

Assessing Political Brand Relationship as Leverage for Voter Preference in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This research is an empirical assessment of political brand relationship as leverage for voter preference and choice of candidates by voters in Ghana. The objective of the study is to ascertain the use of political brand relationship for leveraging preference of voters. The study used a total sample size of 10 key party and labour union representatives. The research found out that voter identification and differentiation of a political party from one another, as a process, has positive effects on the voting motivations of respondents and their choice of candidates. The research established that political brand of a party causes voters to accept and identify with a particular party. Finally, the research revealed that desire to help voters, fulfilment of promises, the creation and sharing of wealth and safety issues were of paramount concern to voters. The study also found out that, political brand relationship building has positive impact on voter attraction/preference of the voter. Voters identified themselves with political brands on the basis of brand characteristics such as economic freedom, social status, safety, recognition and personal achievement. The study further found out that political parties are liable to be neglected by voters when there is failure to establish a brand relationship. The research recommends that in order to track or monitor changes in aspirations and needs, political parties should undertake regular marketing research with a view to obtaining current information regarding what voters want. The study further recommends that, politicians should segment, target and position their parties or candidates properly in the political market space, if they are to be victorious in elections.

Keywords: Political Brand Relationship, Party Brand Image, Voter Preference

INTRODUCTION

Relationship marketing has prompted brand managers to seek innovative ways to create mutually beneficial relationships with consumers (Mitchell & Orwig, 2002). Previous studies on political-brand relationships were mainly focused on the relationship formulation (e.g., Bagozzi, 1995; Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; Fournier, 1998; Peterson, 1995), relationship development (e.g., Fajer & Schouten, 1995; Fournier, 1998; Franzen, 1999), relationship pattern (e.g. Fournier, 1998; Kaltcheva & Weitz, 1999), relationship scheme (e.g., Blackston, 1992; Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; Fournier, 1998; Franzen, 1999; Hess, 1998), and the response effects of brand relationship (e.g., Kaltcheva & Weitz, 1999; Park & Kim, 2001).

According to Schmitt (1999), experiential marketing has proven itself to be a good starting point for studies on political-brand relationship. Franzen (1999) continued that the political-brand relationship is in the final stages of the mental brand responses. He also claimed that the political-brand relationship is formed by voters experience and political party knowledge (or brand meanings). According to Monga (2002), the use of relationship metaphors in political party-brand context facilitated the understanding of brand loyalty, in-depth information about voters' needs and wants, and thereby assisted parties to improve better policies and marketing activities.

Traditionally, the field of voting behavior has gained powerful insights from concepts such as cleavage structure, party identification (Campbell et al., 1960) and issue ownership (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). On the other hand, the field of political brands has illustrated, for example, how a brand is used by voters to differentiate between political parties (Scammell, 2007; Smith and Alan, 2009), project a certain identity (Smith, 2009), or establish brand loyalty (Needham, 2005; Phipps et al., 2010). An important stream of research in political marketing has focused on modeling how voters learn about political parties and make voting decisions based on this information (O'Cass and Pecotich, 2005; Cwalina et al., 2004). According to Nielsen and Larsen (2014), brands are vital to people. They are able to create signals, both emotionally and functionally, that can ease the decision-making process when a person is confronted with a complex bundle of alternatives. Although the importance of brands was originally established in marketing research, its logic has diffused to many areas of society (Marsh and Fawcett, 2011); in particular, during the last two decades, the study of brands in politics has evolved in regards to parties, party leaders and party campaigns (French and Smith, 2010). Against this background, this article aims to bring together the two fields of voting behavior and political brands to examine whether a party brand influences a voter's propensity to vote for that particular party.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The relationship perspective has become increasingly popular as a theoretical lens for understanding political-brand interactions (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Escalas and Bettman, 2005; Fournier, 1998). Consumers (voters) according to Mensah (2009) are known to form strong relationships with those political brands that have values and personality associations that are congruent with voters' self-concepts (Sirgy, 1982). In this way, political brand relationships can be viewed as expressions of voters' identities (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). The relevance of political marketing and electoral victory has been highlighted by Hinson and Tweneboah-koduah (2010). There is a particular focus in their work on understanding political marketing communication issues pertaining to the 2008 Ghanaian presidential elections with a twist on political brand relationship. The relevance of building brand relationship with voters in Ghana cannot be overemphasized since the foremost goal of every political party is to win and hold onto the support of voters. This study seeks to address the shortcoming of political brand relationships with voters specifically for the area of political marketing. Bannon (2003) argued that a relationship marketing approach in the political sphere is under-researched but is potentially fruitful from an applied as well as a theoretical perspective. The objective of this study is therefore to ascertain the usage of political brand relationship for leveraging preference of voters.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political Brand Relationship

Brands are identifiable attributes, physical marks, emotional markers and cognitive triggers used to create a differentiated promise of future experiences based on prior offers of value through memories of prior product experience, or assumptions of future experiences based on the reputation of the product, provider or service (Dann & Jensen, 2007). Brand is a complex combination of the manufactured elements of the marketing communications toolkit to create a set of differentiating promises that reside in the mind of the consumer (Okazaki, 2006). The functional purpose of branding within marketing is to communicate a set of differentiating promises about the value offering in the mind of the consumer through a bundle of key attributes (Ahmed & Zairi, 1999). Marketing principles of branding can and have been successfully applied to political marketing Needham (2005) demonstrated that successful parties develop brand attributes in their leaders to maintain relationships with supporters beyond the initial vote-transaction.

Political branding has also explored the domain of personal branding, celebrity endorsement and brand community engagements to develop a more complex model of engagement between candidates and the voter marketplace (Hughes & Dann, 2009). The application of the principles of branding to the conscious and deliberate development of personal reputation is well established formally and informally within the political marketing and management literature. The personal brand consists of four elements of attributes, promised benefits, values and personality (Plummer, 2000) with brand personality being of interest for this study. Personal brand attributes and promised benefits have been measured previously via the use of proxy variables of celebrity attributes (trustworthiness, attractiveness, credibility) in studies of political brand communities (Eagar, 2009). Of interest to the present research is the role of values and personality in personal and party political brands.

Brand personality also ties into the consumption of products to conjure meanings (Seetharaman, Nadzir & Gunalan, 2001). Brand personality ties into the congruency of brand association, product preference, brand loyalty and the consumption of products which are congruent with the consumer's self-image (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). In short, when voters assign or identify a series of personality traits to a political brand they vote for, the brand is believed congruent with the type of person with whom the voter would want to associate congruency in the political branding sense is often colloquially expressed as "the candidate you would want to have a beer with" as an expression of the desire to associate socially with the brand.

Political Parties as Brands

Political parties are organizations whereby politician communicate information and announce promises seeking electoral support (Harris & Lock, 2001). The term political party brand is currently a conventional concept and part of the overall branding in the consumer marketing (French & Smith, 2010). Political brands are important, since they are thought to play a role in voting decisions (Smith & Alan, 2009). People often rely on heuristic shortcuts to make a voting decision, since gathering all the information to make a choice takes too much time and effort (Popkin, 1994). According to Smith and French (2009), political brands can be useful heuristics. Therefore, studying political brands adds to the knowledge of why people vote for certain parties.

Brand knowledge is made from individual pieces of information (called nodes) that link together in memory to form more complex associative networks (Collins & Loftus, 1975; Wyer & Srull, 1989). Information is recalled from memory when a node is stimulated from the rest by a process known as activation (de Groot, 1989). Brand personality can also be utilized by voters to reduce the perceived risk of voting for the wrong party. Politics according to Mahajan and Wind (2002) is a so-called credence service in that, at the time of purchase (voting), it is very difficult to know whether policy promises will be delivered. Brands affect how voters evaluate political parties and candidates. Political brands, according to Keller (1993), are not physical but intangible, being the knowledge about a particular object that is held in the memory of voters.

According to Schneider (2004), marketing a political party as a brand “facilitates easier information processing for voters, lowers the risks of making wrong decisions, and finally, creates sentimental utility through generating feelings of groups belonging and identity”. Singer (2002) notified that party brands offer the voters predictability, cohesion and recognition. Tomz and Sniderman (2005) found that party brands make the party more simple, credible and salient to voters. According to Forehand, Gastil and Smith (2004), marketing a political party as a brand increases the likelihood that voters are eager to learn more about the party, its policies and its values. Clarke et al. (2004) found that the party leader’s image also has a motivational effect to learn more about the party.

Brand image can play a significant role in directing voter-customers preferences, choices, and enables them to differentiate between competing offers (Kapferer, 2004; French & Smith, 2008). Voter-customers are rational and economic actors when voting (Downs, 1957) and they are less influenced by their class affiliation (French & Smith, 2008). For parties seeking to win an election, such parties should be perceived by millions of voter-customers as well-known and fulfilling in their political offers (French & Smith, 2008). However, voter-customers are not highly involved with political parties, their involvement is limited, due the costly aspect of gathering political information in terms of the effort required to assess it and how motivated they are to do so (French & Smith, 2008). Politicians are mainly influenced by their party image, hence the party brand perceived image often dominates a significant part of the presidential candidate brand equity.

Voter-Customer-Party Identification

From marketing prospective, voter-customer creates meaning and definition of their identity through their brand preference, choice and vote (Belk, 1988). The extent of the voter-customer-identification with the political party depends on the degree to which that party or brand is perceived by the voter-customer as a partner or as a reference group (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Attractiveness of that party identity is one of the main components leading to voter-customer identification with a party. Similarity-attraction theory (Byrne, 1971), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985) combined to argue that individuals are attracted to, prefer, and support relationships with similar others, in order to enhance their self-esteem and maintain stable self-identity. Interaction is preferable with others who have similar attitudes, values, activities, or experiences (Kunda, 1999).

The party identity attractiveness is the extent to which individuals prefer, are attracted to and support partisan relationships given the enduring attributes of the party. The attraction exerted

by a party depends on its capacity to satisfy at least one of the three basic voter-customers self-definitional needs (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003): self-continuity (the need to find a party identity similar to their own), self-distinctiveness (the need to differentiate themselves from others in social contexts through establishing the identification with a certain party that has a distinctive culture, strategy, structure, or some other configuration of distinctive characteristics), and self enhancement (the need to feel associated with a certain party that has an attractive perceived identity to enhance their self-esteem).

Voter-customer-party identification is an optional and selective process from the voter-customer side which, favourably or unfavourably, leads them to engage in partisan related behaviours. Voter-customer-party identification is the degree of matching between a voter-customer self-concept and his or her perception of a party. Identification is a significant influential factor (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Voter-customers who identify themselves with a party are probably loyal patrons of that party presidential candidate. When people identify themselves with a party, they may have a sense of attraction to define themselves in terms of that particular party. Voter customer-party identification is the primary psychological substrate for the kind of deep, committed, and meaningful relationships that campaigners are increasingly seeking to build with their voter-customers (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). If the voter-customer perception about a party becomes self-referential or self-definitional, he or she is said to be identified with the party. Although identification develops and grows over time, a person can identify himself/herself with a party that is yet unknown to him or her. This type of identification may happen when the voter-customer believes that the party shares the same values. For instance, if a voter-customer senses that the party shares the same concern about foreign affair policies he/she might feel an instant sense of connection and identification with that party.

Voter-customers are more attached and concerned about a party when they identify themselves with it. Recent studies showed that customers' behaviours are positively influenced by the identification (Ahearne et al., 2005). Voter-customers who identify themselves with a party behave in a way that supports the goals of the party. The range of identification-driven behaviours comprises of the actions of party promotion, voter recruitment, loyalty, and resilience to negative party information.

METHODOLOGY

The approach used in this study is purely qualitative. Qualitative approach of research is employed to explore the behavior, perspectives, feelings, and experiences of people (voters) with regards to their relationship with political parties. It is also important to mention that this approach does not limit the study to rigid definable variables and continues to allow the examination of complex questions that can be impossible with quantitative research. The approach ensures that the researcher is able to interact with voters (the citizenry) to probe more into their relations and affiliations with a particular political party. The use of the qualitative research approach makes the study exploratory in nature.

The study used purposive sampling technique. Creswell (2009) has argued that purposive sampling is used in qualitative research. Patton (2002) has proposed a number of strategies for purposive sampling namely maximum variation, deviant case, intensity, typical and critical case sampling strategies to mention but a few. The maximum variation strategy used in the study

aims to capture the central themes that cut across the study (Patton, 2002). Where participants are heterogeneous as in the case of voters in Ghana (rural, urban, men, women, young adults and adults, literates and illiterates) the strategy becomes appropriate (Creswell, 2009). Two (2) respondents each were selected from four national unions namely the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT), Trade Union Congress (TUC), National Union of Ghana Students (NUGS) and the University Teachers Association of Ghana (UTAG). One representatives each (secretaries) of the two major political parties in Ghana, National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) were also included in the sample. These constitute a total sample size of 10 respondents covered by the study.

Primary data was collected for the study by the use an in-depth interview method of data collections with a well-designed open ended interview questions based on the objective of the study for analysis and findings.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The study in this section presents analysis and findings based in the information retrieved from the in-depth interviews.

Understanding of Political Brand by Voters

Revelations from the in-depth interview confirms that respondent's voter identification and differentiation of a political party from one another have positive effects on their voting motivations and candidate's choices. In other words, the brand moves them towards a party or a candidate in an election. It was also confirmed by respondents that political brand of a party have caused them to accept, identity with and vote for a party.

A lecturer in a reply to a question on his expectations from a political brand of the party you voted for emphatically mentioned economic freedom and the desire to share. Expectations are also underpinned by the desire for economic emancipation, social status and safety. It is implying that his desire for power, recognition and personal achievement, economic freedom, social status and others drive people toward the party they vote for or the candidate they support. These assertions suggest positive relations between the political brand and the voter's expectation from the brand. Regarding brand dominance the general secretary of the NPP expatiating on things that lead people toward a party opined that some groups affiliate with political parties because of their desire to become dominant groups in society. In other words, they see the political party as a brand with perpetual continuity capabilities and hence will associates with it. They regard political brand as the party that is first among equals. A respondent had this to say when he elaborated on the understanding of political brand; NPP always cater for their own, they create and share and so they vote for them. The NDC only knows each other while in opposition.

In political brand relationship literature, Acker (2000) and Keller (1998) have developed seminal models of political brand equity that have directed subsequent thinking in this area. Both Acker and particularly Keller identify the critical importance of a brand image in creating value for the voter. Applied to politics this value generation takes two forms. The first is the provision of value to politicians in the form of greater loyalty to a party and competitive advantage. This loyalty and advantage should then lead to greater partisanship amongst the electorate when voting. Secondly image also provides value to the customer by enhancing the

interpretation of the party brand through processing of information about the party and increasing confidence in the voting decision (Aaker, 1991). With these potential benefits in mind, a more detailed analysis of those factors that most influence the image of political brand clearly positions it for favorable responses from the electorates.

In the study, personal interactions, the desire to help the voter, the fulfillment of promises, creation and sharing of wealth and safety issues are of paramount concern to the voter which must be considered critically in any efforts aimed at building relationship with the voter. Respondents mentioned these interests as a response to questions on their desires regarding a political brand. For example, insecurity, poverty, dependence care and freedom were dominant issues and concerns and appeared among segments and across places where these forces were prevalent. Insecurity was mentioned as a key driver of negative voting among civil servants and trade unionist. A respondent in one of these sectors had this to say when he commented on insecurity:

.....through I want to see holistic development in Ghana, I also prioritize my job safety first before any other considerations when I appear before the ballot box.

Another respondent answering a question regarding what would cause him to become dissatisfied with a party mentioned that:

If the party engages in controversial issues against public interest.....

Safety and positive brand image were recurrent issues among respondents. In fact, all of the respondents in the categories mentioned order and safety. One of the respondents shared the view that party involvement in the welfare of electorates can have positive inclinations to political brand relationship building but show of disinterest could cause dissatisfaction resulting in negative voting response against the party.

Political Brand Membership as Leverage for Voter Preference for a Party or Candidate

In the opinion of majority of respondents, the electorates will reject and avoid parties that fail to establish relationship with them. In other words, the tendency of reject and neglect by parties will have negative implication for voter preference against a political party. In political brand relationship literature Bratton et al. (2012) have argued that for collective grievance, groups will vote against political parties they believe are associated with these negative tendencies.

Arguably, intrinsic or positive actions on the part of political parties towards building relationship with voters will serve as a pull factor to bring voters close to that particular party.

A UTAG member said:

..... When you involve me, I will understand and appreciate you better.

This affirms the position that moving your electorates along and taking them through series of party activities will in a long way help them understand your political brand and develop lasting relationship with them. When asked whether they consider political candidates in deciding which party to vote for, majority of interviewees responded positively saying they vote based on the candidates' personality. To them, the following attributes is what they look for in the candidate.

Humility

The ability of the candidate to show how humble he is even in times of unnecessary criticisms to the respondent's shows he is someone who can be trusted with power since he won't take his followers for granted. Elaborating on what they meant by humility, a respondent noted that: "Humility draws me closer to political leaders; I tend to see them as my parents in whom I trust".

Over three quarter of respondents attributed their party choice to the individual characteristics of the political party candidates. An administrative assistant at GNAT Head Office had this to say:

I voted for John Kuffour because he is humble and gentle in 2000, I did same for John Attah Mills in 2008 and repeated it for Mahama in 2012.

Aside humility, care, patience and respect for others emerged as important attributes expected from political party candidates when building political relationship with voters. Another respondent commenting on the attributes expected from the candidates had this to say:

When you invite someone to dinner in your house with cutlasses in the hand, will the person come?

This view is supported by a respondent who also revealed that:

When you love me and want to be with me, let your action show not your words.

It was however noted that respect for others emerged as a stronger factor of consideration among the elite groups comprising of, GNAT, TUC, UTAG and NUGS. In the interview, patience also emerged as a positive requirement for building political brand relationship with a lecturer from the University of Ghana business school saying:

"The patient dog eats the fattest bone"

Other considerations

The character and personality of the political candidate can influence voting for a particular party (Anebo, 1997; Mensah 2011). A candidate may be voted for based on factors such as likeability, physical attributes, religion and career background (Alsamydai & Al Khasaawneh, 2013).

In the in-depth interview, over half of the respondents mentioned the personality and character of the candidate when they further elaborated on things that motivate their party choice. A closer examination of responses revealed that young respondents provided answers such as, I just like the candidate, the candidate has good personality. For example, a young interviewee answering a question on what accounted for his interest in the party/candidate he voted for said bluntly:

I just like the candidates' personality. It matters most to me.

The civil servant in a related development intimated that a party candidate must be attractive. In the study over half of respondents mentioned candidate personality and characteristics as what influenced their voting decision and relationship choice. In fact, negative candidate personality and characteristics have been noted to have reverse effects. For example, that UTAG chairman of one of the universities in the country commenting on why he voted against his preferred party in the 2012 elections has this to say:

The party's choice of presidential candidate, his personality is the only reason why I voted against my own party. The other candidate is more appealing.

The same respondents answering a question on whether the party he does not support can influence him to vote for them said yes. When asked to mention what the party can do to influence his choice, he remarked:

All I want is a good and presentable candidate.

The quotation attributed to the UTAG chairman and corroborated by half of the respondents in the study provided evidence to support the arguments that the candidate personality can attract and also muddy any relationship building effort by the party with voters. The relevance of the candidate in influencing voting behavior has been highlighted by Newman (1995). He notes that by crafting a candidate's image through the media emphasizing on certain personality traits, the candidates appeal to the electorates is enhanced. Therefore, the evidence from the interview appears to be consistent with evidence in voter political brand relationship literature. Candidate personality and character can drive voter political relationship positively or negatively in electoral markets.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Building political brand relationship with voters has become an essential requirement and therefore drives the electorate toward a party or a candidate. Political brand relationship building has positive impact on voter attraction or the preference of the voter. Voters prefer to identify themselves and vote a particular party or candidate as a result of their acceptance with the brand of the party. Voters identify themselves with political brands on the basis of brand characteristics such as economic freedom, social status, safety, recognition and personal achievement. Political branding creates a good party brand image which provides political value in the form of party loyalty and competitive advantage. This leads to partisanship among voters during voting inducing voter confidence in decision making. It is further concluded that political parties are liable to be neglected by voters as a result of failure to establish a brand relationship. Humility is concluded to be one of the major reasons which leverage voter preference as a result of political brand relationship. This consists of other important attributes demonstrated by political parties in their brand like care, respect and patient. Other important attributes of political brands which leverage voter preferences included likeability, physical attributes, religion and career background of candidates presented by political parties.

Voter aspirations and needs in Ghana are dynamic and constantly changing. In order to track/monitor the changes in aspirations and needs, political parties must undertake regular marketing research with a view to obtaining current information regarding what voters want. Their needs and expectations should guide the manifesto as well as the party policy and program development process. Politicians must therefore segment, target and position their parties/candidates properly in the political markets. The political parties are advised to develop a unique identity of pride and prestige in order to make voters continue to remain loyal to the party.

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