

# Structured Abstract: Comprehending Political Branding and Brand Image of the BJP in India

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## Introduction

The communication between a political party and a voter these days is expected to be interactive (Cogburn et al. 2011) and focused on the everyday story of the voter (Weiser 1991). Unlike previous messaging, where political party maintained a royal distance as a demonstration of power, the modern approach connects the political party directly with the voter. Such new marketing approaches strengthen the connection between the candidate and the voter (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011). However, there is limited insight about how political brands are interpreted and understood. This is supported by explicit calls for further research in this area beyond a Western context, especially in nontraditional settings (Kumar 2009; Needham and Smith 2015). This is particularly the case with an emerging country such as India, which has more than a billion citizens, the second largest population in the world (Castells 2011). They have two categories of parties, national (6) and state level (30) (Election Commission of India), and the brand image of these parties becomes important for the voters. Most importantly, among the various parties, the leading and the currently ruling party, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), have widely used political branding approaches and developed their brand image among the young voters of India. Thus, this chapter explores the political brand image of the BJP from the perspective of young voters in India.

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## Background

### *Research on Political Branding*

In political branding, political parties develop their brands by emphasizing the utilitarian and hedonic traits of the voters. Further, political branding can be divided into two types: party brand and candidate brand (Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy 2007). Additionally, scholars from political branding have worked on different areas such as political brand personality (Smith 2009), political brand equity (French and Smith 2010), political brand identity (Pich et al. 2014), and political brand image (Smith 2001). These scholars have widely studied the Western countries. This has led to several authors to call for more political branding research in different contexts and settings (Kumar 2009; Needham and Smith 2015; Pich and Armannsdottir 2015). One area that warrants further attention is political brand image (Pich and Armannsdottir 2015; Smith 2001). Political brand image is the comprehension of consumers' mindset and perceptions that are generated and captured without the control of the organization (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2002; Pich and Armannsdottir 2015). Political brand image is an interactive paradigm as the information and issues follow a two-way flow between the voters and the leaders for a robust brand image (Aaker 2010). In order to sustain this robust brand image, awareness, and trust (Adolphsen 2010), effective use of media channels is imperative. Despite some progress in this area, there are still very few models or frameworks that can be used to deconstruct the external brand image of a political brand. Pich and Armannsdottir (2015) explored the external orientation of the UK Conservative Party brand and developed the *brand image framework* as a mechanism to deconstruct the external standpoint. Further, Pich and Armannsdottir (2015) challenged future researchers to adopt the framework to assess its transfer potential and applicability to new settings, which in turn would enhance political brand image research.

### *Evolution of Development of Political Branding in India*

India has experienced key socio-electoral transitions such as the development of region-based voting blocs (Hallin and Mancini 2004) and revolutions in technology, which have permanently changed the nature of political branding. Further, India has changed from its previous form related to caste- and religion-based dynamics to a more coordinated political approach, focused on centering of political leaders (Negrine 2008). One party that experienced a great degree of success in the 2014 Indian General Election was the BJP Party. They projected Narendra Modi as the Prime Ministerial candidate for 2014 because he contributed significantly to the accomplishment of the party's objectives. This approach

was continued by the political parties in the 2014 elections as there were 26 million tweets by the end of the election and around 1.8 billion likes on Facebook for a promising and emerging leader of a prominent and leading political party (BJP), i.e., Narendra Modi (the current P.M. of India) (Wani et al. 2014). The brand image of the party and the leader was exponentially magnified by regular updates and constant activities on social and digital platforms. This approach developed relational marketing and balanced the utilitarian and hedonic nuances of the voters.

## Research Gap and Objective

The existing literature on political branding calls for further research in this area in order to understand the nuances of political brand image originating from the emerging nations. It further calls for the same in an Eastern context with a focus on young consumers, who constitute 75 % of this country's population. More specifically, there are calls to critically assess and apply the framework of political brand image (Pich and Armansdottir 2015) to new settings and contexts to investigate its operationalization. Therefore, the objective of the study is to understand the BJP political brand image from an external orientation. This will assess the transfer potential of the political brand image framework to new settings and contexts which may be used by political entities as a way to understand their political brands.

## Methodology

This study has utilized a qualitative and interpretive approach to investigate the perceptions and the beliefs about the political branding exercise and political brand image of the BJP in India. This process was carried by dividing it into three phases: initial design, where deductive approach was used after studying the earlier frameworks of brand image. In the second stage, course extension was carried out after integrating the insights of the respondents. Lastly, full-framed development was undertaken by developing a conceptual framework that integrated the respondents' insights. Additionally, a richer schema of the phenomenon explained in Pich and Armansdottir (2015) was further extended in the political branding literature. The paper did this by removing the variable of uniqueness from the original framework which had five variables: strength, uniqueness, expectation, perception, and experiences.

The study accommodated the variable of uniqueness in the variables of experience and expectation to maximize the robustness of the framework. Furthermore, our study added more key variables to the framework, which will be discussed in the

section of major results. The wide-spanning discussions conducted in major Indian cities have empirically verified these extensions of the framework. This framework helped by becoming the deductive baseline. In addition, the novel and unique insights from the respondents facilitated in developing the inductive approach, thereby allowing us to use an abductive method for this study.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were used because they are considered to be an effective method for empirical and theoretical studies where substantial research has not been undertaken as yet (Yin 2003). FGDs help in developing collective insights as they aim to offer a more nuanced understanding of the respondents' perceptions.

### ***Sampling***

A total of 17 FGDs with 147 participants were conducted with respondents recruited using purposive sampling in the leading cities of India such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Pune, and Hyderabad. Delhi is the capital city of India with a population of more than ten million, Mumbai is the business hub of India with 18 million people; Bangalore is the technology center of India with a population of nine million. Hyderabad is considered to be one of the royal cities of India with six million people. These leading cities contribute majorly to the demographic dividend of India. Extending from this, these respondents were the young voters of the emerging country who were in the age group of 18–28 years. This age group was selected as 75% of the Indian population is below the age of 35 and this segment dramatically changed the political branding scenario of the BJP in the Indian election of 2014 (Virmani 2014). These respondents were the residents of those cities as they had lived there for a minimum of 10 years.

### ***Process of Research***

FGDs were undertaken to explore the external political brand image of the BJP following the 2014 Indian General Election. These discussions were conducted between November 2014 and March 2015. The protocol was drafted using the objectives and earlier scholarly papers about political branding and brand image. The FGD protocol was divided into three categories; the first part focused on developing a comprehensive understanding of the voters of the party, the leader, and their communication strategies. The second part aimed at gaining a nuanced understanding of the different dimensions used in the political brand image framework (Pich and Armansdottir 2015): physical, perception and association (P and A), expectations, and experience. In the last stage of the discussion, the aim was to develop an overall utilitarian and hedonic understanding of the party, leader, and the voters' expectations from the subsequent elections. The FGDs were conducted in

a conducive location easily accessible to all the respondents to achieve optimal expression of their views and thoughts. They were moderated by the first author with an average time of 90 min per discussion in the English language as it was convenient for the respondents. The transcription of the FGDs was effected using the video recordings of the discussions. Subsequently, a robust and systematic thematic and content analysis was undertaken by all the authors independently with a coding scheme pertaining to the objective of the study. These independent quotes and themes were discussed by the authors till they were able to achieve consensus about the different categories and quotes that led to the formation of themes.

The primary themes that emerged from the respondents' insights were *physical, P and A, experience, and expectation*.

## Major Results

There were broadly four categories under which subthemes were developed. The four major categories were physical, P and A, expectations, and experience. Under the category of physical, the major themes that emerged were personalization and connection, trustworthiness, interactivity, and reciprocity. The four themes in tandem allowed the study to realize that the party and the leader would need to be credible, achieved by providing the relevant information sought by the voters on time. Consequently, the study also realized that the party and the leader would need to be seen as those dedicated to the welfare of the nation. Finally, the study was able to understand that the political parties and leaders would need to provide effective communication channels that allow people to state their views in a quick and unhindered manner. These insights led to the research proposition:

*P1: Political parties need to have personalization, trustworthiness, and interactivity to develop positive political brand image.*

Under the category of P and A, the major themes that were developed were leader superimposing on the party, dynamic and competent leader, and systematic and comprehensive usage of social media. These four themes allowed the study to understand that the party leader had a superimposing presence that was greater than that of the party. This was supplemented by the respondents' views that stated that the party leader was seen as a person who facilitated a shift in the ideology of the party from a communal party. Finally, this theme helped us realize that the BJP and the leader were seen as the forces that had changed the nature of Indian elections by bringing in social media to political campaigning. Thus, here is the research proposition that was developed:

*P2: Dynamic, competent, and integrated use of social media develops positive brand image.*

Under the category of experience, the major themes that were developed were engaging governance, synchronization of ideas with media usage, and comprehen-

sive image of the party and the leader. These themes helped us realize that the voters preferred their leaders to communicate in person through social media platforms. We were also able to understand that voters were keen that the leaders use those platforms that were veracious. Finally, we were able to realize that they still had serious issues with the party's right-wing religious affiliation whereas they did not feel that the leader suffered from the same drawback. Thus, here is the research proposition that was developed:

*P3: The positive brand image of the leader is highly dependent on the dimensions of engaging governance and effective usage of media.*

Under the category of expectation, the major themes that were developed were proof of performance, strong leadership, and viral impact. These themes identified that the voters placed great emphasis on the deliverables by the party leader.

Further, they felt that the leader's strength lay in his lack of corruption, which distinguished him from other leaders. Finally, they felt that the viral impact of the BJP and Modi's messages was based on though not restricted to social media alone. They felt that these messages were able to achieve a viral status due to their connection with the expectations of the voters. Thus, here is the research proposition that was developed:

*P4: Effective delivery of the leader and the party, strength of his leadership, and viral impact through different media platforms lead to strong political brand image.*

## Discussions

The present study has contributed widely to the area of political branding and brand image with novel insights provided by the respondents. The brand image framework proposed by Pich and Armansdottir (2015) could be applied to new settings. However, the framework was strengthened further and tailored to the unique political environment. Therefore, a revised conceptual framework was developed as can be seen in Fig. 1. The literature on political branding (Marland 2003) mentions that candidate brand delivers the image of the party. However, the present study identified that the leader has a brand image distinct from the party. Similarly, another study (Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy 2007) from the literature found that policy, politician, and the party serve as important elements for the political brand. Our study identified that these elements are closely associated with each other and work simultaneously to accomplish better results. Additionally, the subcomponents of the leader that were identified by the present study were competence, dynamism, and strength of leadership; contending ability; and contemporary and action orientation. On similar lines, the present study identified that the policy should be categorized on the basis of performance, results, and effective delivery against promises. Lastly, the current study found that synchronization of ideas, policies, and actions needs to

be used widely in traditional and social media for a modern and promising brand image for the party among the voters. The revised *political brand image framework* can be used as a mechanism to deconstruct the external viewpoint of political brands and assess consistency with internal political brand identity.

References available upon request