodes. The types of association held by political voters may be vast, varied, and often different from what was intended by the political parties involved.

Brand is therefore a multidimensional construct that contains both functional and motivational aspects. Motivational aspects result from implementation of the party or candidate's policies, which potential voters can judge in an objective and rational way. Motivational aspects are emotions and desires that arise from the subjective and interpersonal relationships of the subjects with the situation (Schweiger & Adami, 1999).

Recent research has explored different aspects of political brands: brand values (Lieb & Shah, 2010; Smith & French, 2009), brand innovation (O'Cass, 2009), brand differentiation (Lieb & Shah, 2010; Smith & French, 2009), brand positioning (Butler & Harris, 2009; Lieb & Shah, 2010; Smith & French, 2009), segmentation and targeting (Butler & Harris, 2009; Lieb & Shah, 2010), brand adaptability (Butler & Harris, 2009; Henneberg, Scammell, & O'Shaughnessy, 2009; Scammell, 2007), brand history and sustainability (Scammell, 2007) and brand notoriety (Smith & French, 2009).

As one of the first authors on this subject, Kirchheimer (1966) suggested that viewing parties as brands is an inevitable response to the move from mass-based to catchall parties. Voters are less influenced by class affiliation and more likely to act as rational economic actors when voting (Downs, 1967). In the past, to win an election, the catchall had to become well-known among millions of people, fulfilling a political role analogous to that of a major brand in business (Kirchheimer, 1966). However, this competitive imperative for catchall parties to move toward the

middle ground created similar manifestos with rather small differentiation and weaker elements of the brand.

Defining a political product is problematic because it cannot be meaningfully divided into parts, and its nature is complex and intangible. The political product embodies a certain level of promise about the future, where the satisfactions derived are not immediate but rather are long-term, vague, and uncertain (O'Shaughnessy, 2001).

O'Cass (2003) identified six key aspects of political products from a party perspective: the political party, policies, leaders, candidates, issues, and services. The combination of these six elements represents the basis of the brand of a political party or political representative.

In particular, positioning within the marketing framework is the act of creating a unique identity for your product or service in the eyes of the consumer. Political positioning is the act of creating an identity for a political entity. The perceived positioning of a political party is an organization's members' collective understanding of the political ideas presumed to be central and relatively permanent to the party; these ideas are what distinguish the organization from other organizations.

While all aspects of marketing are important, in the political arena, positioning cannot be ignored (Harrop, 1990). Politicians that portray a clear identity have an easier time enticing potential voters. Political entities inform constituents of their brand by stating their stances on issues of concern to voters (Ansolabehere,

Snyder & Stewart, 2001; Baines, 1999; Mauser, 1983; Smith & Hirst, 2001).

Campaign themes, which represent party policies and key messages, are crucial to influencing voter opinions. Themes are meant to be wide-ranging in order to include a variety of ideas and thus appeal to a wider range of voters; however, they are also determinant in formulating or identifying clusters of supporting groups because “without a target, a campaign has no direction; without a theme, it has no rationale” (Burton & Shea, 2010).

## **1.4 Development of research problem**

Several areas in political marketing require better understanding, including the stance and the positioning of a political brand and the factors affecting its desired and perceived positioning.

The question related to the positioning of a political brand is complex. Although the nature of a political brand is clear in previous literature, the processes and reasoning that a political subject can face in the brand creation process require further study because the effectiveness of a political strategy is highly influenced by the market realities of the targeted voting body.

Political leaders should be able to effectively define the distinctive characteristics of their political brand and subsequently understand, identify, and utilize the most appropriate mechanisms of communication to create an accurate perception of their political image in the market that is strictly linked to the characteristics of their brand.

To reach these results, it is mandatory to have measurement methods and comparable results over time.

However, there are risks associated with creating a brand because of the unspoken promise to consumers that their trust in the brand will be respected. This leaves the brand owner exposed to considerable reputational risk.

Political leaders must be vigilant regarding their brand's reputation and must understand that the effects of their mistakes or bad behavior can reach beyond their personal image. Political brands and political communication are different from personal communication. To understand the differences, it is therefore useful to both study methodologies that measure a political party over time and to identify and underline the differences between political communication and personal communication.

Based on the abovementioned literature review, we identified a research problem, which is examined in this thesis, in order to narrow the focus and deepen the knowledge of the previous academic frameworks.

The overall research problem has therefore been identified and divided into four different research questions to explore and explain the mechanism of political brand creation and the interaction between political brands and the electorate.

## **Overall research problem**

The political realm consists of three terms: policy, party, and person (Speed, Butler & Collins 2015). All three are subject to marketing communication designed to either reinforce or change voters' perceptions; thus, they can form a part of a brand's positioning. The parties and candidates implement the design and construction of the brand and the brand positioning in view of internal and external variables (Prete, 2015). The first variables relate to internal resources and party characteristics; the latter are in relation to the political, legislative, and competitive situation, to media, and especially to the peculiarities of the electorate.

In particular, it is relevant to assess the expectations, desires, and perceptions of potential voters (Pilotti, Ganzaroli & Guido, 2007). Political parties should determine the expectations of voters, the shared knowledge, the image of parties and candidates, the determinants of intention to purchase, the meanings and symbols associated with the experience of voting, and personal and contextual variables concerning participation in political activity (Prete, 2015).

From this, the overall research problem focuses on the comprehension of strategic positioning of a political brand and recognition of factors that can affect both the desired and perceived positioning of that brand.

**Overall research problem:** How can the strategic stance of a political brand best be understood, and what are the factors that subsequently affect the positioning of a political brand?



On the basis of this research problem, the sub-research questions in the following sections were developed.

### 1.4.1 Formulation of research question 1

**RQ1: Do political brands adopt strategic archetypes/stances in the same manner as conventionally branded products and services?**

Firstly, the aim to develop and strategically position a political brand is strictly connected with the need for marketing research. It is a subsequent consideration of the expectations, desires, thought patterns, level of involvement, and understanding of potential voters.

Within this approach, in which the voter is compared to the consumer and the party and candidates are compared to companies, is the transition from being product oriented to sales oriented, and market oriented (Lees-Marshment, 2001; Shama, 1976; Smith & Saunders, 1990).

Therefore, the starting point for this research was the exploration of political party strategic orientations.

Research question 1 was formulated as follows:

RQ1: Do political brands adopt strategic archetypes/stances in the same manner as conventionally branded products and services?

Parties and politicians should therefore use marketing tools and communication to convey the expectations and perceptions of voters toward their

political offerings and provide solutions to those demands and problems.

## 1.4.2 Formulation of research question 2

**RQ2: Does the positioning/stance of a political party change over time, and how can this be measured and evaluated?**

Political advertising and all forms of communication in general offered by the party or the candidate should try to influence the perceptions of the electorate and be measured through research activity (Baines, Harris & Lewis, 2002). Because a political party is an organization and not a firm, the relationship between planned and perceived positioning is fluid and unstable; thus, it can change over time.

Political parties and/or candidates that do not consider possible discrepancies between planned and perceived positioning and possible changes over time could give rise to frustration and disappointment within the electorate, both of which increase the perception of political hypocrisy (Prete *et al.*, 2015).

Research question 2 was formulated as follows:

RQ2: Does the positioning/stance of a political party change over time, and how can this be measured and evaluated?

This research aimed to offer a systematic and practical way for political party organizations and researchers to learn from consumer feedback in order to fill the gap between political party positioning and

perceived positioning when developing a consistent political brand.

Therefore, this study will explore interrelations between a political party's positioning in two different periods, before and after the decision to run for the election, in order to discover possible discrepancies over time.

### 1.4.3 Formulation of research question 3

**RQ3: Do adverse events and external elements affect the positioning of a political brand?**

Both parties and candidates must design a political brand that can differentiate and be easily distinguishable from that of their opponents with the goal of being preferred by potential voters, especially those who are undecided or volatile.

The political party or candidate must be able to personify the proposed values and issues and to associate their name with the precise aim of creating an orientation symbol (Schweiger & Adami, 1999).

However, there are risks associated with creating a brand because there is an unspoken promise to consumers that their trust in the brand will be respected. This leaves the brand owner exposed to considerable reputational risk (Buer, 2002; Van Ham, 2001).

Specific brand value or brand equity is constantly affected by its respective firm's actions. A better-educated and informed pool of consumers demanding a higher level of corporate social responsibility and ethics (Egri & Ralston, 2008) can quickly detect any negative event and associate it with the brand image.

Research question 3 was formulated as follows:

RQ3: Do adverse events and external elements affect the positioning of a political brand?

In this sense, political marketing can not only play the role of providing guidance and assistance regarding the general or merely tactical aspects of the political campaign but also can exercise an important role in shaping the strategy of the campaign policy (Bradshaw, 1995; Medvic, 2001, 2006).

#### 1.4.4 Formulation of research question 4

**RQ4: How do brand strategies affect the frequency and quality of communication used by political parties to position themselves?**

As to political brand building, even before actions and political programs, political parties and politicians should create the experience of political scenarios through communication, which will help establish the criteria and terms of comparison with which the activities of the party or politicians are assessed (Guido, 2005, 2015). This will reduce rather than bridge the gap between the perceptions and expectations of the voters.

Post-modern political campaigns are defined by the use of new electronic and digital media (Norris, 2002; Prete, 2007). New communication channels have provided more opportunities for actors and policymakers to disseminate news and information of interest. This has made it necessary within the design of political communication to choose the optimal form of media to spread political messages.

The Internet is a highly effective channel for political communication (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Norris, 2003) because it requires the user (i.e., the consumer) to take action in order to visit the websites and blogs of political parties and candidates. Other more traditional media (billboards, e-paper, and the presence of politicians on television) are less targeted and can therefore be more



invasive, reaching people who are not interested in politics. Although exposure to the majority of mass media can be both voluntary and involuntary, exposure to a website, a blog, or any web-related social media is deliberate and requires a degree of interest and active involvement.

Therefore, there is a risk of involving only restricted groups of the population. A successful message needs to be spread in several ways; a message that goes viral in the fastest way possible is more likely to reach both potential supporters and undecided subjects (Vaccari, 2008).

The complexity of the Web 2.0 approach does not lie in technology: creating a website can be done quickly via a variety of open-source platforms that are easily accessible and free to all; however, the construction of a network of active users and stakeholders is a much longer and more complex process. Building a network requires establishing relationships and trust between individuals who often do not know each other before they meet online (Coleman & Wright, 2008).

In particular, political blogs represent not only an additional communication channel but also an instrument for spreading editorial content and messages, which can virally infect more traditional media channels.

The extended reach and immediacy of new media platforms have increased the ability of politicians to communicate and spread political messages, especially if readability and comprehension fit the target. A key task

for any political party or politician is to make a blog understandable and easy to read to ignite and spread the right viral effect. To reach this goal, writers must consider both their content and their target audience.

Research question 4 was formulated as follows:

RQ4: How do brand strategies affect the frequency and quality of communication used by political parties to position themselves?

Each research question was written after the academic literature on political marketing was reviewed to acquire pertinent and necessary data from the fields of political marketing, communications, and management for this study.

The four research questions have been examined and addressed through my writing of four academic papers, which have been published in peer-reviewed journals.

## **1.5 Methodology**

Academic research papers use either the quantitative or qualitative approach. With quantitative studies, a deductive approach is used in which the researcher ideally identifies a theory that relates to the topic being studied, develops hypotheses based on this theory, and then tests those hypotheses with data that either confirms the hypotheses or debunks it.

The steps of a quantitative approach are generally fixed and follow a classical structure including an introduction, theoretical framework, conceptual model and hypotheses, methods, results, discussion, implications for future research, and limitations.

The qualitative approach is quite different and follows an inductive approach, which is needed to advance and build a theory. The process usually starts with an observation within a specific interest or area of research by identifying trends and patterns, formulating a tentative hypothesis, and finally formulating a theory or model.

Paper number 1 “How customer and product orientations shape political brands” follows this second approach. The political environment was observed and studied, and then a theory of consumer and product orientation was utilized to both understand a different way of communication and to strategize how politicians can better position and present themselves to the public and voters.

In the first paper, four strategic orientation archetypes (as originally presented by Berthon *et al.*, 1999) were adapted and analyzed, with particular focus on politicians and political brand. This paper presents a theoretical framework by which political strategists can use environmental understandings to better position political brands. Further, it is proposed that influence in political endeavors happens in a bi-directional manner, where politicians are influenced by voter sentiment and voters are influenced by politicians. By using a careful

analysis of the environment, politicians can better manage this relationship.

Paper number 2 applied mixed research methods, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, which is increasingly recognized as valuable because it can potentially capitalize on the respective strengths of quantitative and qualitative approaches.

The research completed a content analysis of a vast number of comments published by supporters of the Italian politician Beppe Grillo, with a focus on the theories of political party positioning and perceived positioning. The analysis was conducted using a Bayesian machine-learning technique utilizing Leximancer software. The results were discussed and the gap identified, which opened the door for future research and models for understanding and measuring the gap between political positioning and perceived positioning.

Paper 3 is a qualitative paper. We wanted to determine whether or not the negative impact of a political brand can influence a country's brand.

To reach the target, we studied the impact of a negative image of political leaders, especially the head of a government or state. In our case, this was Mr. Berlusconi (Italy) and the study of how his perceived image could damage both public and private sectors. We then paired the negative image with the fall of the Italian country brand index over time.

The fourth paper tried to measure how the quality, readability, and frequencies of political messages could provide insight into the effectiveness of viral communication using a political blog.

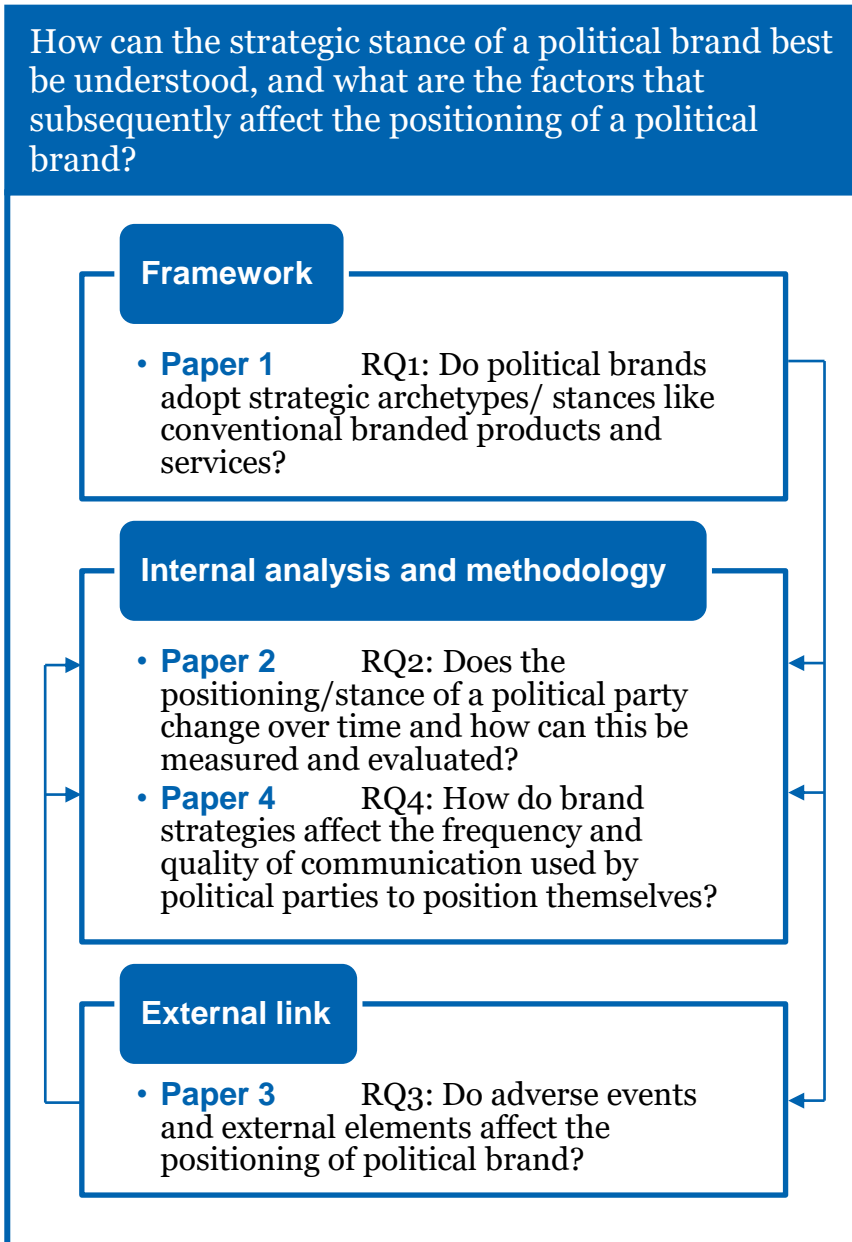
The blog under analysis was divided into two different phases: the former entries were intended to discuss political topics and were written by a non-political contributor; the latter were posts written by an active politician. We measured the results, and our findings indicated that levels of readability of communications might deteriorate significantly when a blog becomes political and the communication becomes more institutional.

## 1.6 Layout of individual papers

Following the research questions, this final dissertation is composed of four separate papers, which were published in international peer-reviewed journals. Each paper aimed at exploring the political brand positioning field.

In figure 1, the research questions' structures are defined in order to explain the *consecutio* of the four different themes observed.

**Figure 1** Research questions' structures



## **Chapter 2: Individual papers**





## List of papers

### **Paper 1: How customer and product orientations shape political brands**

Published in the *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 2016.

Co-authors: Emily Treen and Anjali Bal

Bigi, A., Treen, E. & Bal, A. (2016). How customer and product orientations shape political brands. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 25(4): 365–372.

### **Paper 2: Evaluating political party positioning over time: A proposed methodology**

Published in the *Journal of Public Affairs*, 2015.

Co-authors: Michelle Bonera and Anjali Bal

Bigi, A., Bonera, M. & Bal, A. (2015). Evaluating political party positioning over time: A proposed methodology. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 16(2): 128–139.

### **Paper 3: When satire is serious: How political cartoons impact a country's brand**

Published in the *Journal of Public Affairs*, 2011.

Co-authors: Kirk Plangger, Michelle Bonera and Colin L. Campbell

Bigi, A., Plangger, K., Bonera, M. & Campbell, C.L. (2011). When satire is serious: How political cartoons

impact a country's brand. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 11(3): 148–155.

**Paper 4: Viral political communication and readability: An analysis of an Italian political blog**

Published in the *Journal of Public Affairs*, 2013.

Bigi, A. (2013). Viral political communication and readability: An analysis of an Italian political blog. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 13(2): 209–217.

# Paper 1



## 2.1 Paper 1

### **How customer and product orientations shape political brands**

ALESSANDRO BIGI  
EMILY TREEN  
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*Published in*

Journal of Product & Brand Management, 2016, 25(4):  
365-372



# **How customer and product orientations shape political brands**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to present a theory of consumer and product orientation in the realm of political branding to illustrate how politicians can choose to position and present themselves to voters. It is evident that some politicians play an active role in shaping the beliefs and actions of their constituents, while others are more influenced by voter sentiment. The effectiveness of the political strategy is highly influenced by the market realities of the voting body in question.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A dichotomy is presented to shed light on how consumer and product orientation might influence the way in which politicians choose to address the public. Specifically, four modified strategic orientation archetypes are presented and analyzed with particular focus on political brands and strategy.

**Findings** – Product and consumer orientations have been shown to also be applicable to the strategic positioning of political brands. While it can be argued that no strategy is superior over another, careful consideration of the political environment in question and subsequent execution of an appropriate stance can be used to better manage the relationship between the electorate and politicians.

**Research limitations/implications** – This study provides academics in this area with a comprehensive examination of strategic orientation literature in



political contexts, and lays out a strong groundwork for future studies. In this burgeoning area of research, there are several opportunities for marketing and political strategy academics to dive deeper into the intricacies that drive politicians to adopt specific strategic orientations, and how these strategies evolve over time and in differing political environments.

**Practical implications** – This analysis suggests that there are opportunities for political strategists to explore the relationship between the identified strategic orientations and political brands, and for political marketing scholars to investigate the modes of focus presented.

**Originality/value** – This analysis provides better understanding of how politicians can influence voters and voters can influence political brands, and how the strategic orientation archetypes can be used to influence decisions about political strategy.

## **Keywords**

Market orientation, Marketing strategy, Customer orientation, Political branding, Political positioning, Political strategy, Product orientation, Strategic orientation framework

Some politicians follow and respond to voter concerns. Others shape voter concerns by their actions and strategies. It has been noted, for example, that as Americans increasingly did not support the war in Iraq after 2003, politicians also began to voice concerns and withhold their support. By understanding voter apprehensions, these politicians amended their political strategies. More Democratic congressional candidates than Republicans opposed the war in Iraq, which shaped subsequent voting decisions, and many American selected Democratic candidates. In this case, political strategies shaped voter behavior (Bianco and Canon, 2014). That is not always the case. History shows that while some politicians serve voters, others shape them, still others hold dialogs with them, and a few [. . .] simply ignore them.

Political scientists note four main sources of public opinion (Bianco and Canon, 2014). First, there is socialization, in which people learn their opinions from family and culture. Second, events can cause people to reconsider and revise their opinions in response to major changes in their environments. Next, groups that individuals belong to and define themselves by, such as sexual orientation, race, employment situations and the like can shape peoples' opinions. This usually occurs because people learn about politics from those around them (e.g. a labor union) because those who are "like" them (the "Principle of Liking", Cialdini, 1993) influence them more than others, or because politicians target their strategies at particular groups (e.g. labor, the

wealthy, the elderly). Finally, some politicians and other political actors shape opinions, and thereby win support. They are able to do this because they are perceived to have power or expertise.

In the expanding landscape of marketing research, political parties have become a highly examined topic of interest, and political brands have been and continue to be assessed under much the same criteria as commercial marketing interactions. Since Hunt's (1976) proposition of more liberal constraints of possible areas of marketing research to include any interaction between two parties capable and willing to participate in an exchange of value, the scope of acceptable areas of marketing research has expanded to include political branding. While marketing scholars, such as Kotler (1975), support political and commercial marketing contexts as being largely similar, other parties, such as O'Shaughnessy (2001), recognize that political and business realms are not completely equal and marketing is less relevant in politics than some believe. Each side has a case for whether political and commercial marketing are similar enough to warrant interdisciplinary comparison, discussion and analysis, but it can be argued that the bi-directional relationship and interactions between the public and politicians are factors that influence political strategy and actions of the electorate. There may be differences in the political and business landscapes that make marketing across each discipline not completely analogous; however, the two are as dissimilar as two neighboring cities and not distant planets.

The question of whether politicians succeed by understanding the needs of the electorate and responding to them, or if they shape the preferences of voters by means of their strategies is a fundamental one in political marketing. Answering this question not only has powerful practical application to those who devise political marketing strategies, it also raises interesting research and theoretical issues for political marketing scholars. There is a conceptual framework in the strategic marketing literature that considers these issues in depth, but it is one that has been overlooked by political marketing researchers. The purpose of this research, therefore, is to introduce this framework to the political marketing literature, to show how it can explain political marketing strategies and the positioning of political brands and to lay foundation for further inquiry into using these marketing orientations to shape political brands. We begin by introducing the framework and reviewing the relevant literature that has sprung from it. Then we use the framework to illustrate the strategies of four well-known kinds of political brands. We conclude by exploring the ramifications of the framework from practical political marketing standpoints and by identifying avenues for future research.

## **Customer orientation, product orientation and the strategic orientation framework Customer orientation**

Many marketing textbooks of the 1980s and 1990s taught that organizational success was to be achieved by finding out what customers wanted, and then finding a way to give it to them. This point of view was called a *customer* orientation, or a *market* orientation, and it argued that by doing marketing research, firms would find out what customers needed, and then be able to develop the offerings that would best satisfy these needs and lead to the attainment of organizational goals. At the same time, these textbooks eschewed an alternative viewpoint on the direction of the organization called a *product* orientation. By focusing on the offering itself and only then trying to find a market for it, organizations would be caught flatfooted by markets that did not want the product, service or idea – “the better mousetrap that nobody wanted”.

Customer- or market-orientation thinking led to an extensive stream of research in the marketing literature, particularly in the 1990s. Researchers such as Narver and Slater (1990), Narver *et al.* (1990), Narver and Slater (1991), Slater and Narver (1995) and Kohli and Jaworski (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993; Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Kohli *et al.*, 1993) devoted considerable effort to conceptualizing the construct of market orientation and to the development of scales with which to measure it. This enabled these researchers to not only identify the antecedents of the construct but also to demonstrate

that marketing orientation had a positive effect on a range of important strategic variables in organizations, such as profitability, growth and market share. This has led to a substantial body of work by other researchers over the past 20 years, who used these concepts and scales to investigate a broad range of other organizational variables in many contexts (Deshpande and Farley, 1998; Deshpande *et al.*, 1993, 1997; Pitt *et al.*, 1996; Özturan *et al.*, 2014; Wei *et al.*, 2014).

### **Product orientation**

However, at the same time that the market orientation research was receiving so much scholarly and practitioner attention, real-world evidence as well as empirical academic work was showing that under certain circumstances, a product orientation could be more effective. For example, Ford of Europe built the Mk4 Escort around extensively “broad” and “deep” market research, but when launched, the car was poorly received by both customers and journalists; sales volume had to be built through heavy discounting (Martin and Faircloth, 1995). As a result, Ford then consciously eschewed market-research input (Car, 1997), and stated that it would be a product-led rather than a market- or customer-led company (Bulgin, 1997). The popular business press is replete with quotes from renowned entrepreneurs who openly eschew a customer orientation. Apple founder, the late Steve Jobs said, “You can’t just ask customers what they want and then try to give that to them. By the time you get it built, they’ll want something new” (Burlingham and Gendron,

1989). Cirque du Soleil's founder Guy Laliberte contends, "We've done audience surveys that included questions such as, 'What acts do you like? Can you order them?' [. . .] If I take this to Creative, they will throw me out" (DeLong and Vijayaraghavan, 2002). And renowned el Bulli chef Ferran Adria simply puts it this way: "Creativity comes first; then comes the customer" (Norton *et al.*, 2009).

Just as the market orientation literature suggests significant links between market orientation and organizational performance, there is equally strong evidence of the importance of innovation (or more simply, a product orientation) to good performance (Capon *et al.*, 1988, 1992; Deshpande *et al.*, 1993, 1997). This implies that offerings precede needs and create their own demand by changing the way customers behave. Everyday evidence of this is plentiful: whereas just 10 years ago passengers on public transport would have been reading newspapers, conversing with others or sending simple text messages on cell phones, nowadays the great majority are checking emails, playing games, engaging in social media or surfing the Internet on smartphones. This is unlikely to be something that consumers could have foreseen or asked for. Many scholars have emphasized the fundamental significance of innovation to organizational success. More than 80 years ago, Schumpeter (1934) contended that innovations created by companies were the drivers of economic evolution and progress, while Nonaka and

Yamanouchi (1989) offer evidence that new offerings are essential to companies' ability to renew themselves.

### **An integrated conceptual framework**

There are many examples of situations in which both asking customers what they wanted and giving it to them have failed. Similar examples exist of expecting innovative products conceptualized with little market research to flourish, which have also failed. In the case of the former, Eli Lilly's launch of Humulin, the first human equivalent of insulin, was accorded an indifferent market response (Christensen, 1997). Humulin had been developed in response to the requirements of the foremost endocrinologists and diabetes specialists. These lead users disclosed that there was a large, untapped market for 100per cent pure insulin – not the variety extracted from pork, which had impurities that led to insulin resistance in some patients. However, the specialists tended to treat a far greater proportion of diabetics with pork insulin resistance, whereas most other medical practitioners saw diabetics without resistance problems, for whom pork-based insulin was quite effective. They had no need to prescribe Humulin and the product performed poorly in the market place. A customer orientation did not do Lilly much good.

When Steve Jobs was asked to step down from Apple in the late 1980s, he founded Next to produce a desktop computer. The Next products were technologically far superior to the alternatives at the time, in terms of both



hardware and software. However, the product failed and was withdrawn from the market mainly because customers just did not get it. Market orientationists would declare that Next suffered from technological myopia (Hill and Jones, 1998), as managers were so enthused by the wizardry of the product that they ignored basic market realities, and, of course, the customer. A superior product does not always succeed.

Berthon *et al.* (1999) argue that customer and innovation orientations are not “either-or” alternatives, and that the potential relationship between them is of a two-way nature. There is an information flow from customers to innovative offerings not only by means of traditional market research but also through informal knowledge and market observation by managers and others. Likewise, there is a flow of information from innovative technology to customers, and this has the potential to change perceptions, expectations and preferences. These changes may reshape the way people live, the way society is structured and the manner in which human beings conceptualize themselves – either positively or negatively (Wiener, 1954; Mander, 1991).

Thus, Berthon *et al.* (1999) argue that managers and their companies learn from the market, and the market (customers) learns from new technologies and associated products (Carpenter and Nakamoto, 1989; Carpenter *et al.*, 1994). As a result of the presence of this two-way flow of information for every product or service in every market to a greater or lesser extent, Berthon *et al.* (1999) suggest that by dichotomizing these

dimensions, four archetypal configurations can be identified for any marketing entity. Although for any one organization, the degree of focus on innovation, product and/or the customer can vary substantially. The two-by-two matrix in Figure 1 illustrates the various modes of focus that an organization can have. Of course, the notion of the organization is equally transferable to individual offerings (products or services), brands and even, we would argue, individuals (in the case of politicians).

**Figure 1** Strategic orientation archetypes

High	<b>Follower</b>	<b>Interact</b>
Customer Orientation	<b>Isolate</b>	<b>Shaper</b>
Low	Low	High
	Product Orientation	

**Source:** (modified from Berthon *et al.*, 1999)

In the next section, we extend the two-by-two matrix into the political sphere to illustrate the applicability of

strategic orientation archetypes thinking to political leaders as brands.

## **Strategic orientation of political brands**

### **Isolates**

The degree of focus on either customer and/or product orientation varies substantially across different brands in both a traditional marketing sense and a political one. Similar to the orientation of an isolated organization, the strategic orientation of political leaders falling under the label of “isolate” encompasses the conceptual structure of low customer- and product-focus strategies. In this quadrant, the organization or political brand focuses solely on itself and neither relies on feedback from customers nor attempts to create an offering that will create a market of demand. In the absence of democracy, for example, there may be little motivation for leaders to respond to or attempt to influence public sentiment. As a result, isolates are exemplified in several historical and contemporary examples of absolute monarchies.

Historically, political strategies emulating the orientation of isolates were common, due to the periodic superfluity of near-absolutism within empires and kingdoms, and the European belief in the Divine Right of Kings. While some political influence often lays with the nobility, either elected or royally appointed, systematic democracy with an even distribution of power was often flawed or nonexistent (Bragg,2007).

Many examples, such as the ancient Chinese dynasties, Roman Emperors and European monarchs, such as King Louis XVI demonstrate the practical application of a political strategic orientation that would seemingly only be successful in the absence of democracy (Wilson, 2000). Today, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of only seven remaining absolute monarchies in the world (Batniji *et al.*, 2014), where the royal king serves as both head of state and head of government. The Saudi Arabian kingship has been passed exclusively through the sons of the founder of the state, and political participation, although mostly limited to advising the king, lies entirely with the male members of the House of Saud and leading religious figures (Blair, 2015). Issues that directly affect the general population, such as foreign policy, national defense, international affairs, government budget, finance and health, are discussed among only a few appointed officials, with decisions ultimately being made by the king (Ochsenwald, 2016).

According to Ali Al-Ahmed, director of the Institute of Gulf Affairs, the priorities of the king are to keep the family happy, to avoid familial infighting that could jeopardize the dynasty. He says, “You will see more members of the family getting a greater share of the pie, the political, economic pie, at the expense of the people” (“How will the new King”, 2015). Offering his opinion about the future make-up of the political landscape, Al-Ahmed indicates that the strategic orientation will remain unchanged and the would-be electorate will remain silenced.

The lack of an electorate within the country illustrates the composition of a political strategy that does not need to react to or shape public opinion in order to stay in power.

### **Followers**

The strategic orientation of the follower is characterized by focusing intently on customer needs and reacting to them, and concentrating less on innovation or shaping consumer preferences through its offerings. The follower is epitomized by politicians whose campaign tactics are influenced by listening to and addressing, or at least promising to address, the public's concerns, to sway the electorate to vote in their favor. Politicians are elected to serve and represent the citizens, as true democracies operate on the basis of an even distribution of power among the people (Laxer, 2009). It is expected that democratic political leaders listen to the electorate and shape decisions based upon the public's need and expressed sentiments.

One example of a follower-style political strategy can be drawn from the United Kingdom, where in a by-election, the Labour Party narrowly won (by only 697 votes) over the United Kingdom Independent Party. After the unexpected close call, Labour leader, Ed Miliband vowed to "listen and deliver" based on voters' concerns (Mason, 2014). Miliband and his party recognized that the uncharacteristically marginal win indicated that the group's previous significant majority was no longer inevitable, and that a large number of

voters were feeling unheard by the party (Mason, 2014). To avoid another near-miss, Miliband and his group identified that an evaluation of the party's strategy would be needed to adhere to the electorate's most pressing concerns.

If politicians do not attend to the genuine concerns of the general populace, this can create significant push-back from those who are being ignored. An example of this is from the Canadian province of Prince Edward Island, where the mayor of the city of Cornwall commended the efforts of the premier of the province and his cabinet for “sticking to their vision in the face of considerable opposition” (Fullerton, 2013). This was in regard to the premier's choice to move ahead with upgrades to a section of the province's highway, even though a significant proportion of citizens opposed its construction due to environmental concerns (Province releases Plan B properties list, 2012). At one point, protesters held a rally, coined “the death of democracy”, and many camped in front of the construction zone, exhibiting their contempt for being disregarded (Province releases Plan B properties list, 2012).

A letter to the editor in response to the mayor's comments effectively illustrates the incongruity between the premier's actions and the mayor's praise, and the role of politicians as servants to the public. The author expresses that ignoring the public is not “something to be commended”, but rather that “the best politicians listen carefully to the electorate” (Campbell, 2013). Hinting at the rationality of the strategic orientation of

the follower, he explains that politicians must listen to and act for the public because “citizens experience the brunt and grace of political decisions. We are experts in the consequences of political decisions” (Campbell, 2013).

## **Shapers**

In the traditional mode of the shaper in an organizational context, the strategy is represented by a low customer-orientation and high product orientation in that the organization provides something for which there is not yet an established market or demand. In the context of political branding, the essence remains the same in that the politician is able to mold the opinions of the electorate, even against strong opposing viewpoints. The quintessential orientation of a shaper is that of a politician who has the ability to influence, and perhaps completely alter public opinion, without coercion. In a prototypical example, one can examine the effect that Winston Churchill had on the ultimate success of Great Britain during the Second World War, even as he was surrounded by whispers of uncertainty from Parliament and a skeptical public, who considered defeat at the hands of the Nazis inevitable (Best, 2011).

After British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain resigned early in the war in 1940, Churchill was not the first choice to replace him. However, he was eventually offered the position after it was turned down by the expected replacement. Unlike his predecessor, Churchill was very much against appeasement with Germany and

refused to accept, as others had, that Great Britain had to admit defeat. Not only did Churchill persuade the cabinet and parliament that Britain could emerge victorious from the war but he was also able to instill his vision of unfailing bravery and perseverance into the British people (Best, 2011). Churchill's unwavering tenacity, reassuring public demeanor and inspiring public speeches, united the people of Britain and those who had opposed his appointment as prime minister now stood behind him. With the government and the people's support, Churchill secured allies and changed the country's military approach from sluggish and defensive to an aggressive attack that greatly impacted the country's ability to win the war (Best, 2011).

Initially considered a warmonger by many, Churchill managed to sway the British government and people to believe that the challenges facing them could be overcome, and transformed ubiquitous despondency into hope and courage across Great Britain. When almost no one else subscribed to the same thought, he managed to shape not only minds and military tactics but also the course of history.

## **Interacts**

Interacts establish a bi-directional dialogue by not only attempting to listen to customers (or voters) but also attempting to shape customer wants (or public opinion), and are depicted by high levels of both customer and product-orientation. Political interacts epitomize a hybrid stance between followers and



shapers, which has become more prolific since the advent of the Internet and its subsequent use in political campaigning. Indeed, it is now viewed by many as a necessity within primary and presidential elections for candidates to have strong online presences. It was not long ago, however, that those implementing online strategies were pioneers in the practice (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2008).

During the 2008 Democratic Party's primary run, Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton relied heavily on the Internet to spread their messages, listen to voters and secure funding. Both candidates used the new medium to empower individual users and engage in conversations with the electorate in an intimate fashion that had never before been possible (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2008).

This bi-directional communication allowed both senators to not only understand the concerns of the electorate but also feed users' inboxes, YouTube accounts and other social media streams with the candidates' policies, stances on important issues and useful information. The engagement and responsiveness that these strategies allotted in each campaign were primarily intended not only to inform and influence the electorate's stances on issues but also to vote and contribute financially. In addition, these tactics also propagated high levels of user-generated content (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2008).

User-generated content encompassed a different method of message distribution than the traditional

means, in that the production and circulation came from users in a bottom-up fashion, instead of top-down. As a result, each candidate experienced both beneficial and unfavorable consequences relating to how users represented them online (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2008). On the positive side for both candidates, YouTube became a significant avenue with which to engage voters in the comfort of their own homes. The video-sharing website was also accessible to thousands of supporters who acted as ambassadors and exponentially disseminated each candidate's vision.

While Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama experienced differing results through similar tactics (Obama's online campaign garnered more support, and he ultimately won the primary), both candidates followed similar strategies. In both campaigns, the efforts were distributed between listening to and delivering upon the public's needs, while simultaneously shaping the electorate's mindset, and providing an excellent illustration of the strategic orientation of interacts.

It is evident that for each strategic orientation, there are both challenges and benefits to pursuing one over the other in the context of political brands. The consequences can impact both the political leader and the people, and the same strategy may have differing effects on each side. These political stances that embody differing orientations often change in their prevalence through time, and even from country to country, and

none is necessarily completely independent of one another.

## **Strategic archetypes: observations and directions**

A cursory examination of the strategic orientation archetypes grid in Figure 1 might suggest that an isolate stance is obviously the least desirable, and that an interact posture is optimal. Berthon *et al.* (1999) argue that this is an oversimplification, and that there is no one “best stance”. Rather, the stance that an organization adopts should be contingent on the environment in which it finds itself.

For example, outside of the political sphere, these authors suggest that even an isolate stance can sometimes be appropriate. For example, a mining company would probably not benefit from doing marketing research to find out what customers needed, when all it really produces is a basic raw material. Similarly, it could not really shape customer behavior and preferences because it only has access to a basic raw material. So its best option is to have an internal focus or to be isolated from both external innovation and customers. This does not mean that innovation or indeed some other direction of focus is unimportant – merely that it should be internally focused. Because commodity markets, and not the firm, determine the prices of most raw materials, a mining company’s main

focus will probably be on lowering costs and pursuing any internal innovations that would make this possible.

Likewise, while an interact stance might seem ideal, Berthon *et al.* (1999) point out that these types of strategies are substantially more expensive than others and are complex and difficult to manage. Usually, they are only well-pursued in the case of products for which there has to be a high level of buyer commitment, so that examples would include bespoke classic automobiles such as Bugatti and Duesenberg, and Airbus's production and marketing of the giant AX380. Likewise, the strategies pursued in the Democratic campaigns referred to above required considerable resources and skills to execute.

In the political sphere, political brand strategists would do well to note that neither followers nor shapers always win. In the recent British general elections, the Labour Party, despite its follower stance, fared badly. While Churchill led the country successfully through the Second World War, after the war, the electorate seemed to prefer a party that would listen to their post-conflict concerns, and Churchill's Conservatives lost the election; although, his party was reelected the following election.

The issues discussed above suggest that there are opportunities for political strategists to consider exploring, and political marketing scholars to investigate with regard to the modes of focus identified. First, political brand strategists and political marketing scholars might find it useful and insightful to measure and gauge the stance within a party or political entity.

Berthon *et al.* (2003) provide a scale that enables both researchers and practitioners to gauge and assess an organization's stance that could easily be adapted for use by political parties and political brands. The key strategic question then becomes not whether the stance is the right one, but whether it is appropriate for the environmental conditions in which the party or brand finds itself. If it is, then the party or brand must both reinforce and maintain the mode of focus; if it is not appropriate, then strategists need to identify the more appropriate stance and engineer ways for the brand to move into that direction.

Second, like for-profit brands (Berthon *et al.*, 1999, cite companies such as Boeing, AOL and Microsoft as examples), astute political marketing strategists would do well to note that changes in stance over time might be opportune, contingent on environmental conditions in the political marketplace. So for example, Churchill might have done well to change his stance from that of a shaper after the Second World War, a shaper stance was perfectly appropriate in a time of crisis when people wanted to be led from the front. However, when the crisis was over, the public wanted to be listened to after enduring a lot of hardship to achieve a national objective. As his party was eventually reelected, it could be argued that a necessary change in stance was identified and followed, leading to a successful election. Just as Boeing Aircraft Corporation adopted a shaper stance in innovating the 707, then shifted to a follower stance in marketing the 747, and more recently has been

an interact in the cases of the 777 and the 787 Dreamliner, political brands might also find it advantageous to shift modes of focus as markets evolve.

It might also be possible for political brands to exploit a “portfolio” of stances aligned to different target audiences. For example, while Toyota exploited a follower stance in the case of Lexus, its RAV4 SUV was more of a shaper product (not really a genuine off-road, four-wheel drive vehicle like the Land Cruiser, but also not a saloon car). More recently, the company has used the Internet extensively in an effort to interact with consumers on its Scion range. In developing markets, the company has also marketed a very simple pickup style vehicle that can be turned into a passenger minibus. This is done with very little real product development and no reliance on marketing research whatsoever, making it a typical isolate product. It would be quite feasible for a political brand, at least, in a democracy, to follow certain voters (probably those committed to the party), shape others (perhaps the undecided) and interact with yet others (perhaps corporations and major donors).

By virtue of the increase in two-way communication through the Internet, voter sentiment has an increasingly powerful role in political strategy and decision-making. However, not all politicians benefit from granting ultimate power to constituent opinions. In countless political situations, congruent voter sentiment has not led to victory for a political party. However, politicians who are most able to adapt to the political

environment would likely be able to more accurately use the appropriate political stance(s) for their given situation. These politicians may then be better positioned in the minds of constituents, as their agility and foresight allow them to appeal more accurately to the needs of the electorate.

## **Conclusion**

Considerable scholarly research in marketing has been dedicated to supporting the concept of customer orientation strategy. This ability to listen, react and adapt to customer preferences has long been thought to be the difference between successful and unsuccessful companies. Over the past few decades, attention has been directed toward the product orientation as a valuable strategy for many firms, placing less focus on the customer-oriented models that have dominated the marketing and organizational strategy landscape. It is based on these two strategic orientations that the integrated conceptual framework is derived and used to illustrate the similarities between the organizational and political settings. The dichotomous matrix is presented and assessed against political brands and environments to demonstrate its efficacy in illustrating possible political strategies. The strategic orientation framework defines political leaders by their level of customer and product orientation and divides political leaders into isolates, followers, shapers and interactors. Each mode of strategic orientation presents its challenges and opportunities, and none needs to be mutually exclusive.

As with organizational strategies, the political orientation may be altered as the environment, resources and other factors change over time. It is this ability to balance current voter needs and sentiments with internal insights, knowledge and anticipation of the changing political landscape that will ultimately determine the political strategy and success. Further, it is proposed that influence in political endeavors happens in a bi-directional manner where both politicians are influenced by voter sentiment and voters are influenced by politicians. Using a careful analysis of the changing environment, political brands can better manage this relationship.

### **Avenues for future research**

This paper provides crucial insights into the political marketing landscape, using an established marketing matrix to illustrate the various strategies of political figures and discussing the implications of each. The concept of customer and product orientations being combined as viable strategies in marketing has only recently been gaining traction in the organizational context, so there is still much room for political strategists and researchers to conduct in-depth studies into the implications of the strategic archetypes on political leaders. There is a need for further development and theoretical contributions that uncover the specific factors that could determine the most effective strategic orientation in a certain context, and also to discover patterns of how strategic brands evolve under different circumstances and over time.



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# Paper 2



## 2.2 Paper 2

### **Evaluating political party positioning over time: a proposed methodology**

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# **Evaluating political party positioning over time: a proposed methodology**

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## **Abstract**

In this article, we propose a methodology in order to measure political positioning and constituent perception. Political leaders should be able to effectively define the distinctive characteristics of their political brand and to subsequently utilize the most appropriate mechanisms of communication to promote an accurate perception of political image in the market. The specific aim of this research is to explore interrelations between a political party's positioning in two different periods in order to discover possible discrepancies and changes over time. The official blog of a political party, containing both official communication and the people's feedback, represents a perfect place in which to observe the concepts and the values on which both the political brand identity and image are founded. Leximancer, a content analysis tool, was utilized to analyze communications between a political party leader and his or her constituents. Illustrating the methodology, the blog of Beppe Grillo, founder of the Movimento 5 Stelle is analyzed.

## Introduction

The popularity of the blog has grown exponentially since its origin in the late 1990s. Increasingly, consumers and constituents are trusting blogs more and more as a location for relevant and trustworthy news and political information. As of 2014, an astounding 77% of Internet users read blogs online and amazingly 81% of consumers in the USA trust the information presented from blogs (The Blog Economy 2014). Social media websites such as Twitter and Facebook include blogs and microblogs as means of allowing users to express themselves and engage with others. While the popularity of blogs is undeniable, there remain numerous questions as to what a blog tells us about its creator as well as how others might interpret meaning as positioned in the blog. The focus of this article is to propose that blogs can be utilized not only to gauge popularity in political arenas but also to measure political positioning and to help politicians and political parties better represent themselves. Kotler and Levy proposed the possible utility of marketing for politics for the first time in 1969, arguing that marketing, hitherto confined to businesses and commercial organizations, could be extended to all organizations. The marketing concept, as a general management philosophy, has been noted as being useful and relevant to both profit and non profit organizations (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971; Brownlie & Saren, 1991), as well as to a variety of other industrial contexts (Kotler, 1972; Wensley, 1990).

Kelley (1956) is generally credited with the first usage of the term political marketing. In his view, political marketing was virtually synonymous with propaganda, as it was aimed essentially at persuasion. Gronroos (1990) defined political marketing activity as ‘seeking 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 fulfilment of promises’.

The link between politics and the marketing discipline was also reinforced by Rothschild’s (1978) study on political advertising effectiveness, segmentation, social policy, and political policy-making. In the same period, Shama (1976) argues that many terms used in conventional marketing, such as consumer behavior, market segmentation, image, brand loyalty, product concept, and product positioning, can be used similarly in political marketing.

During the past 25 years, political marketing has transformed from a relatively obscure subject studied by a small group of authors and academic marketers to a significant area of international research in contemporary marketing. Therefore, a wide range of academic literature has concentrated on the application of marketing concepts and principles to politics (Andrews, 1996; O’ Cass, 2001; Butler & Harris, 2009; Soberman, 2010).

Over time, short-term marketing campaigns, designed to influence specific and limited targets at



particular periods of time (e.g., elections and voters), have been replaced by long-term activities, which instead seek 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 enables the creation of a political brand. One of the first authors on this subject, Kirchheimer (1966) suggested that viewing parties as brands is an inevitable response to the move from mass-based to catchall parties. Voters are less influenced by class affiliation and more likely to act as rational economic actors when voting (Downs, 1967). In the past, to win an election, the catchall had to become well-known among millions of people, fulfilling in politics a role analogous to that of a major brand in business (Kirchheimer, 1966).

In particular, we focus on the theories of political party positioning and perceived positioning. This can lend insight into the character and behavior of organizations and their members. Consequently, the article research questions are the following: (i) is it possible to analyze the positioning strategy of a political party through their blogs; and (ii) is it possible to recognize the differences between political strategy and the audience perception of the position? Moreover, as a political party is an organization and not a firm, we will note that the relationship between planned and perceived positioning is fluid and unstable, and it can change through time. Therefore, the aim of this research is to explore interrelations between a political party's

positioning in two different periods, in order to discover possible discrepancies over time. With the aim of exploring these concepts, we choose to analyze the positioning of one political party, using its main communication tool: its blog. To this end, the article proceeds as follows: we begin with a thorough analysis of political positioning, then explain the use of Leximancer as the analytical tool, go on to describe the case study of Beppe Grillo, discuss our findings and conclude with a discussion on implications for future research.

## **Political Positioning and brand**

Positioning within the marketing framework is the act of creating an identity for your product or service in the eyes of the consumer. Political positioning is the act of creating an identity for a political entity. While all aspects of marketing are important, in the political arena positioning cannot be ignored (Harrop, 1990).

Politicians that portray a clear identity have an easier time enticing potential voters. Political entities cue constituents as to their brand by stating their stances on issues of concern to voters (Mauser, 1983; Baines, 1999; Ansolabehere, Snyder & Stewart, 2001; Smith & Hirst, 2001). Market segmentation techniques are used in political marketing not only to choose target markets but also to position themselves in a way that is appealing to those target markets (Johnson, 1971; Ahmed & Jackson, 1979; Yorke & Meehan, 1986; Baines, Worcester, Jarret & Mortimore, 2003). Voter preferences evolve, often in

conjunction with changes in social conditions and expectations, and thus new positioning will be required in order to construct effective campaign messages. Political leaders who have a strong understanding of their target market are better positioned to handle changes within to their constituent pool.

There are numerous definitions of brand analysis of brand, and brand image tend to focus both on the tangible and intangible values of brands to consumers (De Chernatony & Riley, 1998). Intangible values of a brand to consumers are things such as customer satisfaction and higher levels of repeat business (Ghodeswar, 2008). The management of a political brand and positioning meets the objective of offering a set of tangible (e.g., political programs and political activities) and intangible factors (e.g., services, culture, values, and emotions) to the public. This makes up a system that guides people's perceptions and behaviors. Therefore, the process should be able to effectively define the distinctive characteristics and positioning of the political brand and, subsequently, activate the most appropriate mechanisms of communication to promote an accurate perception of the image in the market, both in particular and in a more general context.

The perceived positioning of a political party is an organization members' collective understanding of the political ideas presumed to be central and relatively permanent to the party; these ideas are what distinguish the organization from other organizations. Nevertheless, because of the reciprocal interrelationships between

political party positioning and perceived positioning, these are relatively fluid and unstable concepts rather than enduring ones. There must be fluidity to the notion, otherwise, the organization stagnates in the face of an inevitably changing environment. Perhaps most importantly, we further argue that the instability of positioning is actually adaptive in facilitating organizational change in response to environmental demands.

Perceived positioning often acts as a destabilizing force, frequently requiring members to revisit and reconstruct their organizational sense of self. To examine the processes by which positioning becomes interrelated with, and susceptible to the influence of perceived positioning, we begin with the assumption that organization members have developed some sense of ‘who we are as an organization’ (Albert & Whetten, 1985) and have communicated that identity to internal and external constituencies. Over time, organization members receive feedback about their organizational portrayal, or some event occurs that makes identity concerns salient (cf. Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). Because organization members are also simultaneously members of external groups and thus sensitized to outsider views of their own organization, the tendency to compare their views of their organization with others’ views is heightened further (Hatch & Schultz, 1997).

Jackson (2004) explains that those candidates, who use the Internet in order to reach particular groups of

people in particular areas with particular issues, are more effective. Davis (2009) clearly points out the growing role played by political blogs and their relationship with the mainstream media. Blogs have become an increasingly important source of information for political audiences, but also for politicians and political marketers. The official blog of a political party, containing both official communication and the people's feedback, represents a perfect place in which to observe the concepts and the values on which both the political brand identity and image are founded. At this point, it is interesting to explore a methodology able to evaluate the relationship between brand positioning communicated through the official communication channel and brand positioning perceived by the constituents of one political party, in order to note the differences between the two and to verify the fluidity of the two concepts over time.

### **The Bayesian machine-learning-based content analysis methodology**

In order to analyze the data, we performed a form of content analysis based on a Bayesian machine-learning technique utilizing the Leximancer software ([www.leximancer.com](http://www.leximancer.com)). Leximancer is a tool for transforming lexical co-occurrence information from natural language into semantic patterns in an unsupervised manner. Leximancer is an Australian-developed text-mining or lexicographic tool that enables a visual analysis of texts. Leximancer uses a machine-learning technique to discover the main concepts in a

text and to determine how they relate to each other (Rooney, 2005). In fact, Leximancer allows us to perform two types of content analysis: conceptual (thematic) and relational (semantic).

In the conceptual analysis, texts are analyzed by the presence and frequency of the concepts contained in them; these concepts can be words, phrases, or more complex definitions such as a set of words representing a concept. The software performs this analysis through its own preset dictionary. The relational analysis, however, measures how specific concepts relate to one another within the text. In this case, Leximancer measures the connections between the concepts identified in the text and extracts information representing them through conceptual maps. Themes that are physically closer together or overlapping on the map are more closely linked in the text, and brighter circles on the map indicate the increased importance of that concept (Robson, Farshid, Bredican, & Humphrey, 2013).

One of the advantages of Leximancer is its ability to handle large quantities of text, including the short and ungrammatical comments typically posted to a blog (Smith & Humphreys, 2006). As analysis proceeds, the software automatically learns the words that predict certain concepts. The program generates word lists by assessing the contextual collocations of words through ‘term-occurrence information, such as co-occurrence, positions and frequencies of nouns and verbs’ in text (Kamimaeda, Izumi, & Hasida, 2007; Young & Denize, 2008), suggesting clusters of meaning based on word

groupings. Concepts that occur in very similar semantic contexts will form clusters (Rooney, 2005).

Leximancer has been used successfully by scholars across a number of disciplines in the social sciences (Scott & Lane, 2000; Smith & Humphreys, 2006) and specifically in marketing (Campbell, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2011a, 2011b; Beninger, Pitt, Parent, & Chan, 2014), where it has been especially used in order to analyze online communication.

## **The case study**

The political party used in order to evaluate the relationship between political brand positioning and political brand positioning perception is *Movimento 5 Stelle*, an emerging Italian political party. Beppe Grillo, founder of the *Movimento 5 Stelle*, is an Italian comedian-turned-political activist. Mr. Grillo's career as a comedian started in the late 1970s and exploded in the early 1980s, ultimately transforming him into a national superstar. With stardom, Mr. Grillo's humor changed immensely and he began to discuss controversial and political issues across all mediums. He openly attacked some of the most influential Italian politicians with particular focus on their penchant for bribery. As a result, by the early 1990s, Mr. Grillo was informally but firmly banned from Italian television. Yet this did not stop Mr. Grillo's satirizing of politicians and corporations— his live productions were regularly sold out and he enjoyed immense audience and critical

acclaim. In 2005, the editors of Time magazine recognized Mr. Grillo for his contribution to political satire and named him one of the European heroes of the year.

In January 2005, the web provided Mr. Grillo with a new and powerful communication channel: a blog at [beppegrillo.it](http://beppegrillo.it). Through this site (and with the help of the digital marketing company Casaleggio & Associati), his popularity received yet another boost. In December 2005, less than a year after its first post, [beppegrillo.it](http://beppegrillo.it) was awarded the WWW 2005 Prize in the News and Information category by the well-known *Il Sole 24 Ore*, ‘for interactivity with the public, ample documentation on the Internet and commitment to tackling topics of use to citizens’. In June 2012, [beppegrillo.it](http://beppegrillo.it) was the most popular blog in Italy. During 2008, several meetings were held that anticipated the foundation of an official political movement. *Movimento 5 Stelle* was announced and formalized on October 4, 2009, becoming legitimate at the administrative election of 2009.

We chose to evaluate this political party specifically because it uses the blog as an official communication channel, basically the only one, and this means that all the messages sent through the blog represent the internal view of the political party team, and the answers of the followers represent the perception of the general public.

The focus of the analysis for this paper was [beppegrillo.it](http://beppegrillo.it). We analyzed not only the posts of Mr.



Grillo but also the most popular user's comments. The *beppegrillo.it* posts from January 2005 to May 2012 have been analyzed. During this period, Mr. Grillo and his staff published 4935 posts, which included 2,572,638 words. The data containing the comments for the years 2005–2012 contained around 19,765,000 words.

These posts have been divided into two different periods (before and after the blog switched from personal to political), but they both have as their central foundation the *Movimento 5 Stelle*. In order to get only significant data, we decided to analyze only the comments receiving the most votes from readers.

## Data analysis and results

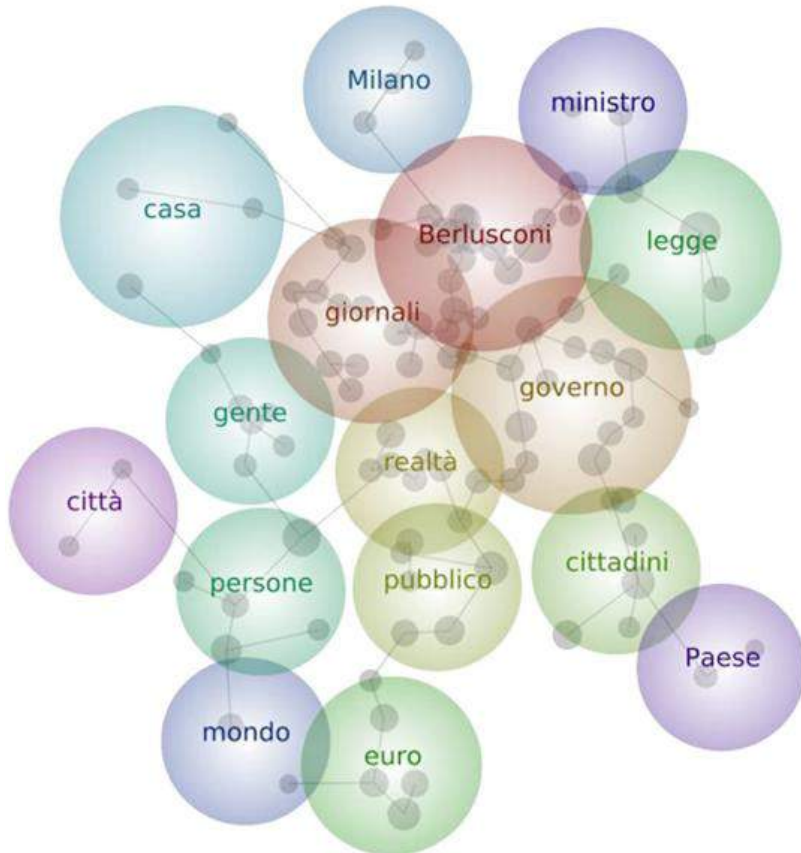
For the analysis of posts, we compiled two parallel datasets (party leader's posts versus comments from the public) in order to identify possible differences or discrepancies between the official communication (coming from the organization and reflecting the party brand identity) and the public opinion (expressing what the public thinks of the party brand and depicting the brand identity).

Figure 1 shows the result of Leximancer's content analysis of Mr. Grillo's posts before the foundation of *Movimento 5 Stelle*. The concepts extracted from the political leader's posts are displayed on a concept map that details the relative importance of concepts and the links between them. Large circles represent key themes from a text, while dots represent concepts. Brighter

(lighter colored) and larger themed circles and concept dots indicate greater relevance within the text. When concepts are close together or overlap in the map, it means that they also appear close together in the text. Concepts that are directly related, but not necessarily strongly semantically linked, will be far apart on the concept map, while concepts that are strongly semantically linked will be close to each other on the concept map (Rooney, 2005, pp. 410– 412). Moreover, concepts that occur in very comparable semantic contexts will form clusters. The researcher can then use the concept map to guide the interpretation.

The themes represented clearly indicate the predominance of discussions about Mr. Berlusconi, prime minister at the time of the posts and a political opponent. Analyzing the composition of the two principal themes makes it clear that the message is predominantly negative and that the leader of *Movimento 5 Stelle* is creating a brand identity in contraposition to the prime minister.

**Figure 1** Concept map of the political party's official posts in the first period analyzed



Theme:	Translation:
Berlusconi	Berlusconi
giornali	newspaper
governo	Government
realità	reality
pubblico	Public

cittadini	Citizens
euro	euro
legge	law
persone	persons
gente	people
casa	house
Milano	Milan
mondo	world
ministro	minister
Paese	Country
città	city

The Mr. Berlusconi theme is characterized by the following concepts (Table 1): Berlusconi, trial, mafia, deputy public prosecutor, cabinet, trials, judges, sentence, boss, investigation, crimes, intercept, judge, and crime. The same negative concept apparently is not extended to the institution and the government that are represented by the concepts of government, politics, politicians, politician, justice, political party, laws, and respect. The third theme, newspapers, has a neutral polarity. Other issues relate to the reality and the people with their instances: true, people, person, public, home, and country. Words linked to people are, in fact, working, future, market, and life; those related to citizens are Italians and democracy. Among the topics of

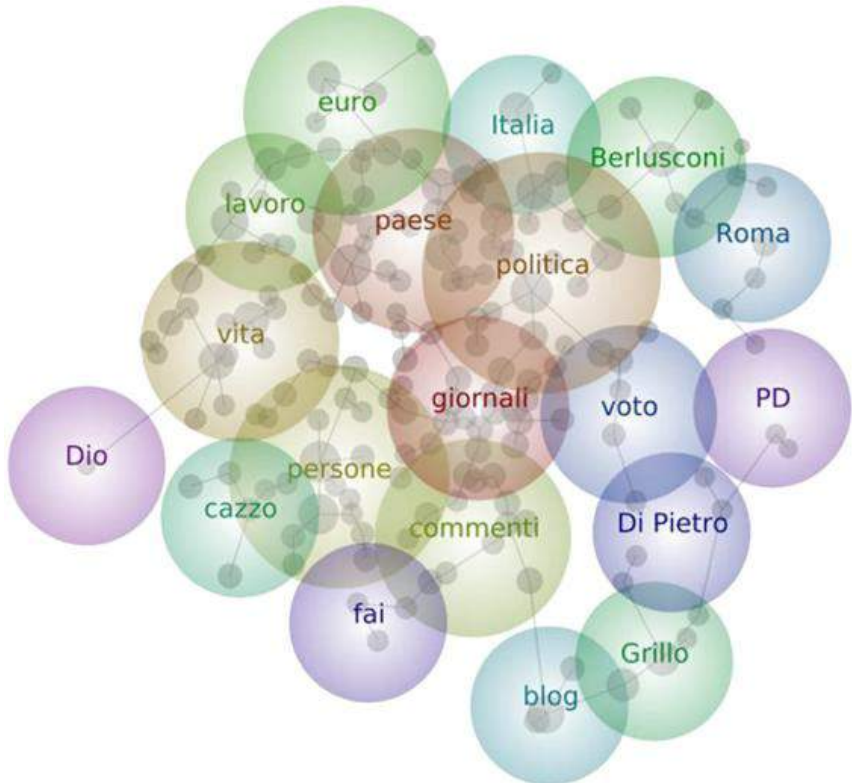
lesser importance, it is possible to find Milan, city, euro, and world. It is interesting that there is not an issue related to the environment, a subject of some importance in the discussions of Mr. Grillo. The only reference to this topic is the word ‘waste’.

**Table 1** Theme's related words in the political party's official posts in the first period analyzed

Theme:	Related words
Berlusconi	Berlusconi, trial, mafia, Deputy, Public, Prosecutor, Cabinet, trials, judges, sentence, boss, investigation, crimes, intercept, judge, crime
Newspaper	newspaper, written, person, journalist, grade, state, condemned
Government	government, politic, politics, political, justice, party, parties, laws, respect
Reality	reality, public, publics
Public	public, money, problem, society
Citizen	citizen, Italians, italian
Euro	Euro, millions, Italy, billions
Law	law, president, Parliament

In analyzing the same conceptual map with the data coming from public comments, several differences are identified (Figure 2). The first aspect is the relative unimportance assigned by the followers to Mr. Berlusconi; this is not one of the most important themes

and is less cited than the left wing party [*Partito Democratico* (PD)]. The same concepts correlated (Table 2) to Mr. Berlusconi seem to be less aggressive (Mr. Berlusconi and Rome). The followers are showing more nationalism and patriotism in their comments. Notably, the theme of ‘politics’ is not present in the official party posts of the same period; this topic is related to words such as government, law, citizens, political, left party, laws, party, public, and Italian. The topics newspapers and people play a significant role as in the official party posts. The terms ‘Italy’ and ‘Italian’ are more relevant, and huge importance is bestowed on the country topic. Analysis of these concepts correlated to the themes reveals a desire of belonging to a country, as well as the desire to change a situation and the political assets. The second element, in order of importance, is represented by social elements. The social themes are people, house, and words. The difference between the identity shown by the leader of the *Movimento 5 Stelle* and the perceived image is quite clear in this first phase of the analysis.

**Figure 2** Concept map of public comments in the first period analyzed

Theme:	Translation:
giornali	newspaper
paese	country
politica	politic
persone	persons
vita	life
commenti	Comments

lavoro	job
euro	euro
Berlusconi	Berlusconi
cazzo	dick
Grillo	Grillo
Italia	Italy
blog	blog
voto	voto
Roma	Rome
Di Pietro	Di Pietro
PD	PD
Dio	God

**Table 2** Theme's related words in public comments in the first period analyzed

Theme:	Related words
Newspapers	newspapers, freedom, hand, future, democracy, parliament, justice, tv, truer, service, rights, good, problems, talk, suggestion, media, countries, square
Country	country, politics, Italians, population, millions, Italian, public, interests, law, society
Politic	politic, government, law, citizens, left, laws, party, public, italian, minister
Persons	persons, people, family, understand, stop,

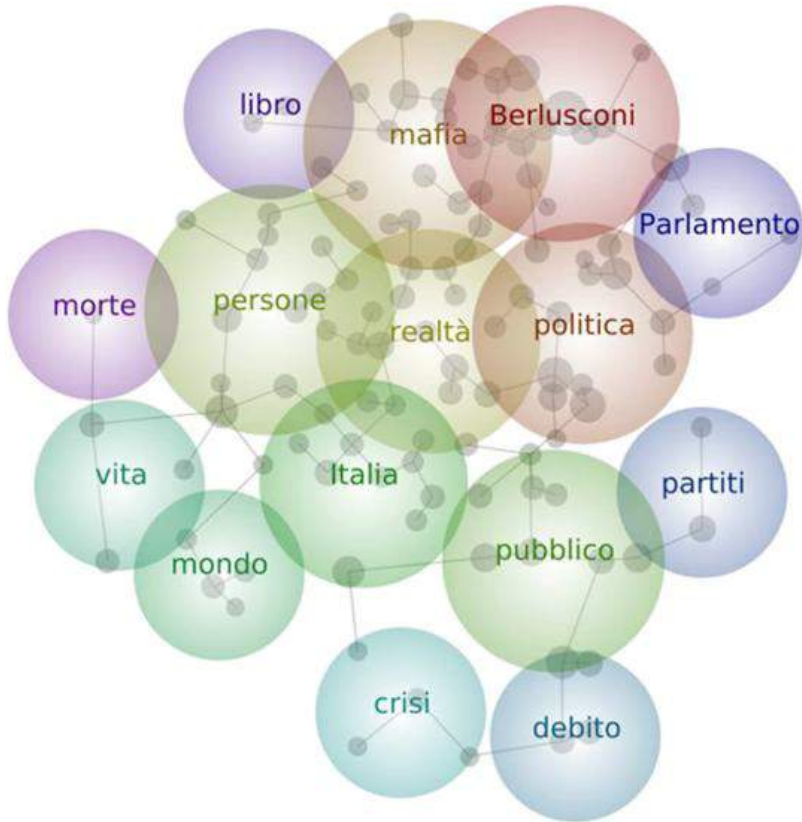


	history, strength, friends
Life	life, world, house, sons, respect, to live, reality
Comments	comments, person, written, words, read
Job	job, money, problem, pay
Euro	euro, tax, billions
Berlusconi	Berlusconi, president

The second set of analyses is focalized on the second timeframe, from January 2009 to May 2012. The difference between the two sets is found in the more political and electoral implications of the second data elaboration, because of Mr. Grillo's decision to create a movement in order to run for election. In this phase, Mr. Grillo expanded his subjects without in any way changing his personal attack style. The leader's communication (Figure 3) is still negative and against Mr. Berlusconi, even if several proactive aspects have appeared and gained importance. There is first a key issue that was not there before: politics. It is clear that Mr. Grillo addresses issues that are complex and far reaching, in a more concrete and combative style, to take the lead in the Italian political scene and try to create a broad base of support. In support of this, related to politics are words (Table 3) like money, government, politicians, newspapers, corruption, party, political, and majority rules— concepts used by Mr. Grillo to denounce the state of the Italian political situation. Related to the political topic are the topics parties and parliament.

There are some central themes, such as reality, people, and public, but the words linked to them are different. For reality, linked words included problem, society, respect, and talking; for people, the word home was linked, and for public, Italians and citizens. Moreover, there are issues that make an appearance such as economic crisis and debt— related to the economic crisis that is sweeping across the country— and social issues such as death, life, world, and mafia. In this case, surprisingly, issues related to environmentalism are lacking, even if they are present in the program of the political party.

**Figure 3** Concept map of the political party's official posts in the second period analysed



Theme:	Translation:
Berlusconi	Berlusconi
politica	politic
mafia	mafia
realta	reality
persone	person
pubblico	public

Italia	Italy
mondo	world
vita	life
crisi	crisis
debito	debt
partiti	parties
Parlamento	Parliament
libro	book
morte	death

**Table 3** Theme's related words of the political party official posts in the second period analyzed

Theme:	Related words
Berlusconi	Berlusconi, law, trial, crime, Cabinet, judges, trials, President, sentence, crimes
Politic	politic, money, government, politicians, newspapers, bribery, party, politic, majority, laws
Mafia	mafia, magistrate, boss, Milan, condemned, justice
Reality	reality, problem, society, respect, talking
Person	person, house, success, country, important
Public	public, citizens, Italians, millions, billions, paty

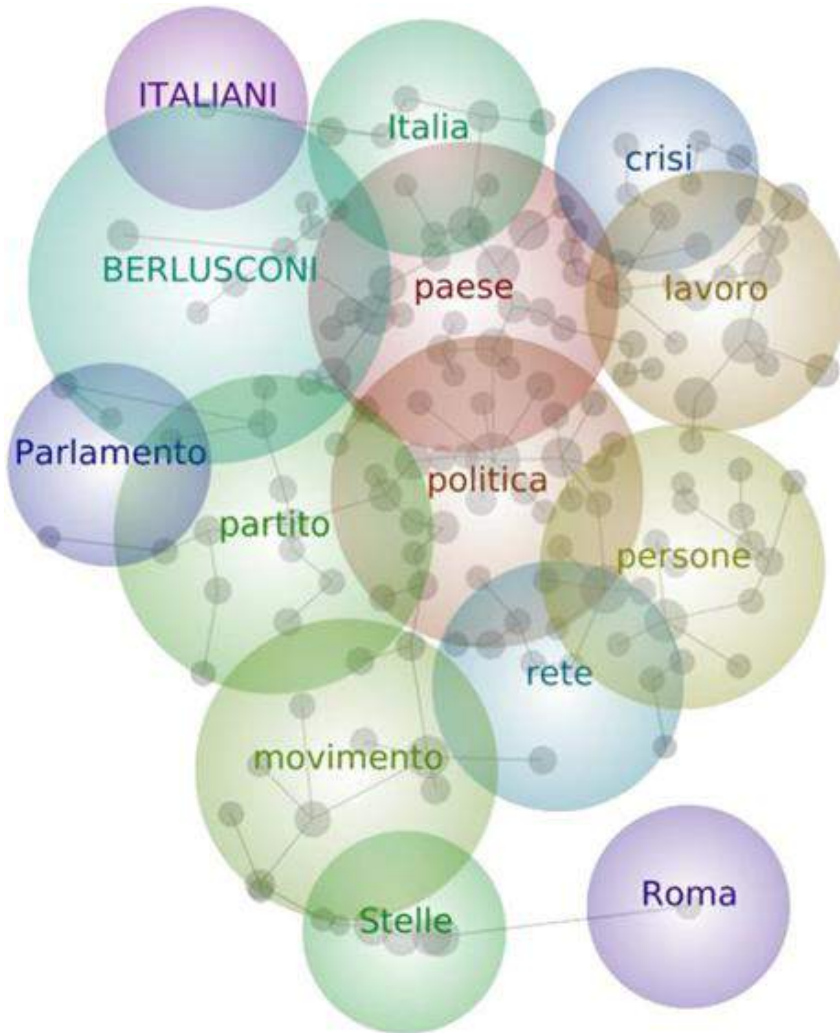
Italy	Italy, people, Italian
World	world

Finally, analyzing the concept map of the comments to the posts in the second period (Figure 4), we see significant changes compared with the previous period. Once more, Table 4 shows the words that the software related to every theme for this phase. Here, there is a higher consistency between the official posts and the follower's comments than observed in the first period analyzed. The theme of politics (already present in the comments of the previous period) plays a prominent role, like Mr. Berlusconi. Compared with the results of the comments in the first period, the communication of the commenters/supporters changes (Table 4), moving toward a clear participation into politics, together with that of the blog. In fact, besides the aforementioned theme of politics (tied to citizens, political parties, political democracy, future, understand, person, respect, and so on) are the themes party, movement, and parliament. There is a growing consciousness, therefore, in the thoughts of the readers of the existence of a new political entity able to participate in the elections; connected to the theme of movement, we find Mr. Grillo, ideas, *Movimento 5 Stelle*, and elections.

Country and people continue to appear as very important themes. The comments also reflected themes of social relevance, such as work and crisis. It is interesting to note that the theme of work is present in

the comments in both periods, but it is missing in the official party posts both before and after 2009.

**Figure 4** Concept map of the public comments posted in the second period analyzed



Theme:	Translation:
paese	country
politica	politic
lavoro	job
persone	person
movimento	movement
partito	party
Stelle	Stars
Italia	Italy
BERLUSCONI	BERLUSCONI
rete	net
crisi	crisis
Parlamento	Parliament
Roma	Rome
ITALIANI	ITALIANS

**Table 4** Theme's related words in public comments in the second period analyzed

Theme:	Related words
Country	country, world, government, italians, politicians, population, law, sons, hand, italian, bank, laws

Politic	politic, citizen, parties, political, democracy, future, understand, person, respect, social, strength, reality, politics, thousands
Job	job, life, money, euro, millions, pay, debt, taxes, society, workers
Person	persons, people, problem, stop, need, must, problems
Movement	movement, Grillo, post, stars, ideas, election, M5s
Party	party, left, shit, vote, talk, words, think, PD
Stars	Stars, Movement, Beppe, blog

## General discussion and political marketing implications

Marketing planning can be used to fill the gap between what voters want and what political parties propose (Baines, Arris, & Lewis, 2002). In the present research, through the content analysis of a political party blog, we propose a methodology able to reveal this gap and to monitor it.

The analysis of the blog [beppegrillo.it](http://beppegrillo.it) has highlighted that the political party positioning constructed through Mr. Grillo's and his collaborators' communication efforts does not fit exactly with the vision of user– voters. In fact, the concept maps obtained from the Leximancer analysis gave results that show there is a substantial difference between the



official political party posts and the comments of his or her followers. The most representative theme that identifies the difference between the two sides is temporal. *Movimento 5 Stelle* and Mr. Grillo are focused on reality, Mr. Berlusconi, and other concrete elements of political life. The followers, however, are not focused on Mr. Berlusconi; the most important theme in their comments is related to the future, even if it is correlated to short-term problems.

Moreover, the political party positioning and perceived positioning register substantial changes in between the two periods considered. In effect, organizational identity can vary within the context for which it is expressed (Wilkins, 1989; Fiol, Hatch, & Golden-Biddle, 1998). We can say that the political party positioning must be fluid, otherwise, the organization decays in the face of an inexorably changing environment.

Given the rising importance of the Internet and blogs on politics, this paper contributes to our understanding about how to use these tools in order to gain important information about political parties' relevant themes, as well as those important to their audience. The political party's official blog, containing both the official communication and the people's feedback, represents a perfect place in which to observe the concepts and values on which both the political brand identity and image are founded. At this point, if the discrepancy is marked and significant, it can suggest the need to re-evaluate and change aspects of identity.

Because direct interventions with followers to alter their conceptions of the organization are unlikely to be effective (Reger, Gustafson, DeMarie, & Mullane, 1994), a viable alternative for the political leader is to project an attractive vision in the form of a desired positioning as a precursor to a hoped-for-future identity. Creating and maintaining a brand identity is regarded as the first step toward building a strong brand (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2003), or in this case, a strong political brand.

This paper aims to offer a systematic and practical way for political party organizations and researchers to learn from consumer feedback in order to fill the gap between political party positioning and perceived positioning. Online consumer reviews have the potential to provide a wealth of information about individuals' attitudes and how they prioritize different elements of a discussion, which can be assessed for individual political parties, as well as to compare different ones. The method used for the analysis of the *Movimento 5 Stelle* offers researchers and politicians a useful new tool, which can guide quality improvement efforts and help focus marketing communications.

The organization that governs the development of a political brand must work to increase the value of the brand (brand equity) and gain sustained competitive advantages. In particular, the brand identity strategy (Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan, & McDonald, 2005) is a set of processes aimed at developing, analyzing, and maintaining the brand identity and at communicating it to all the appropriate audiences. The increase in brand

equity comes from positioning decisions and depends on the ability to develop a brand identity that is correctly perceived by the market (brand image). Such a task suggests two major options: the first is to change something about the way the organization sees itself (i.e., changing aspects of the identity) and the second is to change the way others perceive it (i.e., changing others' external impression/reputation).

As the gap between positioning and perceived positioning should be as narrow as possible (De Chernatony, 1999), the possible discrepancy should be resolved by attempting to change how outsiders perceive the organization through several tactics. First, the political party can project a positioning strategy to its outside constituencies that more strongly conveys its conception of the organization's identity.

## **Limitations and future research**

There are three main limitations to the present study. First of all, the huge amount of information collected (more than 20 million words examined) forced us to work at this level of analysis, leaving more in-depth analysis to future researches.

The second limitation is linked to the interval of analysis; we confronted just two periods (before and after the decision to create a political movement). It would be interesting, in the future, to study the evolution of the single terms and themes during shorter periods, identifying trends and reaction viscosity.

Finally, Cameron (2007) noted the limitations of Leximancer as being less valuable for data sets, which could produce false positives as a result of simplifying complex primary data through machine analysis. To some extent, the research required some subjective interpretations and codifications. That said, the counterbalancing arguments for Leximancer's objectivity, face validity, and reliability outweigh this possible risk in an exploratory study. However, for an exploratory study, we consider these limits to be within acceptable boundaries and a stimulus to further research.

In the future, other communication channels that are able to convey both the political party's official communications and its constituents' perceptions could be explored in order to compare the ability of these tools to give a clear and relevant picture of the political party's official positioning and perceived positioning. Moreover, as this study was limited to a single political party's blog, it could be interesting to conduct a similar analysis of other political blogs in order to use this methodology as a proposed way to compare different politicians' positioning.

## Biographical notes

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# Paper 3





## 2.3 Paper 3

### **When satire is serious: How political cartoons impact a country's brand**

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# **When satire is serious: How political cartoons impact a country's brand**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the case of Italy's Mr. Berlusconi's indiscretions and the effect his scandals have played in the decline of the Italian national brand. National brands are the perceived added value that international consumers place on that country and its products and services. An analysis of recent political cartoons will provide insight into international attitudes regarding Mr. Berlusconi's political and social actions. From this investigation, the authors conclude that a country's political leader's negative image and reputation can have a large negative impact on national brand equity abroad.

## Introduction

From ‘Sparkling Korea’, ‘Timeless Tunisia’, ‘Incredible India’, and ‘Amazing Thailand’ to ‘your very own Ireland’, and Greece’s ‘the true experience’, national brands have become key motivators for tourists, investors, migrants, and worldwide consumers of national exports seeking something a bit different. Nations have become much more than the mere colorful drawings in an elementary school atlas (van Ham, 2001). Every country possesses a national brand, which encompasses the political, cultural, historical, geographical, metrological, and financial aspects of that nation’s people and land. The rewards of this branding, as with other forms of branding, are immense in attracting ‘consumers’ of that brand (van Ham, 2001; Anholt, 2002; Buer, 2002).

However, there are risks associated with creating a brand, as there is an unspoken promise to consumers that their trust in the brand will be respected. This leaves the owner of brand exposed to considerable reputational risk (van Ham, 2001; Buer, 2002). A specific brand value or brand equity is being constantly affected by its respective firm’s actions. This is due to a better- educated and informed pool of consumers demanding a higher level of corporate social responsibility and ethics (cf. Egri and Ralston, 2008). Nations must be vigilant to be good stewards of their international reputation and must remember, ‘brand promises are not made in isolation’ (Buer, 2002). It has become increasingly difficult for countries that have

poor reputations or no reputation to remain competitive in today's globalized world (van Ham, 2001).

This article first discusses national branding and caricature theories then contributes to the literature by applying these theories to the case of the infamous Italian premier, Mr. Berlusconi. It does this by first linking a nation's brand with its politics then by applying that link to the Berlusconi controversy. From there, the authors examine how cartoons can affect public sentiment and effect political action. Finally, the authors discuss some implications for both managers of nation brands and private brands.

## **Nation branding**

### **What is in a nation brand?**

Nation brand refers to the identity of a particular country as perceived by an international audience (Anholt, 2005). Throughout this paper, we also refer to it as a country brand and a national brand. Brands are considered a marketers' main tool to differentiate products and services. The American Marketing Association's definition of a brand is a name, a term, a sign, a symbol, a design, or a combination of these intended to identify the goods and services of one seller from the competition. Successful brands are often extended to include new offerings in the hopes that the brand association will speed up consumers' information processing and learning (Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002). Brands also have

emotional and social values to consumers (cf. Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001).

Brands create value for consumers and investors in the form of brand equity, which includes intangible assets such as customer preference, performance, social image, and trustworthiness, as well as more tangible assets such as financial gains appraised from increases in firm value (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). Shimp *et al.* (1993) coin the term country equity in reference to the emotional value consumers attach to a product or a service from a particular country. These brands assist consumers to evaluate purchases according to their own intrinsic values. Therefore, a nation brand may either add or subtract perceived value from a purchase.

A country’s image can affect the internal political, social, and economic stability. If properly managed, this image can benefit the country in all sectors by becoming a lasting vehicle for goodwill and by encouraging forgiveness in difficult times. Well branded countries can reduce the impact of negative political and economic events, and stakeholders can be more willing to forgive or forget negative events or news. This is valid both in the institutional relations with other countries and in the business environment. Moreover, countries that are branded well recover faster in the eyes of stakeholders than badly branded one (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002; Garbacz Rawson, 2007). When a product, a service, or a corporation is identified with a positive country brand, it has a better chance of receiving a price premium for its offerings, preference over other brands,

and longevity (Garbacz Rawson, 2007). Papadopoulos and Heslop (2002) find that ‘national images are powerful stereotypes that influence behavior in all types of target markets’ (p. 298).

Like a frail product brand, a weak nation brand leads to reduced differentiation, unclear meaning, and low brand recall in the minds of travellers, investors, and business people. Country brands create strong and positive impressions that generate desire and demand. All of this affects a nation’s ability to stand out and take advantage of growth opportunities. A strong country brand is more than the sum of its parts as it makes people’s lives better through creating a strong emotional connection with potential tourists, investors, international students, and business people (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002). Despite crisis, economic downturn, political upheaval, and public relations problems, countries with a clear identity, consistent values, and a lasting heritage continue to perform at the highest level (Bojan, 2008).

Nation brands are long-lasting reminders of past deeds both good and bad. The Olympic games had a tremendous positive economic, political, and social impact on the national brand of Korea (Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 1993). The 1989 events that took place in Tiananmen Square also had profound negative influence on China’s national brand (Brunner *et al.*, 1993). Samsung’s place as the leading manufacturer for many electronics and Nokia’s position as the leading telecommunications firm can both build nationalism

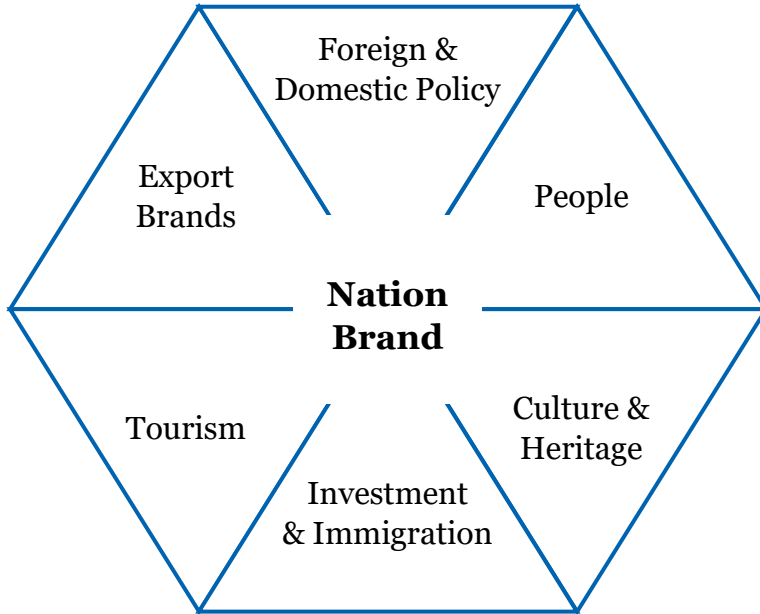


within Korean and Finnish citizens, respectively, and also improve their national image. Country brands can assist large national firms expand into international markets, which citizens derive a sense of national pride (Dinne, 2004). Nation branding is even important with the delicate situation between China and Japan, as China currently has an active public diplomacy campaign to increase its brand status within Japan, albeit with limited results (Dinne & Lio, 2010). A strong, positive nation brand can bring value to the country's citizens, investors, tourists, students, business people, and government.

### **Looking deeper into nation branding**

The existing literature on nation branding tends to be more sector or country specific, as well as more empirical than theoretical (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002). Place or country branding is receiving more consideration with a growing number of researchers trying to ground it in theory (Anholt, 2002), with Anholt and Hildreth's (2004) model of nation branding leading the way. Their model identifies that a country's brand is influenced by tourism, people, culture and heritage, investment, immigration, foreign and domestic policy, and export brands. The perception of the identity outlined by the model forms a nation's brand for the international audience (Figure 1).

**Figure 1** Anholt and Hildreth's (2004) nation-branding hexagon. Adapted from Anholt and Hildreth (2004)



After observing international political events, Anholt (2007) asserts that politics is the key influencer of nation branding. Positive change will happen only if a government has a clear vision of the country's image and can successfully manage that vision. A national political brand is a part of the more complex nation brand and consists of the perceptions of a country's political decisions and values and is most often issued and communicated by the political leaders of the country. Within the model, the political aspect appears to carry more weight than the other influences. Just as governments communicate with their citizens,

governments communicate to foreign audiences, aiming to accomplish an international positive and productive image. A policy- oriented competitive identity strategy differs from a nation- branding strategy in that it is more focused on promotional techniques, as usually seen in tourism campaigns. An effective nation- branding strategy is not centered on promotional techniques because these are useful only after the political strategy has been implemented (Anholt, 2007).

A vital part of both planning the national brand vision and implementing the branding strategy is involving stakeholders, including government and citizen institutions, to insure consistency across all facets of exposure (Anholt, 2007). Moreover, brand ambassadors, such as political leaders, are the main source of information about a country for international audiences. Thus, their actions and behaviors have immense implications for national image (Olins, 2003; Anholt and Hildreth, 2004).

Political leaders attract more media attention than business, export brands, or tourism, because of the immediate implications of what they say or do (van Ham, 2001; Garbacz Rawson, 2007). The frequency of messages and impressions across the mass media keeps political leaders in the minds of people around the world. Therefore, political leaders expose their countries to global audiences and promote travel or investment in their respective nation (Garbacz Rawson, 2007).

## **Mr. Berlusconi's effect on the Italian brand**

### **The exploits of Silvio Berlusconi**

Silvio Berlusconi is a successful Italian entrepreneur and the current Prime Minister of Italy. He is worth over US\$ 11 billion and is the 37th richest man in the world (Kroll and Miller, 2010). Mr. Berlusconi is currently Italy's second longest- serving Prime Minister, having held this position on three separate occasions from 1994 to 1995, 2001 to 2006, and currently since 2008. He leads the Popolo della libertà political movement, which is a centre- right party he co- founded in 2009. He has some control over the media, as he directly owns three of the most influential private television channels, the biggest group of Italian newspapers, as well as indirectly controlling two out of three public television channels (Kroll and Miller, 2010). Moreover, his family owns one of the top European publishing houses, Mondadori.

Mr Berlusconi has had a long history of criminal allegations and conflicts with the Italian Justice system (see Table 1 for a complete list). He has been accused of crimes, including mafia collusion, tax fraud, false accounting, corruption, and bribery of police officers and judges. Berlusconi is currently facing several cases in Italian courts (Kroll and Miller, 2010). The judiciary was forced into staying a few cases due to changes in laws enforced directly by Berlusconi's parliamentary majority (Castelnuovo, 2009; Agnew, 2011). There are several cases pending that he is trying to quell by again creating a law that suspends the legal processes for

political figures (Stewart, 2008), which contravenes the principles of the rule of law and the magna carta. He has tried three times in 7 years to create this immunity law, but so far, it has yet to pass the constitutional court (Agnew, 2011).

In his defence, Mr Berlusconi claims that this situation amounts to

...judicial persecution, against which I am proud to resist, and the fact that my resistance and sacrifice will give the Italians a more fair and efficient judicial system makes me even more proud (Brown, 2008).

**Table 1** A history of the legal troubles of Mr Berlusconi

Status of trial	Allegation
Acquittals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lodo Mondadori: bribery of judges (acquitted due to SoL)</li> <li>• All Iberian 1: 23-billion-lira bribe to Bettino Craxi via an offshore bank account code-named All Iberian (first court sentence: 2 years 4 months jail; appeal: acquitted due to SoL)</li> <li>• Bribery of Guardia di Finanza (1st sentence: prison 2 years 9 months; appeal: acquitted due SoL for three charges and the 4th charge was unsubstantiated)</li> </ul>
<i>Statute of Limitations (SoL)</i>	
<i>Amnesty Legislative acquittal</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Massonic lodge trial: false testimony (guilty - offered amnesty)</li> <li>• Lentini affair: accounting fraud (not guilty – change in Accounting Fraud)</li> </ul>

Law)

- Macherio Estates 1: accounting fraud (amnesty offered following the 1992 Fiscal Remission Law)
- Macherio Estates 2: embezzlement, tax evasion, accounting fraud (acquitted due to SoL in all charges)
- All Iberian 2: accounting fraud (acquitted – new Accounting Fraud Law passed by the Berlusconi government)
- SME-Ariosto 2: accounting fraud (acquitted – new Accounting Fraud Law passed by the Berlusconi government)

*Other  
acquisttals*

- Medusa Cinema: accounting fraud (acquitted – minor amount compared with wealth)
- SME-Ariosto 1: bribes to the judge Renato Squillante (acquitted)
- Television rights: accounting fraud, tax evasion, embezzlement (acquitted)

Stayed

*Stayed for  
legislative  
reasons*

- Fininvest 1: accounting fraud and embezzlement (archived - new Accounting Fraud Law passed by the Berlusconi government)
- Fininvest 2: accounting fraud and embezzlement (archived - new Accounting Fraud Law passed by the Berlusconi government)

*Other  
stayed  
trials*

- Anti-competition behaviour: division of publicity between RAI and Fininvest television giants
- Drug trafficking
- Tax bribery on the pay TV

- Conspiracy concerning the 1992-1993 slaughters
  - Collusion to money launder with mafia, together with Mr. Dell’Utri
- Ongoing trials
- Corruption of justice: bribe to the lawyer David Mills
  - Corruption of senators of the Romano Prodi government camp (trial transferred from Naples to Rome)

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Source: [www.ricercagiuridica.com/cassazione](http://www.ricercagiuridica.com/cassazione)

He also claims that he had to endure ‘... 577 visits by police, 2,500 court hearings, and 174 million Euros in lawyers’ bills paid by me’ (Brown, 2008). Moreover, the Italian premier attests that many in the judicial system have taken an interest in defaming him ‘... with the aim of subverting the votes of the Italian people’ (Brown, 2008). Mr Berlusconi’s image problems do not stop with his public life. There have been a number of private scandals regarding divorce, extra- marital and underage affairs (Pisa, 2009). Evidence shows that Mr Berlusconi has attempted time and time again to subvert justice through his legislative majority and the power afforded to him through this office.

This political influence on a country brand is evident in Italy with Mr Berlusconi’s premiership and misdeeds. The authors used the 2010 edition of the FutureBrand Country Brand Index (CBI) to evaluate the Italian national brand. This annual study examines and ranks

country brands based on FutureBrand's proprietary research, which is similar to Anholt and Hildreth's (2004) model. It incorporates elements of tourism, heritage, and culture, which are good for business, quality of life, and value system. The sixth edition of CBI incorporates a global quantitative study with 3400 international business and leisure travellers from 13 countries on all five continents. These data are then qualified by in - depth expert focus groups that took place in 14 major metropolitan areas around the world. The overall country brand score is calculated using FutureBrand's hierarchical decision model, which measures the overall country brand performance in the following areas: awareness, familiarity, associations, preference, consideration, decision/visitation, and advocacy. Additionally, this ranking reflects the extent to which a nation exports its values through its iconic brands.

As the 2010 CBI reveals (see Table 2 for the top 25 country brand ranking), economic performance is also vital to brand strength. For example, Greece's 2010 22nd rank has fallen eight positions since 2009 and 16 positions since 2005. This can be seen as largely due to recent economic strife and liquidity concerns and ineffective leadership (Byron, 2010). Italy has also faced economic troubles in the global recession, which may have influenced the Italian position; however, the authors argue that economics cannot explain Italy's lapse, as most, if not all, ranked countries suffered economic strife. The inaugural report in 2005 listed Italy



as the first nation brand globally. Things are very different now, as the 2010 report listed Italy as 12, 11 places down in 5 years (Figure 2).

**Table 2** 2010 FutureBrand overall top 25 country brand ranking

2010 rank	2009 change	Country
1	+1	Canada
2	+2	Australia
3	0	New Zealand
4	-3	USA
5	+6	Switzerland
6	+1	Japan
7	-2	France
8	+8	Finland
9	-1	UK
10	+11	Sweden
11	-2	Germany
12	-6	Italy
13	+9	Norway
14	-4	Spain
15	-2	Singapore
16	+3	Maldives
17	-5	Ireland

18	-3	Bermuda
19	+4	Denmark
20	+8	Austria
21	+5	Mauritius
22	-8	Greece
23	-5	India
24	+1	Iceland
25	+6	the Netherlands

Source: FutureBrand (www.futurebrand.com)

**Figure 2** Italian performance in overall FutureBrand Rank & GDP Index (2005–2010).



Source: FutureBrand (www.futurebrand.com) and UN Data (data.un.org)

Italy fared much better in terms of heritage and culture, which it placed first (Table 3). But even in terms of tourism, Italy ranks 15th only despite increased efforts to boost tourism over the last few years with high-profile domestic and foreign advertising initiatives, even featuring Silvio Berlusconi himself. However, this is set against a backdrop of sustained criticism of Mr Berlusconi's premiership (Poggioli, 2009). The FutureBrand 2010 CBI finds negative feelings toward Italy and its political leader, which are increasingly strong and suggest that they may be starting to affect other parts of the country's image.

**Table 3** Examining Italy's FutureBrand 2010 country brand ranking performance

Top 25 country brand index category	Italy's rank	Included attributes
Tourism	15th	Attractions, resort and lodging options, food, and value for money
Heritage and culture	1st	Authenticity, history, art, culture, and natural beauty
Good for business	Not reported*	Investment climate, skilled workforce, advanced technology, and regulatory environment
Quality of life	Not	Education, healthcare,

	reported*	standard of living, job opportunity, safety, and livability
Value system	Not reported*	Political freedom, environmental friendliness, stable legal environment, tolerance, and freedom of speech

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\*Only the top 25 countries reported.

Source: FutureBrand ([www.futurebrand.com](http://www.futurebrand.com))

## Politics of cartoons

Like urban graffiti, jokes, and other genres of popular culture, cartoons challenge the ways we accept official images as real and true. Cartoons are static form of caricature, which in turn is a form of satire (Bal *et al.*, 2009). A cartoon is a drawing, representational or symbolic, that makes a satirical, witty, or humorous point. A cartoon exposes viewers to a point of view for or against its subject, either by presenting it as a figure worthy of sympathy or by distorting it into a figure of ridicule (Streicher, 1965, 1967; Alba, 1967; Coupe, 1967). Condensing history, culture, and social relationships within a single frame, a cartoon can re- contextualize events and evoke reference points in ways that a photograph or even a film cannot (Gombrich, 1963). Cartoons are often a humorous commentary on recent events, which allows the spectator to easily elaborate on the image and develop an opinion on the subject (Bal *et*

*al.*, 2009). Political cartoons are often an outlet of opposition or criticism, which are used to propel social issues to the general public's attention.

Newspaper and magazine editors use cartoons to portray a specific issue because of their simplicity in reader comprehension. Readers can understand their message faster than any political commentaries or editorials. Clever cartoons are often the motivator for a consumer to actually read editorial viewpoints, ideas, and beliefs. Editorial cartoons have an increased chance of becoming viral and therefore usually have wider circulation, a longer life, and a greater influence than written editorials among the public (Duus, 2001). The purpose of political cartoons is not necessarily just to inform but also to make people reflect on current events and issues about politics, government, and society. Artists aim to attack an idea, a person, or a party in the hopes that the image will inspire a laugh or a smile at the expense of the subject (Duus, 2001).

Bal *et al.* (2009) develop an integrated theory, grounded in literature, to explain how cartoons work. Effective cartoons must process exaggerated elements of sympathy, a gap between the image and reality, and either material or ideological differentiation. The authors use this framework to analyze the following Berlusconi cartoons.

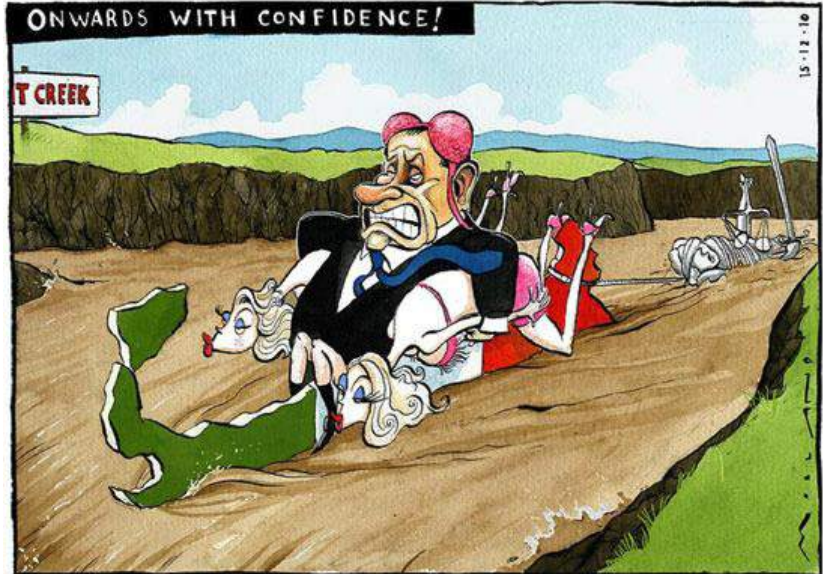
## Cartooning Italy's Berlusconi

The two cartoons discussed in the following section represent a summary of the relevant facts and aspects of the recent affairs of Mr. Berlusconi. The authors decided to examine two British cartoons for several reasons: First, we were looking for cartoons that were available and seen by a large number of people; and second, they had to discuss the same subject. Having two British cartoons satisfy both requirements. British newspapers have a tradition of satire cartoons that is appreciated by the readers. The decision to have cartoons from the same country strengthens the message. We found several cartoons about Mr. Berlusconi and the sex scandal he is facing, and we chose the two with the higher visibility based on readership of the publications where they were printed. Both images appeared in well-regarded international newspapers in December 2010; thus, the authors assume that they are representative and provide a glimpse of how international audiences view Mr. Berlusconi's recent actions.

*The Times'* cartoonist, Mr. Morten Morland, captioned the first cartoon 'onwards with confidence' (Figure 3). It was published the day after Mr. Berlusconi won a confidence vote in the Italian Parliament. In the image, Mr. Berlusconi is riding a thin raft, shaped like Italy, and painted with the colors of the Italian flag, which is sailing through fast brown colored waters. He is sporting a helmet made from a pink bra and is not wearing any trousers while hugging two barely covered young ladies. His raft is attached to slightly submerged

boat further upstream, which bears a sword and the scales of justice.

**Figure 3** Onwards with confidence! Source: Morland, 2010



This cartoon has several elements that give the viewer an indication of how British people perceive Italy and its leader. It seems that Italy is in deep trouble from this scene because the outline of the country and its justice system are nearly submerged in the brown, fast-moving river. The future looks bleak as Italy struggles to survive the economic crisis with its Mr. Berlusconi steering the country and its justice institutions blindly into the rapids of uncertainty. The cartoon's depiction of Mr. Berlusconi with two young women and wearing their undergarments shows that his scandals and affairs that rocked Italian politics are well-known to the international audience. Moreover, Mr. Berlusconi's Italy

will not float long as the impending conclusion of his story seems near.

The second cartoon is from *The Independent* by Dave Brown and was published the day before the confidence vote. It is titled ‘Silvio Berlusconi: the leader who has eroded Italian democracy’, which may be even more caustic than the image. In this cartoon, a battered, trouser-less Mr. Berlusconi seems to be tripping on a mess of sexy women’s lace undergarments. He is balanced precariously on a broken leg in a cast the shape of Italy, and it seems he will fall down the stairs of either the Italian Parliament or perhaps a courthouse. It seems that the Italian Prime Minister’s private and public life are finally bringing his story to an inglorious end (Figure 4).

**Figure 4** Silvio Berlusconi: the leader who has eroded Italian democracy. Source: Brown, 2010





Despite increased efforts to boost Italy's international profile and tourism by using prominent domestic and foreign advertising initiatives, fairs, and exhibitions, Italy continues to see its national brand decline in global rank in 2010. This effort by the Italian government features advertisements in which Mr. Berlusconi is displayed in an attempt to improve his stained image. This national brand decline is set against a backdrop of sustained criticism of Silvio Berlusconi's premiership and the financial difficulties the country has faced in the global economic crisis, such as a drop in purchasing power, fierce student strikes, and domestic social tensions. However, the misguided values of the Italian leader seem to be internationally perceived as carrying into vital elements of Italian politics, business, tourism, and culture as reflected in the decline of the Italian national brand since Mr. Berlusconi took power in 2008, regardless of his past successes.

## **Conclusions**

Loyal consumers often forgive a brand's indiscretions but only to a point (Hart *et al.*, 1990). A strong national brand can provide a country additional leeway to weather short-term difficulties that hamper both domestic and foreign public perceptions. However, the degree to which consumers look the other way seems to have its limits as well, as previously illustrated in the Italian example.

The national brand spirit will depend as much on citizens as ambassadors of values and culture as it does on specific locations or destinations. In order to increase national brand value, a nation's leaders must not only manage the country's government but also become ambassadors and promoters of the nation or be taunted, as Berlusconi is, by the cartoonists of the political press for their misdeeds. A strong national brand will earn rewards both in the public and private sectors by increasing gross domestic product, through higher sales, exports goods, tourism, and taxes, as well as an improved sense of national pride.

A national-branding strategy is grounded in the vision of political leaders, especially the head of government or state. This vision needs to provide an environment that supports improvement of the six points outlined by Anholt and Hildreth's (2004) hexagon. As the Italian case has shown, the political and even social actions of government leaders can have significant effects on the perceived national brand equity.

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# Paper 4



## 2.4 Paper 4

### **Viral political communication and readability: An analysis of an Italian political blog**

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# **Viral political communication and readability: An analysis of an Italian political blog**

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## **Abstract**

The Internet is widely used by political parties to report events and to send messages to the voting population. Politicians used digital media (websites, blogs, bulletin boards/lists, and chat/instant messaging) in recent elections, together with traditional media (television, newspapers, rallies, etc.). Political blogs represent not only an additional communication channel but also an instrument for spreading editorial content and messages, virally infecting more traditional media channels. A key task for any political party or politician is to make the blog understandable and easy to read as a first step to ignite and spread the right viral effect. To reach this goal, writers must consider both their content and their target audience. This article measures the readability of the text of a political blog to provide insight on the effectiveness of viral communication using blogs. The Beppegrillo.it blog was analyzed from January 2005 to May 2012 and is a unique example of a political blog using a single official media. This blog switched in the period of the study from being a personal blog to a political blog. The posts were divided into two different phases: the former were intended to discuss political topics and were written by a not-yet-political contributor; the latter were posts written by an active politician. Content analysis using simple word and sentence counts for every year of posts was undertaken, along with a readability analysis using the Microsoft Word Spelling and Grammar function, and both the Gunning Fog Index and the Gulpease Index. The two

different phases were compared to determine if any change occurred in readability, complexity of the text, and volume of communication. In this way, we can explore the differences in the communication techniques used in the political field unofficially and then officially. Finally, our findings indicate that levels of readability of communications, particularly among broad-based audiences, may be deteriorating significantly when the blog becomes a political one and the communication becomes more institutional.

## Introduction

In the last decade, the number of people surfing the Internet for news and information has greatly increased (Johnson and Kaye, 2008); in particular, digital communication during political elections is a major source of political communication and opinion expression. The Internet has been identified as a relatively inexpensive and direct method of disseminating information. Websites are widely used by political parties to report events and to send messages to the voting population. Despite the importance of the subject, the complexity and variety of political electoral media make it difficult to study the impact of a single medium: digital or traditional (Castells, 2009).

In recent elections, politicians used digital media (websites, blogs, bulletin boards/lists, and chat/instant messaging) together with traditional media (television, newspapers, rallies, etc.), and a preference for digital media was evident (Garrett and Danziger, 2011). Users are moving from traditional sources of information to online versions of the same media, or toward more innovative and interactive media.

The recent Italian administrative election of 2012 made it possible to study a case where a winning party voluntarily limited the use of digital media to mainly one medium, a blog. This elimination makes this specific case very interesting and unique, as we can assume that the political leader considered Beppe Grillo's blog to be highly relevant. In fact, *The Five Stars Party* decided that it would be the only communication tool to use.



Beppe Grillo and his political party members decided not to participate in any political television debates or shows to present their political program. In addition, they did not give interviews to newspapers and radios, or use any billboards.

Beppe Grillo is an Italian comedian-turned political activist and candidate. His career as a comedian started in the late 1970s; during the early 1980s, rising audience ratings and critical acclaim transformed him into one of the hottest media figures. Toward the end of that decade and into the early 1990s, Grillo's satire changed and he began to discuss controversial political issues, both during his theater shows and on television. He openly attacked some of the most visible and powerful Italian politicians and their penchant for bribery. He also started to scrutinize big corporations guilty of "false advertising and polluting consumer products" (Israeli, 2005). As a result, in the early 1990s, Grillo was informally banned from Italian public broadcasting television (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013). During the last two decades, mainstream media outlets have rarely mentioned Grillo's name or any of his causes, let alone his many journalistic scoops. Notwithstanding his history of successes with audiences, he appeared only twice on public television since the early 1990s. Grillo's satire of political powers, politicians, and corporations did not end with the ban from Italian television. Apparently, Grillo managed to use his removal from the small screen to boost his popularity with the Italian public and to gain international exposure; his live shows

were almost always sold out. Even the editors of *Time* magazine noticed Grillo and his political criticism; in 2005, they named Grillo among the 37 European heroes of the year (Israeli, 2005).

In January 2005, the Internet provided Grillo with a new and powerful communication instrument, a blog named *The Five Stars Movement* at the website address Beppegrillo.it. He started blogging regularly; through this site (and with the help of the digital marketing company Casaleggio and Associati), his visibility and popularity received a much-needed boost. Grillo was delivering the kind of non-partisan and critical political information that rarely finds space on today's prime-time television news or on the front pages of newspapers for a rapidly expanding and active community of readers (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013). Additionally, comments posted daily on the blog or sent via email gave Grillo an access to a public platform that allowed him to report news stories that otherwise would have remained untold.

In December 2005, less than a year after its first post, Beppegrillo.it was chosen as the best Internet site in the News and Information category by the well-known "WWW 2005 Prize" organized by *Il Sole 24 Ore*, the most popular Italian daily financial newspaper, "for interactivity with the public, ample documentation on the Internet and commitment to tackling topics of use to citizens" (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2005).

Beppe Grillo's blog was (and still is) an expression of his political opinions and it can be ideologically divided

into two, on the basis of a turning point in the year 2009 when he decided to actively participate in Italian political life.

The validity of Beppe Grillo's communication strategy was confirmed by the huge success of the Five Stars Movement in the 2012 local elections when it was demonstrated to be the third major Italian party after The People of Freedom (Italian: *Il Popolo della Libertà*, PdL) and the Democratic Party. In June 2012, Beppegrillo.it was the most popular blog in Italy (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013).

In this article, first we introduce the use of new media and, in particular, blogs in politics. Then we discuss the methodologies that can be used to measure the texts' readability and therefore the communication comprehensibility. Next, as a case study, we examine the Beppegrillo.it blog by studying the author's language use and communication content, both before and after his entry in the electoral arena. This study involves the transformation of a blog about politics into a political blog in terms of communication style and features. The former intended to discuss political topics and was written by a not-yet-political subject; the latter was a blog written by an active politician. The transformation of the communication style and the messages over the course of the transition were taken into consideration. The main aim of this article was to apply a methodology to measure the blog texts' readability and comprehensibility and, thus, to monitor over time the communication effectiveness of the political party's blog.

## **The viral role of blogs and new media in politics**

The Internet is a highly effective channel for political communication (Bimber and Davis, 2003; Norris, 2003) as it requires the user (i.e., the consumer) to take action in order to visit the websites and blogs of political parties and candidates. Other more traditional media (from billboards, e-paper, and the presence of politicians on television) are less targeted and can therefore be more invasive, reaching people who are not interested in politics. Although exposure to the majority of mass media can be both voluntary and involuntary, exposure to a website, a blog, or any of the web social media is deliberate and requires a degree of interest and active involvement. Therefore, there is a risk of involving only restricted groups of the population. A successful message needs to be spread in several ways, and this means that a message that goes viral in the fastest way possible has more possibility to reach both the potential supporters and the undecided subjects (Vaccari, 2008).

Likewise, Internet users tend to be more attentive (but also more demanding) to political issues than the rest of the electorate: according to a survey carried out for commercial purposes on net users, 69% expressed interest in participatory forums and spaces for interaction (community) on the websites of political parties, 65% on the blogs of the candidates, 60% on the publication of online programs, 46% for newsletters sent by email, 37% for videos of electoral candidates, and

27% for the possibility of realizing virtual posters (Oto Research, 2008).

In a situation characterized by a growing level of public discontent toward political parties (Morlino and Tarchi, 2006), and by the disappointing results of recent governments and the weakening of ideologies and party organizations, the Internet could be a useful tool in trying to reverse this trend. The Internet could provide citizens with more opportunities to interact with politicians and making political communication more transparent (Bal *et al.*, 2010). Web 2.0 added the opportunity for the active interaction between politicians and their followers, between politicians and the general public, and also between citizens and professionals, as well as between citizens themselves (Chadwick, 2006; Coleman and Wright 2008). The complexity of the Web 2.0 approach does not lie in technology: creating a website can take little time and use a variety of open-source platforms that are easily accessible and free to all, but the construction of a network of active users and stakeholders is a much longer and more complex process. Building a network requires establishing relationships and trust between individuals who, often, do not know each other before they meet online (Coleman and Wright, 2008).

In particular, a blog is the digital equivalent of a personal diary, giving the author the opportunity to post regular entries with little or no need for technical knowledge. Blogs offer a digital space in which to insert different types of communications: videos, articles,

images, and audio. Many blogs also allow visitors to respond to bloggers' messages with comments (Ferguson and Howell, 2004). Blogs are easy to use, and several digital companies offer free blog space and software. This ease-of-use has caused an increase in the number of blogs and bloggers in the Internet. By the end of 2011, NM Incite, a Nielsen/McKinsey company, had tracked over 181 million blogs around the world, up from 36 million only 5 years earlier in 2006 (Nielsen, 2012). In politics, candidates in the 2004 US presidential election first extensively used blogs (Vaccari, 2008). Political blogs have been analyzed in many studies (Pole, 2010; Coleman and Wright, 2008), as have blogs of general subjects. Even blogs used as tools in election campaigns have been studied (Yanoshevsky, 2007; Serfaty, 2006), although few studies have focused on the blogs of politicians (Jereczek-Lipinska, 2007; Suomela-Salmi and Dervin, 2009). The general opinion is that every politician should have a blog, and the lack of utilizing this digital instrument can be a signal to the public of failure to keep up with the times (Wright, 2009).

It is especially in the emotional and participatory dimension (Bonera, 2011) that the Internet can contribute to renewing political communication and improving its effectiveness, which as demonstrated in a number of cases, is not only typical of the US experience (Bimber and Davis, 2003; Chadwick, 2006; Vaccari, 2007 and 2008, Ward and Vedel, 2006). One of the main reasons some political parties are reluctant to give

space to new technologies is that they fear losing control of communication (Bentivegna, 2006). The virality of the new media has increased the ability of autonomous subjects to communicate and spread different political messages, especially if readability and comprehension are not successful among the target.

### **Text readability and comprehensibility**

Readability is a characteristic of a document that refers to how easy the document can be read, and it considers characteristics such as the vocabulary and the structure of sentences, as well as the legibility and layout of the content (Klare, 1963). The concept of readability includes reader's competence and motivation (Klare, 1980). Readability is what makes some texts easier to read than others, but it should not be confused with legibility, which concerns the typeface and layout of a document. Readability assessment has been a central research topic in past years, and it is still an active field of interest today.

In the business world, the importance of readability has been examined in several disciplines such as finance and accounting (Blouin, 2010; Li, 2008), but marketing remains the most important field for readability studies (Mackey and Metz, 2009; Milne *et al.*, 2006; Kover, 2002; Clark *et al.*, 1990; Mills *et al.*, 2012; Sattari *et al.*, 2011). The text comprehension has also been studied and identified as an important element of e-communication (Leong *et al.*, 2002).

It is also important to distinguish between the terms readability and comprehensibility. Readability indicates the precision with which the reader can answer questions and not the artistic quality of the language used (Miller, 1972). We deal here with the effectiveness of the communication per se and not with the ability of the writer to ignite the imagination.

The variables used to analyze readability are lexical use and syntactic form. Lexical use means the vocabulary that is chosen. The frequently used words are the familiar ones. The frequent and familiar words are short and recurrent words (Miller, 1972). Syntactic form, or syntax, refers to the proportion of simple sentences in a paragraph, and it has high correlation with the length of the period expressed in the number of words (Lucisano, 1992).

Several index and measurement formulas are available for analyzing texts, available both online and offline. Currently, because of the scope and complexity of the object of the analysis, no formula has been identified as the best one. Traditional readability metrics are quick and easy to calculate but have drawbacks. For example, the use of sentence length as a measure of syntactic complexity assumes that a longer sentence is more grammatically complex than a shorter one, which is often, though not always, the case (Orletta *et al.*, 2011). Traditional readability formulas focus on a limited set of superficial text features that are taken as rough approximations of the linguistic factors at play in a readability assessment. For example, the Flesch–



Kincaid measure, the most common measure of reading difficulty still in use (Kincaid *et al.*, 1975) is a linear function of the average number of syllables per word and the average number of words per sentence, where the former and the latter are used as simple proxies for lexical and syntactic complexity, respectively.

The Gunning Fog Index is an index developed mainly for the English language. The Fog Index divides the number of words with three or more syllables in a sample of writing by the number of sentences in the same sample to create a numerical value representing the readability of that piece. The value is obtained by means of a calculation that takes into account the average word length and the average number of words in each sentence. The assumption is that the more words and phrases that are shorter, the more understandable the text is. This algorithm generally produces a lower score when the content is easier to read. For example, *The Bible*, *Shakespeare*, *Mark Twain*, and *TV Guide* all have Fog Indexes around 6. *Time*, *Newsweek* and *The Wall Street Journal* each have a Fog Index of about 11. In particular, the Gunning Fog Index estimates the years of formal education needed to understand a text at first reading. To be understood by any audience, texts need to have a Gunning Fog Index score of less than 8; generally, it is considered easy to understand a text with an index lower than 12. However, this index is calibrated specifically for the English language; Italian words and phrases are, on average, longer.

The Gulpease Index is the most frequently used instrument for measuring the readability of the Italian language (Lucisano and Piemontese, 1988); it was introduced in the 1980s by the Gruppo Universitario Linguistico Pedagogico at the University of Rome. The Gulpease Index takes into account the length of a word in characters rather than in syllables, which has proven to be a more reliable method for assessing the readability of Italian texts.

This index, unlike the others, is not a single measure of readability, but to varying degrees depends on the level of education of recipients of the text. Four levels are defined for readability: very easy, easy to difficult, very difficult, and almost incomprehensible. The index ranges from 0 (lowest readability) to 100 (maximum readability). The Gulpease Index explanation is based on education level, even if it is not directly correlated to years of study. The four levels are related to three different target groups: people with an elementary school education, those with a middle school education, and those with a high school diploma. A text with a Gulpease Index of over 80 is indicated for people with an elementary school education, whereas an index of over 60 is readable by readers with a middle school education. High school readability is set at an index score of greater than 40. The shortcoming of these indices is related to the lack of the semantic analysis. They do not consider in any way the meaning of words and phrases, but only their respective length.

## Method

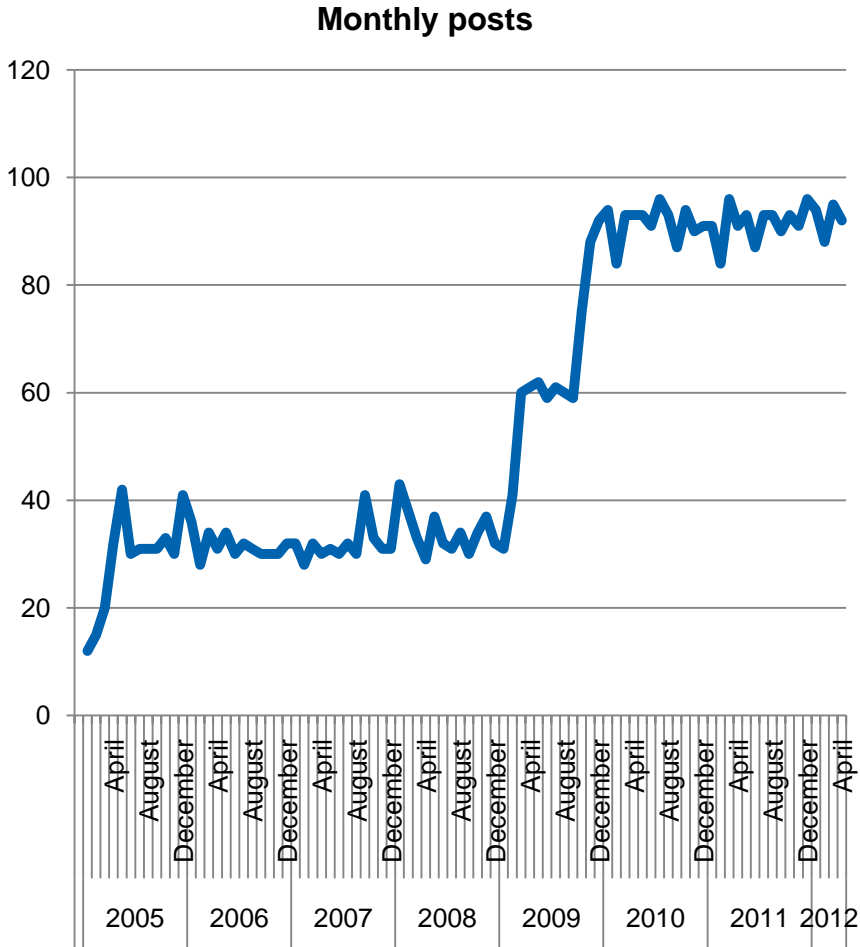
The Beppegrillo.it posts from January 2005 to May 2012 have been studied. Seven years and 5 months of posts were recorded and analyzed. During this period, Grillo and his staff published 4935 posts, which included 2 572 638 words (Figure. 1). The posts are still available online at the following web address:  
<http://www.beppegrillo.it/archivio.html>.

These posts have been divided into two different segments, before and after the blog switched from personal to political, but they both have as their central foundation the “Movimento 5 Stelle”, which is the political party led by Beppe Grillo. To identify trends, the posts have also been studied separately by year.

Content analysis using simple word and sentence counts of the text for every year of posts was undertaken, along with a readability analysis using the Microsoft Word Spelling and Grammar function, and both the Gunning Fog Index and the Gulpease Index.

Our decision to use both Gunning Fox Index and the Gulpease Index is related to the need to use an index developed for assessing the readability of the Italian language compared with one compatible with, but not specifically designed for, the Italian language.

**Figure 1** Volume of blog posts



## Results

The descriptive statistics shows that the first period was characterized by a relatively low number of daily posts, with an all time decrease in 2005 of 0.98 posts a day and an increase in 2008 of 2.12 posts a day (Table.

1). Our analysis reveals that several changes occurred in the blog switch from the personal phase to the political one. The post frequency almost tripled from around 30 posts/month to 90 posts/month. This underlies the increasing desire of communication. The length of the posts increased, too, changing from 274.5 words per post, on average, to 543.2 words per post, on average, in 2011. The sum of these two factors produced a huge increase in the total length of the yearly posts, moving from 151 603 words/year in 2006 to 596 392 words/year in 2011.

**Table 1** Blog post first analysis

Year	Number of posts	Number of posts per day	Number of words	Mean length of posts (words)
2005	348	0.95	95 509	274.5
2006	378	1.04	151 603	401.1
2007	381	1.04	157 196	412.6
2008	410	1.12	291 874	711.9
2009	749	2.05	486 526	649.6
2010	1099	3.01	640 979	583.2
2011	1098	3.01	596 392	543.2
2012	472 (5/12)	3.1	152 559	323.2

Both the Gunning Fox and the Gulpease Index indicated that the posts were, in the first phase, fairly easy to read. Results are shown in Table 2. In particular, the Gunning Fox Index showed that during this first period, the posts were readable to people having between 8 and 9 years of education, which implies an approximate age of 15 years. The Gulpease Index, which focuses more on the Italian language, defined the posts as quite easy to read and understand, with a score between 55 and 57.

**Table 2** Blog post second analysis

Year	Gunning Fox Index	Gulpease Index	Common words (%)	Uncommon words (%)
2005	8	55	76.8	23.2
2006	8	55	77.9	22.1
2007	8	57	78.2	21.8
2008	9	56	78.6	21.4
2009	11	50	79.2	20.8
2010	13	47	78.6	21.4
2011	13	48	79.8	20.2
2012	10	51	79.9	20.1

The increased difficulty in the readability of the posts seems to be related to the beginning of Grillo's active political involvement. In fact, during the period of

transition, the language complexity increased with a rise in the Gunning Fog Index from 8 to 13 (2011) and a decrease in the Gulpease Index from 55 to 48 (2011), indicating a deterioration in the readability of the blog posts.

The data collected indicate that a new incoming communication phase can be identified. This phase started in 2012 and is characterized by an even higher communication intensity, but a lower complexity. This is probably due to the political elections that just occurred in 2012. Our analysis showed an impressive increase in daily posts, which tripled in comparison with the first phase reaching an average of 3.1 posts per day in the first 5 months of 2012. Only in this third phase did the complexity decrease to a more acceptable level of 10 on the Gunning Fox Index and a more acceptable level of 51 on the Gulpease Index. Finally, the recent election period probably implied a necessity for wider and clearer communication than in the second phase.

## **General discussion and implications**

First of all, it is notable that the number of daily posts does not follow a classical growth pattern, but instead is characterized by different levels during the different phases. In no phase was it possible to identify a process of regular growth. Rather, the growth appears to be closely connected to the specific stages of Grillo's approach (personal blog, political blog, and elections).

The first period was characterized by a relatively low number of daily posts. The number of daily posts and the complexity of the language drastically increased after the transition from a politically oriented, personal blog to an entirely political blog. The daily posts doubled after this transition, and the complexity of the text substantially increased.

Both the Gunning Fox and the Gulpease Index indicated that the initial posts were easy to read. The number of daily posts and the complexity of the language drastically increased after the transition from a politically oriented, personal blog to an entirely political blog. One explanation for the dramatic change in strategy could have been the contingency factor of the period; Grillo's founding of the Five Stars Movement and involvement in local administrative elections and activities were correlated.

As a result, there are good reasons to think that Beppe Grillo's decisions regarding subjects, post length, and post frequency in his blog reflect his desire to create a new way of communicating with voters. He changed the traditional idea of Italian political parties that a good political campaign has to be run with the activities of volunteers and activists as an effort that must be tangible, tied to relationships face to face, implemented only in physical places, fully controlled by the party, and embodied in a commitment to permanent link (Raniolo, 2007).

Grillo's posts can be ideologically divided into two different parts, on the basis of their turning point in the



year 2009, when he decided to actively participate in Italian political life, first creating a civic list for the 2009 local administrative election and then founding the Five Stars Movement.

Therefore, it is possible to identify a period (January 2005 through December 2008) in which his blog reflected only his personal ideas and was used mainly to create notoriety about his name and his professional activities. The year 2009 can be considered a transition year when his approach to political life changed, and Grillo's involvement in politics gradually increased. Until this shift, Grillo's main interest was his active political life, and the main instrument for reaching his political targets was the Beppegrillo.it blog. The importance of the web, and derivatively of the blog, was directly indicated in the Five Stars Movement foundation document (Beppegrillo, 2009).

Our assumption is that the language and political content of the blog derive directly from the type of involvement of the blogger. The first-phase blog communication was more personal and accessible, whereas the second-phase language was a more complex political language. It is important to point out that Grillo's blog in the second phase consists apparently of a professional way of communicating, managed by a marketing agency and finalized to achieve well-defined results. Considering that the Five Stars Party adopted Grillo's blog as the only official communication channel, and considering that the party is experiencing rapid growth, we can assume that the blog's communication

strategy has been successful in shifting its focus from personal to political.

In general, political communication is commonly handled in a professional manner, communication campaigns are planned, and the results evaluated. This communication needs to be suitable for a broad audience in the hope that the message will reach them and encourage them to become involved in politics. Political communication should not be complex especially when it uses a very direct media channel (e.g., the Internet).

## **Practitioners implications**

Political language, variously institutionalized and legitimized since ancient times, has always made use of elaborate strategies and tactics aimed at achieving what the Latins called, with a very concise expression, the *fidem facere et animos impellere* – “convince rationally and persuade emotionally”. Geared toward citizen-recipients, information is then organized along complex textual paths where key words, neologisms, and formulas are used to activate and/or reaffirm those bonds of trust with the audience with which every politician must deal, especially during political and administrative election campaigns and referendums.

For political parties, new Internet tools enable campaigning teams to become more proactive and to fit the message to the person targeted according to his or her needs and interests, as defined through their own

requests after answering online questionnaires or, simply, thanks to the recording and processing of the various items on which the user clicks while on the party's site. The competitive advantage that is correlated to the viral diffusion of a political message is apparently the real goal of the communication; the blog, the website, or the social network represent not only an additional communication channel but also an instrument for spreading editorial content and messages, virally infecting the other and "older" media.

Although it was typical of the 1990s, a drastic simplification of the language of politics on the television media, it is now even more necessary to use on the Net a language that tries to appear clear and precise. Renewed attention must be given to clarity of communication now that politics uses the new media to reach the wide public.

Our findings indicate that the levels of readability of communications, particularly among broad-based audiences, may significantly lower when a blog changes from a personal one to an official political party one. Our results raise a concern as to the ability of the political communicators to exhibit the levels of transparency increasingly expected by the public. As when communications from political parties are not readable by their intended stakeholders, transparency is compromised. It seems important to evaluate the readability and comprehensibility of online political texts in relation to the varying public citizens, who will consequently approve or disapprove them.

An important limitation of the present study is that the quantitative explanation of a text loses certain properties when undergoing intense interpretation. Every communication is interwoven with semantic relations and is symbolic, which does not lend itself to statistical analyses. The concatenation of sentences that make up a text does not lend itself to being broken up into linguistic units in its own right.

Moreover, we believe that in the future, it would be interesting to study the reactions of readers to the blog's change in communication style, frequency, and readability, measuring the volume and the language used in the comments posted by readers.

## **Conclusions**

A key communication task for any political party or politician is to make the political communication spread using different tools (we considered specifically the party blog), easy to read and understandable as a first step. These different tools must have the precise scope to inform, to send the right messages, and to ignite the right viral effect. Therefore, because of the great diffusion of the Internet as a political information source, it seems very important to evaluate the readability and comprehensibility of online political texts in relation to the varying public citizens who will consequently approve or disapprove them. Consequently, to reach this goal, writers must consider both their contents and their target audience.

Identifying the reader is probably a challenging activity, but the statistics available to blog owners are a unique aid because they provide useful information to help writers modify the style and complexity of their writing according to who is reading their work.

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## **Chapter 3: Conclusions**



### 3.1 Introduction

Political marketing not only provides tactical counsel and support regarding parties and candidates' political campaigns but also plays an important role in determining party strategies and campaign policies (Bradshaw, 1995; Medvic, 2001, 2006). Indeed, the evolution of political marketing is a recent phenomenon with regard to its practical application of relevant tools and techniques in election campaigns and the proposal of new strategic approaches, theoretical models, and paradigms.

Election campaign strategies have arisen from the evolution of both the political and social landscapes of modern democracies. *In primis*, changes in the circumstances of electorates' social and political preferences are no longer tied to static ideological values; changing patterns in individual preferences have led to increasing volatility in the vote (Franklin, 1995). *In secundis*, the decline of membership in the party, the presence of political coalitions that are opposed yet also characterized by homogenization of electoral programs, and alliances that have become progressively more unstable have less frequently defined the voter as the manifestation of ideological beliefs and lasting fruit and more often as having personal and variable choices (Lilleker & Lees-Marshment, 2005).

Therefore, political candidates and parties must distinguish themselves in the conceptual policy space by creating and managing a political brand and a specific set of values (Schweiger & Adami, 1999). Parties and

candidates must implement the design and construction of a brand and determine its positioning in view of internal (internal resources and party characteristics) and external (political, legislative, and competitive factors regarding media, especially the peculiarities of the electorate) variables (Prete, 2015). To do so, they must understand the target audience's needs, desires, and perceptions and, based on these acquisitions, must identify sustainable competitive advantages (Pilotti, Ganzaroli, & Guido, 2007).

Political parties should also determine the expectations of voters through shared knowledge, images of parties and candidates, determinants of intention to purchase, meanings and symbols associated with the experience of voting, and personal and contextual variables concerning participation in political activities (Prete, 2015).

### **3.2 Major findings**

This work focused on comprehending the strategic positioning of a political brand, as well identifying the factors that can affect the desired and perceived positioning of this political brand.

The overall research problem was subsequently identified as: *how can the strategic stance of a political brand best be understood, and what are the factors that subsequently affect the positioning of a political brand?*



The following four research sub-questions were formulated to analyze the overall research problem in depth:

- RQ1: Do political brands adopt strategic archetypes/stances in the same manner as conventionally branded products and services?
- RQ2: Does the positioning/stance of a political party change over time, and how can this be measured and evaluated?
- RQ3: Do adverse events and external elements affect the positioning of a political brand?
- RQ4: How do brand strategies affect the frequency and quality of communication used by political parties to position themselves?

The key factor is not whether a stance is right or not but rather if it is appropriate for the environmental conditions in which the party or brand finds itself. If it is, the party or brand must both reinforce and maintain the mode of focus; if it is not appropriate, strategists must identify a more appropriate stance and engineer ways for the brand to move in that direction.

It might also be possible for political brands to exploit a “portfolio” of stances aligned to different target audiences. It would be quite feasible for a political brand (at least, in a democracy) to follow certain voters (probably those committed to the party), shape others’ ideas (the undecided), and interact with others (corporations and major donors).

In this sense, political marketing not only provides guidance and assistance regarding the general or merely tactical aspects of the political campaign but also exercises an important role in shaping the strategy of campaign policies (Bradshaw, 1995; Medvic, 2001, 2006).

In this study, four strategic orientation archetypes (the isolator, the follower, the shaper, and the interactor, as originally presented by Berthon *et al.*, 1999) were adapted and analyzed, with particular emphases on politicians and political brand.

The non-political field contains many examples of situations in which asking customers what they wanted and giving it to them failed and many innovative products that were conceptualized with little market research, which also failed.

Within this approach, in which the voter is compared to the consumer and the party and candidates are compared to companies, the transition from being product-oriented to sales-oriented, and market-oriented stands out (Lees-Marshment, 2001; Shama, 1976; Smith & Saunders, 1990). Therefore, the main objective of this paper was to explore political party strategic orientations.

The four strategic orientation archetypes — the isolator, the follower, the shaper, and the interactor — are applicable to political leaders and parties as brands.

The isolator represents a leader who places a low priority on customers and products. For example, in the

absence of democracy, there might be little motivation for leaders to respond or attempt to influence public sentiment. The lack of an electorate within the country represents a political strategy that does not need to react to or shape public opinion to remain in power. As a result, isolators are prominent in several historical and contemporary examples of absolute monarchies.

The follower is epitomized by politicians whose campaign tactics are influenced by listening to and addressing, or at least promising to address, the public's concerns to sway the electorate to vote in their favor. Politicians are elected to serve and represent citizens; true democracies operate on the basis of an even distribution of power amongst the people (Laxer, 2009). It is expected that democratic political leaders listen to the electorate and shape decisions based upon the public's needs and expressed sentiments. If politicians do not attend to the genuine concerns of the general populace, this can create significant pushback from those being ignored.

The public is not “something to be commended”; rather, “the best politicians listen carefully to the electorate” (Campbell, 2013). Hinting at the rationality of the strategic orientation of the follower, Campbell explained that politicians must listen to and act for the public because “citizens experience the brunt and grace of political decisions. We are experts in the consequences of political decisions” (Campbell, 2013).

The quintessential orientation of a shaper is that of a politician who has the ability to influence and perhaps

completely alter public opinion without coercion. In a prototypical example, one can examine the effect that Winston Churchill had on the ultimate success of Great Britain during the Second World War, even as he was surrounded by whispers of uncertainty from Parliament and a skeptical public, who considered defeat at the hands of the Nazis inevitable (Best, 2011).

Political interactors epitomize a hybrid stance between followers and shapers. This has become more prolific since the advent of the Internet and its subsequent use in political campaigning. Indeed, many now view it as a necessity within primary and presidential elections for candidates to have strong online presences. However, not long ago, those implementing online strategies were pioneers in the practice (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2008).

An isolator's stance seems to be the least desirable and an interactor's the most desirable. Notably, Berthon *et al.* (1999) suggested that this is an oversimplification and that there is no one "best stance". Reasonably, the stance that an organization adopts should fit the situation in which it finds itself. Even an isolator's stance can sometimes be appropriate. Likewise, while an interactor's stance might seem ideal, Berthon *et al.* (1999) noted that these types of strategies are substantially more expensive than others and are intricate, making them tough to manage.

Moreover, different strategic political stances are connected with marketing and communication activities carried out by political parties and candidates. In

particular, political advertising and, in general, all forms of communication made by the party or by the candidate should try to influence perceptions of the electorate, which can be measured through research activities (Baines, Harris, & Lewis 2002). Because a political party is an organization and not a firm, the relationship between planned and perceived positioning is fluid and unstable, which causes it to change over time. For this reason, it is important to monitor the relationship between planned and perceived positioning.

This study focused on online communication because it allows for two-way communication, making it possible to study both top-down and bottom-up communication. From those perspectives, the research offers a systematic and practical way for political party organizations and researchers to learn from consumer feedback to fill the gap between political party positioning and perceived positioning.

In the present research, through content analysis of a political party blog, we proposed a methodology able to both reveal the gap between political party positioning and its perceived positioning and to monitor it. Moreover, our study explored interrelations between a political party's positioning in two different periods to discover possible discrepancies over time. The adopted methodology was useful for both detecting misleading positioning and following upcoming changes in the political stance of a party.

It is critical to periodically monitor such positions; political parties or candidates that do not consider

possible discrepancies between planned and perceived positioning and the possible changes through time could cause frustration and disappointment of the electorate, which would increase the perception of political hypocrisy (Prete *et al.*, 2015).

This research is particularly interesting because it studies a political blog that was the only official and unofficial method of communication for a political party. The five-star movement candidates refused any interviews with major media, using only the official blog as their preferred and unique media to contact the electorate. I have been unable to find any other political campaign that had such a strict communication rule.

A political party or candidate must personify all proposed values and issues as well as associate their name with the goal of creating an orientation symbol, which will subsequently connect the political party to the candidate (Schweiger & Adami, 1999).

In general, a brand's value or equity is constantly affected by its respective firm's actions. A better-educated and informed pool of consumers, who demand a higher level of corporate social responsibility and ethics (cf. Egri & Ralston, 2008), can quickly detect any negative event and associate it with the brand image.

Political parties and candidates must design a political brand that is both distinguishable from those of their opponents and preferred by potential voters, especially undecided or volatile voters. They also need to understand the possible risks of such visibility. Indeed,

candidates experience both beneficial and unfavorable consequences related to how users represent them (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2008). Commercial products have risks associated with creating a brand because of the unspoken promise to consumers that their trust in the brand will be respected. This leaves the brand owner exposed to considerable reputational risk (Buer, 2002; van Ham, 2001), which is also true for political brands.

The third article examines the case of Mr. Berlusconi's (Italy) indiscretions and the subsequent decline of his political brand. Political brands also impact national brands via the perceived added value that international consumers place on that country and its products and services.

An analysis of recent political cartoons provided insight into international attitudes regarding Mr. Berlusconi's political and social actions. Newspaper and magazine editors use cartoons to portray a specific issue because of their simplicity. Readers can more easily understand a cartoon message than political commentaries or editorials. Clever cartoons often motivate consumers to read editorial viewpoints, ideas, and beliefs. Additionally, editorial cartoons have an increased chance of becoming viral and therefore usually have wider circulation, a longer life, and a greater influence than written editorials among the public (Duus, 2001). The purpose of a political cartoon is not only to inform but to make people reflect on current events and issues regarding politics, government, and society. Artists aim to attack an idea, a person, or a party

in the hopes that the image will inspire a laugh or a smile at the expense of the subject (Duus, 2001).

From this investigation, the authors concluded that a country's political leader's negative image and reputation can negatively impact their political brand and national brand equity abroad.

Post-modern political campaigns are defined by the use of new electronic and digital media (Norris, 2002; Prete, 2007). These communication channels have provided new opportunities for actors and policy makers to share news and information of interest, to understand individuals' opinions, and to interact with the public. YouTube is a significant avenue with which to engage voters from the comfort of their own homes. The video-sharing website is also accessible to thousands of supporters who act as ambassadors by exponentially disseminating each candidate's vision. Online consumer reviews have the potential to provide a wealth of information about individuals' attitudes and how they prioritize different elements of a discussion, which can be assessed for individual political parties and used to compare different ones. Therefore, the online world provides an important lens for observing political brand positioning and is an important instrument for influencing it as well.

Political blogs are not only an additional communication channel but also an instrument for spreading editorial content and messages through the viral infection of more traditional media channels.



The complexity of the Web 2.0 approach does not lie in technology: creating a website is now an easy and cheap process; however, the construction of a network of active users and stakeholders is a much longer and more complex process.

Building a network requires establishing relationships and trust between individuals who often do not know each other before they meet online (Coleman & Wright, 2008).

The Internet is a highly effective channel for political communication (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Norris, 2003) because it requires the user (i.e., the consumer) to take action to visit the websites and blogs of political parties and candidates. Other more traditional media, such as billboards, e-papers, and the presence of politicians on television, are less targeted and can therefore be more invasive, reaching people who are not interested in politics. Although exposure to the majority of mass media can be both voluntary and involuntary, exposure to a website, a blog, or any social media is deliberate and requires a degree of interest and active involvement.

Therefore, there is a risk of involving only restricted groups of the population. A successful message needs to be spread quickly, which means that a viral message is the fastest way to spread information and has the greatest possibility of reaching both potential supporters and undecided subjects (Vaccari, 2008).

The power and immediacy of new media has increased the ability of politicians to communicate and

spread political messages quickly, especially if readability and comprehension levels fit the target. A key task for any political party or politician is to make a blog understandable as a first step toward igniting and spreading the right viral effect and obtaining individual engagement.

The concept of engagement has evolved into coproduction engagement (Bovaird, 2007), which is seen as an innovative approach in the planning and production of a service. Political engagement has been subject to multiple definitions and measurement methods. Some authors have viewed it not only as the act of voting but also as a broad interest in political activities (Parry, Moiser, & Day, 1992). Indicators generally used for its measurement include (Electoral Commission, 2002, 2005, 2006) knowledge of politics and of its representatives (Electoral Commission, 2003); an interest in politics and, in particular, in issues of local, national, and international importance; the tendency to discuss politics with others (Coleman, 2003); participation, i.e., the propensity to vote, which is expressed through electoral and political activism (Curtice & Seyd, 2003); effectiveness, which is an attitude regarding the ability to influence the government of the country (Thomas & Young, 2006); and satisfaction in their choices (Electoral Commission, 2003). Other authors associate political engagement with frequency of voting in previous elections, particularly in the latest election (Morris & Forgette, 2007), or with having declared the intention to vote.

To reach this goal, writers must consider both their content and their target audience.

We measured the text readability of a political blog to provide insight into the effectiveness of viral communication using blogs. Our findings indicated that levels of readability, particularly among broad-based audiences, deteriorate significantly when a blog becomes political and the communication becomes more institutional.

### **3.3 Theoretical contribution of the study**

From a theoretical point of view, although some schools of thought give political marketing marginal importance, limiting it to a component of communication and defining it as “promotional policy” or “pre-packaged policy”, it represents an appropriate tool for understanding the behavior of potential voters, parties, and candidates. Its importance is both descriptive and prescriptive. Political marketing requires permanent management to address governments in modern democratic countries.

The first paper (see Chapter 2), according to this theoretical approach, serves to present a theoretical framework by which political strategists can use environmental understandings to better position political brands.

Moreover, the aim to develop and strategically position a political brand is strictly connected with the

need for marketing research and is a subsequent consideration of the expectations, desires, thought patterns, level of involvement, and understanding of potential voters. Therefore, parties and politicians should use marketing tools and communication to convey expectations and perceptions of voters toward their political offer as well as to offer valuable solutions to those demands and problems.

The issues discussed above suggest that there are opportunities for political strategists to consider and political marketing scholars to investigate regarding the modes of the foci identified herein.

Political marketing scholars might find it useful and insightful to measure and gauge the stance within a party or political entity. It is evident that, for each strategic orientation, there are both challenges and benefits to the pursuit of one over the other in the context of political brands. Consequences can impact both a political leader and the voters; however, the same strategy may affect each side differently. These political stances, which embody differing orientations, often change in their prevalence through time, even from country to country, and none are necessarily completely independent of others.

Political marketing scholars also must consider the possible risks of brand positioning. Indeed, a candidate experiences both beneficial and unfavorable consequences regarding how individuals perceive them (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2008). For commercial products as well as political brands, there are risks associated with

creating a brand. Additionally, there is an unspoken promise to consumers that their trust in the brand is deserved. These leave the brand exposed to considerable reputational risk (Buer, 2002; van Ham, 2001).

### **3.4 Managerial implications**

From an operational viewpoint, political marketing, which is characterized by increasing professionalization, has established itself as a management tool for election campaigns through the intervention of consultants, managers, and politicians using marketing research techniques.

Firstly, we proposed that influence in political endeavors happens in a bi-directional manner, where politicians are influenced by voter sentiment and voters are influenced by politicians. Through careful analysis of the environment, politicians can better manage this relationship. Political brand strategists would do well to note that neither followers nor shapers always win. For example, in the recent British general elections, the Labour Party, despite its follower stance, fared badly. Moreover, while Churchill led the country successfully through the Second World War, after the war, the electorate seemed to prefer a party that would listen to their post-conflict concerns, and Churchill's Conservatives lost the election.

Political brand strategists might find it useful and insightful to measure and gauge the stance within a

party or political entity. Berthon *et al.* (2003) created a scale that provides researchers and practitioners with a way to assess an organization's stance and can also be easily adapted for use by political parties and political brands. The key strategic question then becomes not whether or not the stance is right but if it is appropriate for the environmental conditions in which the party or brand finds itself. If it is, then the party or brand must both reinforce and maintain the mode of focus; if it is not appropriate, then strategists need to identify a more appropriate stance and engineer ways for the brand to move in that direction.

By virtue of the increase in two-way communication through the Internet, voter sentiment has had an increasingly powerful role in political strategy and decision-making. However, not all politicians benefit from granting ultimate power to constituent opinions. In countless political situations, voter sentiment has not led to victory for a political party. Yet, politicians who adapt to the political environment are better positioned in the minds of constituents.

Secondly, as with for-profit brands (Berthon *et al.*, 1999), wise political marketing strategists would do well to note that changes in stance over time might be opportune and contingent on environmental conditions in the political marketplace. For example, Churchill might have done well to change his stance from that of a shaper after the Second World War. A shaper stance was perfectly appropriate in a time of crisis, when people wanted to be led from the front. However, when the

crisis was over and after enduring great hardship, they wanted to be heard, and they longed to achieve a national objective.

Therefore, political marketing managers could find this methodology useful for revealing the difference between a political party's positioning and its perceived positioning as well as monitoring it in different periods to discover possible discrepancies over time. To solve any such incongruities, it would be quite feasible for a political party (at least, in a democracy) to follow certain voters (those committed to the party), shape others (the undecided), and interact with yet others (corporations and major donors).

As to political brand building, even before actions and political programs, political parties and politicians should create political scenarios through communication to help establish the criteria and terms of comparison with which the activities of the party or politicians are assessed (Guido, 2015). These should reduce rather than bridge the gap between the perceptions and expectations of voters.

### **3.5 Future research and limitations**

Modern Western democracies and, to some extent, new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, are witnessing an instability and, in some cases, a decline in the political commitment of citizens (Spogard & James, 2000). In particular, statistics on young people (Park,

1999; Pirie & Worcester, 1998, 2000; Russell *et al.*, 2002; White, Bruce, & Ritchie, 2000) have shown low voter turnouts, a decline in political interest, a lack of active participation in elections, and less satisfaction regarding potential voters (Dermody & Scullion, 2005; Teixeira, 1992).

Future research activities should explore the role of new media communication in stimulating political engagement.

This thesis created a basis for future research aimed at identifying and measuring the response of the electoral body to the message and the brand image of a particular candidate or political party.

Using the methodology suggested, it would be interesting to measure the impact of the distance between the message and the perceived message of a political party on voters and to verify if this effect is the same in the four quadrants of the matrix, as suggested in paper one.

In this writer's opinion, future research should focus on the effectiveness of the message, which is intended to convince the electorate to give a preference to a particular party or candidate.

The second area of study should focus on the impact of external factors on the electorate. In paper three, I emphasized that external elements can modify brand perception. It would be interesting to identify a scale or method to categorize them and define a measure of positive or negative impact on the electorate.



In the final analysis, this thesis opens the door to research in two different areas of study: the conversion process that motivates a supporter to become a voter and the study and categorization of the effects of external factors on political brands.

Finally, it would be beneficial to measure the impact of “passion” for political brands. Political party supporters are often more driven by passion than rationality, which would be interesting to explore and compare against other factors of political marketing.

Looking at the limitations of this thesis, it would be interesting to reproduce the research of papers 2 and 4 in several countries to verify any differences between cultures regarding the perception of political messages. Unfortunately, due to the particular use of media in this case (only a blog and no other media), this could be impossible. Therefore, measuring the response and the difference between the political message and its perception only within the Italian electoral body could be seen as a limitation of this study.



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