ABSTRACT
ABSTRACT

The notion that political organisations can be classified as brands seems to be a novel idea which has not received universal acceptance. Despite the lack of acceptance, several authors in management and marketing studies do recognise political organisations (parties) as brands as they are aligned to the definition of a brand offered by the American Marketing Association (AMA, 1988). Malawi, just like in its regional neighbour, South Africa, embraced democratic rule in 1994. The proliferation of parties created tension and competition among political players. In a crowded political marketplace where there is convergence of political ideologies, it is very difficult for voters to recognise the parties or to be aware of what they stand for. Therefore branding can play a strategic role in distinguishing the competing parties and position one party as better than the others in the minds of the voters as customers.

An exploratory study of the concept of branding amongst political parties in Malawi and South Africa was conducted, drawing on data from primary as well as secondary sources. This involved use of semi-structured interviews with politicians and media managers; focus groups; and content analysis of media sources.

The conclusion of the study attests to the evidence that political parties in Malawi and South Africa do look at themselves as brands and the production of branded products was to create top of mind awareness, to create a distinctive positioning in the mind of the customer (mind share). Consequently, the brand will build an intangible value in the form of customer goodwill, trust and loyalty.

Key words

Branding, brand image, political organisation, political marketing.


INTRODUCTION

Branding has become engrained into all levels of business from strategy to tactical levels. Doyle and Stern (2006) argue that in a traditional marketing sense, branding has taken centre stage in marketing. Understanding how consumers experience brands and, in turn, how to provide appealing brand experience for them, is critical for differentiating their offering in a marketplace (Schmitt, 2011).

Kotler, Armstrong, Saunders and Wong (2001) define a brand as a “name, term, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of these, which is used to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors” (American Marketing Association, 1988).

However de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley (1998) observe that a brand is a multidimensional construct, involving the blending of functional and emotional values to match consumers’ performance and psychological needs. White and de Chernatony (2002) therefore argue that one of the goals of branding is to make a brand unique on dimensions that are both relevant and welcomed by consumers.

White and de Chernatony (2002) observe that success in an overcrowded market will depend on effective brand differentiation, based on their identification, internalisation, and
communication of unique brand values which are both pertinent to and desired by consumers. Powerful brands communicate their values through every point of contact they have with consumers (Cleaver, 1999).

According to Tustin (2007), branding allows a company to differentiate itself from competition products, services and features, and in the process to bond with customers to create loyalty.

More specifically, brand image denotes ‘customers’ perceptions as reflected by the associations in their minds when they think about the brand or company”. According to Keller (2003), brand image is created by

(i) Marketing programmes that link strong, favourable and unique associations to the brand in the memory and
(ii) Direct experience with the brand’s identification with a certain company or organisation/ entity.

**Political Branding: Are political parties brands?**

Since brands have previously been defined as a “names, terms, signs, symbols, designs, or a combination of these”, Lock and Harris (1996) argue that at the simplest level, the brand is the party name. The name becomes attached as a brand to a wide variety of different “products” beyond the national party or party leader. Wring (2005:4) observes that a political product comprises “leader image, party image and policy commitments (a mind-set of voter centeredness)”.

Figure 1.0 Showing components of a political product.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership image</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

White and de Chernatony (2002) observe that political parties emerge as a response to social developments, when groups of people feel they have an approach to social questions around which they wish to gather support, or which they seek to defend and promote in the face of opposition. They further observe that political parties acquire and use names and symbols, to strengthen their own positions to rally their supporters, to garner further support, and perhaps to intimidate their opponents. A political party, despite the difficulty of defining the market place for its brand, can consider itself as a brand, to be developed to offer functional and emotional values to the electorate as part of its appeal.

White and de Chernatony (2002) explain that until recently, political parties have used marketing to manage their affairs and further their interests. They observe that since World War II, political parties in North America and Europe, and very lately in emerging democracies of Southern Africa and countries of Central and Eastern Europe, have made steadily increasing use of these techniques. The key question worth asking is – can political parties be viewed as ‘brands’ and should they use branding?
Research literature provides evidence of political parties using branding as means of standing out amongst the competition as was observed by White and de Chernatony (2002) when they studied the modernisation of ‘New Labour’ as a brand’ between 1983 and 1994 after suffering three election defeats.

White and de Chernatony (2002) observe that the party had to modernise, reconnect with the electorate and overcome the electorate’s doubts and fears about Labour as a party of government. They argued that this involved changing the party’s constitution and founding principles, among them Clause IV, which committed the party to taking significant components of the economy into public ownership, a revised Clause IV allowed for the workings of the market economy. They further argued that the ‘New Labour’ had set out to represent functional values of openness, modernity, economic orthodoxy and redistributory social policy.

They also argued that the ‘New Labour’ brand wanted to re-assure the electorate it would not the country to the dark days of the ‘winter of discontent’, when the country was paralysed by union disputes in the winter of 1978-1979 when Labour Party was in government. According to The Economist (1997) Labour Party had set out to appeal to ‘middle England’, recognising that it would be a more successful party when it occupied the centre ground. Therefore the brand was an essential element in the modernisation of the party, a device to suggest and promise changes which were built through communication (Gould, 1998). White and de Chernatony (2002) however note that discrepancies between announcements and actual performance led to cynicism about government, New Labour and politics itself.

**Branding and Competitive advantage.**

O’Cass and Voola (2010) observe that the traditional marketing literature has emphasised branding as fundamental to competitive advantage (e.g. Aaker, 1996; Hoeffler and Keller, 2002; Keller, 2001; and Perrier, 1997). They further observe that it differentiates a product from its rivals, and brand equity is a potential source of competitive advantage (Aaker, 1991; Gardner and Levy, 1955; Keller, 1993). They also observe that this is important because many would see the brand as a business’s most valuable asset. Similarly, this is applicable in the political arena.

While others have argued that the application of marketing concepts to the political domain may be inappropriate because politics emphasises ideology over marketing issues (Lees-Marcshment, 2001; Scammell, 1999), and that there are negative connotations associated with marketing (O’Shaughnessy, 2001; O’Cass and Voola, 2010), it can be argued that applying branding to political marketing is valid for two reasons. Firstly Reeves et al. (2006:419) argues that political marketing is, in general, a force for good within society, given that political marketing is concerned with the satisfaction of the electorate. They therefore argue that brand marketing offers an approach that if used effectively, can improve the political process. Secondly, notwithstanding the philosophical debate, evidence suggests that branding is big business (Jevons, 2005 cited in O’Cass and Voola, 2010) as evidenced by party slogans, campaign slogans, and party symbols which require financial resources to produce. Jevons (2005) however cautions that such a scenario would be considered to be counterproductive if it drives up the cost of doing politics.
Table 1.0 Political marketing and branding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lock and Harris (1996)</td>
<td>Voters are unable to unbundle a political product offering. The majority choose on the basis of overall political package, concept or image.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needham (2005)</td>
<td>Analyses the effectiveness of Blair and Clinton by applying six attributes of successful brands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reeves et al. (2006)</td>
<td>Highlights the value of branding in political marketing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scammell (2007)</td>
<td>Discusses the branding strategies relating to ‘reconnecting the Prime Minister (Tony Blair)’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O’Shaughnessy (2009)</td>
<td>Argues that Nazism functioned as a brand.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While agreeing with Reeves et al. (2006) who highlight the value of branding in political marketing, it can be argued that branding theories can and should be applied to political marketing. Although some previous research has examined branding strategies of political leaders (Needham, 2005 and O’Shaughnessy, 2009), others, like Lock and Harris (1996) have sought to provide insights into the application of branding in the broader political marketing sphere. Importantly, the political and broader commercial marketing literature on branding, indicates that there is ample scope to apply branding strategies to political marketing.

O’Cass and Voola, 2010), therefore, argue that political branding has the potential to differentiate one party’s offering from its rivals and yield electoral performance. It is clear that parties must develop and sustain a strong brand because it is crucial to strategy, and it is a mechanism to build awareness among voters and differentiate it from other competing brands.

They state that brand symbolism relates to the development of key symbolism through party brand personality and arousal of emotions among constituents, citing, for example, David Cameron’s (opposition leader at the time) branding of Gordon Brown as backward looking in the 2010 UK General Elections, by telling voters that ‘voting Labour is to vote for more of the same’.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The notion of branding has evolved over decades, moving away from the thinking that names and graphic designs are the only facet to a brand’s essence. While the origins of branding are not clear, Douglas Holt, a leading branding proponent, identified that brands have been elemental to markets since traders first marketed their goods as a guarantee to customers who lived beyond face-to-face contact (Holt, 2006). He proffers that American hawkers patented medicines as brands to promote, not only physical remedies, but also therapeutic remedies for social ailments.
This lack of clarity has caused there to be a broad range of branding theories (Holt, 2002, Holt, 2006) with overly grand ambitions, proposing universal, one-size-fits-all solutions. He therefore argues that such frameworks are excessively vague and unnecessarily misleading, because they smooth over the heterogeneous ways of how brands work and what that means to its users (Holt, 2006). However, Verma (2010) observes that in practitioner marketing circles, brands are created and managed by brand managers. Mariek Mooij (2010) highlights how branding is not rooted in theory but arguing that there are as many branding models and definitions as there are brand consultants. This he further argues clouds the study of brands.

Ries and Trout (2000) were instrumental in developing the thinking that lay the foundations for the modern meaning of branding, that the effect of a brand is to create a distinctive positioning in the minds of the consumer. Mooij (2010) adds by stating that as a consequence, a brand would look to ‘build an intangible value in the form of customer goodwill, trust and loyalty and that emotional benefits and values are added to products to give them their distinct identity. This agrees with earlier work by Ries and Trout (1998) who had stated that brands only exist in the mind and that perception is more important than reality.

From the foregoing discussion, we can formulate a specific question that addresses the key issue – To what extent did the political parties in Malawi and South Africa use branding in their marketing during the campaigns of 2009 and 2014. To investigate this, we undertook an exploratory study of campaign practices in Malawi and South Africa, drawing on data from primary as well as secondary sources.

**METHODOLOGY**

The first part of the study involved conducting of semi structured interviews with 17 politicians (3 each from the six political parties represented in Malawian Parliament minus one) and 17 media managers of both public and private media houses. The parties that took part were the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD), Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Malawi Congress Party (MCP), Malawi Forum for Unity and Development (MAFUNDE), Maravi People's Party (MPP) and the United Democratic Front Party (UDF). Three key officers from each of the six political parties were interviewed, namely the Directors of Campaigns, Directors of Research and Publicity Secretaries. Where the responsible officers were committed to other political engagements, they delegated the interviews to their deputies. Of the 18 eligible officials to be interviewed, 17 were interviewed while one was not available at any point in the study period to take part in the research. Interviews were done in sequence beginning with Campaign Directors, Research Directors and Publicity Secretaries in that order. The interviews were held between September 2011 and January, 2012.

The second phase involved the conduction of four focus groups involving journalists and voters and these were held in the three regions of Malawi.

Lastly and because of logistical challenges, secondary data sources which mainly were online publications were analysed for evidence of branding in electoral campaigns in South Africa. Three online newspapers, namely the Sunday Times/The Times, The Star and News24 were analysed for information about the use of branding. Also, a number of online journals were analysed to trace evidence of branding in South African politics.

Therefore, data used to gauge the use of branding in Malawi was collected primarily through semi structured interviews and focus group discussions. In addition, media reports which
included online news sources on the use of branding and positioning strategy for South African parties were also consulted.

RESULTS

From interviews with politicians and media managers, there was evidence of lack of knowledge of the technical term by the practitioners as to what it meant. But when asked as to why they were doing it, there was consensus that they were doing it because they wanted to be known by voters; to stay in the minds of the voters and they were hoping that during voting, voters would remember the party and its leader based on the party symbols.

When asked about what sort of materials their parties used in the 2009 General Elections, this is what one campaign director had to say:

“We used a number of materials. In fact we hired two buses and painted them in our party colours. Our presidential candidate used one bus as a campaign fighting bus on the campaign trail. The other bus was used by his campaign staff. We also had small pick-ups which carried party supporters. We produced a party cloth, caps, badges, branded water bottles, cooking oil and sweets for distribution to prospective voters and our members. We also had posters for our presidential candidate and our aspiring members of parliament. As you can note this required huge sums of money to be spent on our campaign.” [CD2-DPP]

This was corroborated by media managers who agreed to comments made by politicians regarding branding initiatives that had taken place in the previous general elections. This is how one media manager summed it up:

“I have not seen a lot of campaigns but the 2009 General Elections campaigning brought in a lot of marketing by the ruling DPP. For example, flashy cars like Hummers, campaign fighting buses, billboards on some roundabouts, big screens in town centres and a lot of branded materials. I would say the DPP did a lot of advertising which took the other parties by surprise. In 1994, I do recall that MCP used drama and jingles by a celebrated artist Dunduzu Chisiza Junior but for sure there is more effort put into campaigns these recent years [Media Manager 5].”

These findings also came up during focus group discussions with journalists who were chosen for their knowledge of campaign issues and voters from a sample constituency that had a sole candidate representing a political party in Parliament.

In the case of South Africa, there was evidence through online media sources that parties used branding in South African political campaigning. Agiza Hlongwane (2009) notes about the African National Congress (ANC’s) and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP’s) use of branding by among others, producing party t-shirts and advertising on taxis to get their messages across: even water bottles, bibs and CD pouches were branded in party colours by the ANC and IFP. Several platforms were chosen to communicate the brand and these include social networking website Facebook where Thabo Mbeki emerged as the most popular South African politician after Nelson Mandela. Also Hlongwane (2009:8) notes attempts by South African politicians to emulate Barack Obama by using technology such as SMSes, e-mail and social networks to drum up support”.

The study also found that customers want brands and products which make their lives more comfortable. This agrees with The Taylor Nelson Sofres Research Surveys (2007) which observed that there was an emerging market of knowledgeable middle and upper-middle
class in South Africa who can afford products and services of choice who are even more influential with regards to endorsing political brands because they are looked up to, as opinion leaders.

**DISCUSSION**

The finding that political parties advertised their activities through print advertisements/ posters/ leaflets/ radio speeches and mass rallies, is characteristic of a pre-modern campaign and it agrees with the findings by Stromback (2007). He observes that political parties whose campaign is the pre-modern stage rely heavily on partisan media hence not surprising that these parties produced party uniform, t-shirts, caps, calendars, badges, posters, party miniature flags, and branded products, for example, water, cooking oil and sweets [as was the case with the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)] for distribution to voters as a way of maintaining visibility and awareness. It was also noted that the DPP had campaign fighting buses and pick-up cars in party colours to maintain visibility.

Today, thousands of brands also borrow personality traits of individuals or groups to convey an image they want customers to form of them (Solomon, 2015). A brand personality is the set of traits people attribute to a product as if it were a person. Customers make an emotional connection with the brand based on these traits or values. They may perceive the brand as old-fashioned and traditional; or surprising and lively; serious and intelligent; or even glamorous and romantic (Solomon, 2015). It is therefore not surprising to note when the African National Congress wanted to come across as a serious (Bertelsen, 1996) and yet an efficient party which listens to the views of the voters (Lodge, 1995). A product that creates and communicates a distinctive brand personality stands out from its competition and inspires years of loyalty (Solomon, 2015).

Bertelsen (1996), writing about marketing political change for the 1994 South African elections, catalogued the attempts parties made to delineate themselves to the voters. She observed that the ANC had to avoid negativity and stick to key issues, to look like a serious party which had a plan to govern the country. (Greenberg, 1994)

Johnston (2005) has observed that the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) moved much more quickly, openly and aggressively than the ANC to develop the kind of focused media and campaign strategies characteristic of mediated politics. The party used focus groups to come up with messages of direct targeted advertising, and media strategies that combine rapid response rebuttal with self-conscious image building around its leadership, and it successfully remobilised whites and other minorities by appealing to them as consumers, rather than on the basis of any deeper or longer-lasting attachment.

Kim et al. (2002) argue that consumers (including political consumers or voters as they are often called) are looking out for brands (including political parties which are referred to as brands that carry cultural benefits or whose values fit their own. Luna and Gupta (2001:45) and Kotler and Armstrong (2008:162) support this view by saying that consumers who are individualist or collectivists will use brands (political parties inclusive) for self-expressive purposes, either to differentiate themselves from the referent others or to portray themselves as members of their reference groups. Success will not result in doing what worked in the past, because as the market changes, the business approach must also adjust accordingly. It is not always possible to predict what changes will occur in consumers and what values they will embrace at each election. That means the consumer’s behaviour is not just shaped by one specific culture but by other cultures as well since we live in a global village. There is
therefore need to evaluate cultural influence at each election because it changes as observed by Zhang and Neelankavil, (1997).

Given this, there is little doubt about the use of branding by political parties in South Africa, though the performance of political parties during elections cannot solely or even mainly be attributed to branding. There are other underlying factors which would need to be explored. As noted by De Klerk (2010), disappointingly, voters continue to cast their votes overwhelmingly according to race and not according to political principle or their satisfaction with the performance of a government. This, he observes, will mean that the Democratic Alliance (DA), despite its energetic leader – Hellen Zille – will find it difficult to increase its support much above the 20% represented by the white, coloured and Asian minorities in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

Whilst literature has clearly identified the use of branding in Malawi and South Africa, there has been little discussion of branding of political parties in the emerging democracies of Africa, such as the Republic of South Africa and Malawi.

Through primary and secondary data sources, we have managed to show that political parties in Africa, in general, and South Africa and Malawi, in particular, have used branding to position themselves ahead of the competition in the minds of voters during campaigns for elections of 2009 and 2014. From the foregoing, it is clear that political parties in both countries have used branding although they might technically not been aware of such terminology or simply referred to it as advertising but such a practice is broadly consistent with what is currently obtainable in old and developed democracies.

Political markets in Malawi and South Africa have reached saturation points with stiff competition among political parties. Since parties can be commoditised as brands, use of branding which is the essence of marketing at the strategic level helps to differentiate parties from the competition.

LIST OF REFERENCES


