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**Branding in Election Campaigns:  
Just a Buzzword or a New Quality of Political Communication?**

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MSc in Politics and Communication

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# **Branding in Election Campaigns: Just a Buzzword or a New Quality of Political Communication?**

**Manuel Adolphsen**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Politicians and political communication professionals have come to frequently rely on insights and personnel from the discipline of brand management to improve their external presentation. Political branding seems to be en vogue and is pursued as a deliberate strategy by political actors. It responds to a variety of conditions in the contemporary political communication environment, as is argued in the theoretical chapter of this study. At the same time, political communication research has been tasked by some scholars to assess the normative implications of political branding, its impact on democratic discourse and political engagement. These assessments would especially be needed if political branding lent unique, visible characteristics to political communication content.

The question of whether branding can be detected as a distinct quality of political communication is explored on the basis of the US Democratic Party's presidential primaries 2007/08, in which the campaign of Senator Barack Obama was commonly described as relying heavily on political branding. Through a quantitative content analysis of TV campaign advertisements (n = 80), Obama's campaign communication is compared to that of his main contender, Senator Hillary Clinton. In particular, the composition of both candidates' brand images is investigated – with the hypothesis being that the Obama campaign communicates a comprehensively different brand image from Clinton's and could therefore be seen as engaging in political branding. The results of the analysis reveal only a limited number of statistically significant differences in the presentation of both candidates. In essence, the two brands are very similar – a surprising fact, taking into account that Obama has been described as engaging in heavy political branding. This suggests that branding cannot easily be detected as a distinct quality in political communication.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Following the coverage of the ongoing presidential race in the United States, one at times cannot resist the impression that this might not be a *political* contest after all. Journalists' and bloggers' language is so riddled with terms from marketing and brand management that one could as well be reading a *Financial Times* piece about the competition between Nike and Adidas or an *Economist* review of the differences between flying British Airways and Virgin Atlantic. Especially the campaign of Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama has been described by many pundits with the help of commercial frameworks. They have attributed its success to the "seamlessness of the candidate's corporate identity" (*Newsweek*, Romano 2008b: ¶ 3), his status as the first candidate "to have been promoted in the same way as a trans-media, upmarket consumer brand" (*The Guardian*, Brady 2008: ¶ 2), or the strategy of "building a brand the way social networks are built out" (*Advertising Age*, Erwin 2008: ¶ 5). Apparently, in the eyes of many, the Obama campaign resembles an elaborate branding operation.

The concept of branding is not new to political communication. Over the last two decades or so, politicians and parties in various countries have often relied on insights and even personnel from brand management to advance their external presentation. Widely noted was the re-branding of the UK's working-class Labour Party into third-way 'New Labour' in the mid-1990s and beyond, partially assisted by professional branding firms (Scammell 2007; White and de Chernatony 2002). Keeping the habit, current Prime Minister Gordon Brown hired branding expert David Muir, author of the book *The Business of Brands* (2004), as Director of Strategy (*The Guardian*, Gibson 2008; *The Telegraph*, Gordon Brown's PR trio 2008). Similarly, the Conservative Party established the position of a Head of Brand Communications – a job title that could only be found in the corporate world up to that point (*The Guardian*, Sweney 2006). But also in other countries, brand thinking has reached politics. For instance, Schneider (2004) reports on a series of interviews with leading German politicians, in which they used the terms 'brand' or 'branding' in a routine manner to refer to their communication activities.

Branding, then, appears to be pursued as a deliberate strategy by political actors (Scammell 2007; Barberio and Lowe 2006). It seems to assist politicians and party leaders in aligning their communication activities to a fixed set of messages and emotions (= the brand) and introduces a certain level of discipline and standardization in the management of their external presentation – an asset that can be particularly valuable in more chaotic times of election

campaigning. According to this particular perspective, political branding is mainly an *internal* guideline of political communication organizations, influencing the processes and organizational features within governments' communication units and candidates' campaign headquarters. Intuitively, however, this cannot be seen as all there is to branding.

Of higher social relevance than this internal perspective would certainly be an analysis of the *external* consequences of political branding. As mentioned in the Obama example above, there seem to be certain aesthetic and emotional qualities about political communication – and election campaigns in particular – that justify attaching the label 'branded'. The question is: To what extent are those qualities actually visible in political communication content? Can they be identified and measured? Hence, is branding just a buzzword of political communicators or does it constitute a new quality of communication that can be detected as such?

This study aims at finding an answer to this question. It thereby addresses a topic that has been identified as under-researched by some scholars. Bennett and Iyengar (forthcoming) argue that social science seems to lag behind contemporary trends in communication. "While advertisers and corporations have already shifted to new models of branding and customer relationships [...], both practitioners and scholars of political communication seem behind the curve of social and technological change" (15). Harsin (2007) agrees by calling for research that tackles "style in a world where techniques of branding sell products, presidents and beliefs, and also launch wars" (4). In essence, it is branding's effects on citizens, including all the normative consequences, that turn it into a legitimate object of investigation. However, before we can evaluate these implications, we first have to explore whether branding in political communication can actually be identified as such. This study attempts to make this contribution.

## **2. THEORETICAL CHAPTER**

The *explanandum* of this study, the phenomenon of political branding, can be situated in various theoretical contexts. This could be, for example, the theory of a personalization of politics or arguments surrounding its emotionalization and blending with popular culture. Alternatively, the debate on an Americanization of political advocacy or theories assuming a consumerization of political behavior might offer valuable theoretical grounding. However, treating all of these theoretical approaches would be far beyond the scope of this study. For my research endeavor, I will use modernization – or, more precisely, secularization – theory for gaining an understanding of the contemporary political communication context in many postindustrial societies. As I will show, tendencies towards political branding might be attributed to this context. However, prior to the elaboration of this theoretical framework, basic concepts like brand or branding will have to be clarified with the help of marketing literature. The chapter concludes with a statement of a conceptual framework and my research question.

### **BRANDING AND POLITICS**

The first part of this section features an exploration of the definition of 'branding,' its commercial roots and main characteristics. In the second part, a brief literature review of the role of branding in political communication research will be conducted.

#### ***What is branding?***

Any search for a definition of 'branding' has to start with an exploration of the brand concept. The marketing literature features a wide array of descriptions of the term 'brand'. A trimmed-down definition appropriate for political marketing contexts is offered by Scammell (2007), for whom the term 'brand' refers to the symbolic value, "the psychological representation" (177) of a given product. It is a "layer of emotional connection" (ibid.) or, according to Lambin (2007), a set of intangible benefits connected to a product. Hence, while 'product' only refers to the core benefit obtained by means of a purchase (ibid.), the term 'brand' encompasses softer aspects, such as emotions or social connotations experienced during the use of a product.

Adopting this conceptual difference between products and brands, Scammell (2007) describes a brand's internal structure as comprising two elements, as outlined in a model cited by Woods (2004): The brand's 'boundary conditions' constitute the functional and economic value

obtained when purchasing a product. This, in essence, is the product – the hard, tangible benefit gained by a consumer. The 'brand differentiators,' then, constitute the above-described 'emotional wrappers' of a product – the various connotations connected to a purchase. These can be of different types: *Psychological* brand differentiators appeal to consumers' self-reflexive capacities and value preferences, *social* brand differentiators relate to their socialization or standing in society, and *cultural* brand differentiators tap into their customs and traditions. While these categories might be overlapping, they demonstrate that the perception of a product – i.e. the brand image – can be tied to various aspects of human life.

A brand, therefore, does not constitute what a product *is* but what the consumers *perceive it to be*. It is rooted in people's minds, as a kind of "gift that consumers may bestow" (Scammell 2007: 179) but also withdraw. This is not to say that brand marketers cannot influence consumers' perceptions of a product and facilitate the evolution of reciprocal relations, e.g. by associating their products with lifestyles desired by consumers or by carefully orchestrating the sensual aspects of the consumption situation. However, at the end of the day, the brand is the projection of a product in consumers' minds. It is there where it can be cultivated but also contaminated.

Branding, then, refers to any organization's activities aimed at the creation and fostering of a distinct brand image in consumers' minds. These activities involve a focusing of resources "on selected tangible and intangible attributes to differentiate the brand in an attractive, meaningful, and compelling way for the targeted audience" (Grimaldi 2003: ¶ 7). In this process, all factors shaping consumers' product perceptions – be it marketing communications, employee behavior, or the actual experience of consuming the product – will have to be aligned to the brand. In marketing theory, this is called 'brand integration' and guarantees that "everything the brand does in some way reflects and contributes to its unique identity" (Feldwick 2003: 135).

Three characteristics of branding should be highlighted – they will be related to political branding at a later point in this study:

- *Value-laden/emotional narratives*: On many of today's markets, products are traded "whose characteristics, pricing, distribution and availability are really quite close to each other" (Blackett 2003: 18). In other words, if it was solely for taste or price, the difference between Coca-Cola and Pepsi would be minimal. Only through brand images constructed

around both products, suggesting distinct connotations and identities for each, the two drinks become distinguishable. Hence, when claims like 'product A works better' or 'product B is cheaper' are ineffective, consumers have to be provided with the more elaborate incentives, or "underlying appeals" (ibid.), integrated in brand images. These appeals are often tailored to specific human ambitions or lifestyle preferences, enabling "shared participation in aspirational and democratic narratives" (Hilton 2003: 64). While this perspective of brands as "social unifiers" (ibid.) might be regarded as naïve by some, it illustrates a first characteristic of branding: the communication of value-laden, emotional narratives tailored to specific groups with the aim of differentiating identical products.

- *Multi-channel orientation:* A coherent, and thus effective, brand image can only be evoked, if identical brand attributes are transmitted through *all* communication channels. For instance, a producer of upmarket cars would have to make sure its TV commercials, press advertisements, and mass mailings all suggest similar feelings and connotations, although the three channels involve different senses and reach audiences in different contexts. In this example, coherently branded communication would be lacking if the spots sold the car as a vintage-style countryside cruiser, while the print ad portrayed the vehicle in a hectic metropolitan setting or the mailings were printed in black-and-white on cheap paper lacking any feel of exclusiveness. In a fragmented media environment, effective branding functions through the disciplined promotion of distinct brand attributes across all channels (Feldwick 2003).
- *Trust-building:* Branding also means that all activities, including communications, should be focused on gaining and maintaining consumers' trust. Through the communication of a coherent brand image involving values and inspirations, brands make promises that raise high expectations on the side of consumers (Brymer 2003). In turn, "they must do everything within their power to deliver on the promise" (69). This, however, poses great challenges to organizations. Especially for service brands, which are essentially constructed around the process of one person interacting with another, ensuring that the quality of the product always lives up to the brand promise is not easy. In the marketing literature, consistency and honesty are cited as key factors facilitating the emergence of trust-based relations between consumers and brands (Smith 2003; Hilton 2003). A brand that makes great claims but fails to deliver will soon have a contaminated image in consumers' minds.



All three characteristics bear some relevance for the contemporary political communication environment and can therefore be regarded as potential reasons for branding's popularity among political communication professionals – as will be elaborated below. Beforehand, it seems plausible to have a look at what has been written about branding in political communication research so far.

### ***Branding in political communication research***

Overall, the body of literature on the topic is limited and employs diverse angles and emphases. Most works can be assigned to one of two perspectives: treating branding (or brand talk) in politics as a social phenomenon requiring explanation, i.e. as an *explanandum*, or using the brand concept for analyzing and comprehending political communication reality, i.e. as an *explanans*. While the first perspective can mostly be found in descriptive case studies of particular political campaigns or re-branding processes (e.g. of the transformation of the British Labour Party into 'New Labour'), the second perspective aims to explain political actors' communication behavior with the help of the brand concept. This later approach certainly requires some explanation, as to many scholars, the added value of introducing yet another concept relating to the external presentation of parties or candidates might seem unclear. With political science and communication studies already featuring such concepts as image, reputation, or symbolic politics, what is the benefit of introducing a new concept like political branding?

Scammell (2007) argues that introducing the brand concept in political communication should not be misunderstood as mere replacement of 'image' with a more "fashionable" (176) term. In her eyes, the added value of using branding as an analytical framework is the simultaneous focus on political actors' "functional perceptions" (187) as well as the "emotional attractions" (ibid.) towards them. It considers "the emotional and intellectual, rational and irrational [...], the big and tiny details" that all feed into people's perceptions – or brand images – of political actors:

"The crucial added value of branding is that it provides a conceptual structure to link advertising insight into all aspects of the brand, positioning, development, and promotion; and unlike advertising, it is not wedded to a particular form of communication." (188).

Correspondingly, Needham (2005) argues that traditional terms possess limited analytical value. The image concept is only concerned with how political actors are presented and perceived in

people's eyes. This perspective, however, lacks consideration of actors' 'political products,' their "internal values" (347). The reputation concept, on the other hand, only analyzes how people perceive political products but does not consider which strategic communication activities might be undertaken for their external presentation. Hence, only the branding concept possesses comprehensive analytical capacity.

Scammell (2007) and Needham (2005), as well as other scholars (e.g. White and de Chernatony 2002), take the case of Tony Blair and the communication activities of his government as point of departure for their studies. Needham uses six attributes that marketing literature describes as essential for branding success (simple, unique, reassuring, aspirational, value-based, credible) for evaluating Blair's and Bill Clinton's communication behavior after the assumption of office. The analysis revealed that both politicians were successful in suggesting a differentiated brand image involving aspirational appeals, but "their ability to deliver simple, credible and reassuring messages varied over time" (355). Scammell takes a more descriptive approach and describes how political branding was implemented by New Labour in order to "reconnect Tony Blair to the electorate" (182). On the party leadership's behalf, the London-based branding consultancy Promise conducted intensive research on how people's perception of the premier had changed over his second term of office and developed a comprehensive strategy for improving his brand image.

Other studies have examined the use of branding in US political communication. Barberio and Lowe (2006) analyzed presidential rhetoric and the labeling of policy initiatives (e.g. 'No Child Left Behind'), focusing on the "use of value-based words, phrases and symbols to connect with the public in order to gain the support necessary" (8). They conclude that "branding has had its fullest flowering yet during the presidency of George W. Bush" (19) and was pursued as a deliberate strategy. In a forthcoming paper, Scammell agrees. She describes George W. Bush as "the ultimate brand" (12), at least for a certain period, outlining "a Bush image miles apart from the propaganda thesis of rule by fear and manipulated hatred of enemies". Harsin (2007) portrays the use of branding for a different purpose – to hurt political opponents. In his study, he describes how John Kerry, the Democratic candidate for the White House in the 2004 elections, was branded as 'French' by Republicans. Arguing that "Kerry's identity, his history did not easily fit into the simplistic branding narratives that contemporary political communication demand" (22) and could therefore be easily replaced by his opponents' 'Frenchman' brand, Harsin detects a "political culture where branding has taken over" (23).

This raises the question of how political branding has to be evaluated normatively. For Scammell (2007), "branding is not easily categorized as a force for either good or ill" (191). With its more engaging and interactive communication style, it might have the potential for building a connection to voters who have turned their backs to politics. Traditional political communication has left people confused and indifferent, but political actors' adherence to the rules followed by commercial brands for the facilitation of 'brand connection' might empower and, essentially, re-politicize voters. On the other hand, branding might drive the substance out of politics and replaces it with glitz and style. While branding, in theory, should always be based on a 'hard' product, on substantive values and policies, it can easily turn into a traditional marketing show that makes voters even more fed up with politics. Needham (2005) draws up an equally differentiated picture: Branding can increase political communication's comprehensibility and credibility and make it "more cognizant of and responsive to public opinion" (356). However, it can also lack ideological grounding and stifle intra-party life by subordinating all debate to the guidelines of the party brand.

Barberio and Lowe (2006) and Harsin (2007) offer exclusively negative evaluations. For the former, "an over-reliance on branded communications can all too easily shift into pure manipulation of the public and cause undue injury to the nation's fundamental democratic discourse" (24). The emotional wrapping of political products, which in other scholars' opinion might also bear potential for connecting to voters, is seen as a suppressor of dissent, as part of "demagogic rhetoric" (3). For Harsin, who treats branding as a way of stigmatizing political opponents, "political branding is not about reason-giving, in terms of rational-critical debate" (21). It is symptomatic for a media-politics environment dominated by horse-race reporting and tabloidization. In his eyes, "political communication and teledemocracy in the U.S. is today best understood as branding in terms of marketing theory, and it is a trend that is spreading across Europe and globally" (24). This rise of political marketing, including the special technique of branding, can partially be attributed to a secularization of politics, which will be the topic of the next sections.

## **THE SECULARIZATION OF POLITICS AND ITS IMPACT ON POLITICAL COMMUNICATION**

In the following, I will analyze the secularization of politics and trace the emergence of a political communication environment that provokes the use of branding techniques.

### ***Secularization theory***

In many democracies, the relationship between citizens and political institutions has seen profound changes since the end of World War II. Often, these transformations are subsumed under the label 'modernization,' although the term 'secularization' seems more precise (Hallin and Mancini 2004). It describes the drastic weakening, if not vanishing, of traditional ties between citizens and institutions of authority, such as political parties, trade unions, churches etc. (Bennett 1998; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Swanson 2004). In many European societies, these institutions used to be rooted in a social structure characterized by cleavages, for example "between social classes, the center versus the periphery, and the State versus the Church" (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999: 255). With the vanishing of these cleavages, propelled by such factors as the demise of manufacturing industries as the base of the working class (Hallin and Mancini 2004) or the spread of post-materialist values due to rising affluence (Inglehart and Welzel 2005), traditional loyalties to these institutions became outdated.

For the party landscape, this dissolution of ties meant the "decline of the mass party, ideologically identified and rooted in distinct social groups" (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 30) and, generally spoken, a "transition away from the collective politics of the post-World War II decades" (Bennet 1998: 749). Instead, a new political culture emerged that many scholars have described as more pragmatic, colorful, and volatile (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1995; Swanson 2004). Rather than following long-established party loyalties, citizens started directing their attention and engagement towards specific issues, out of which many did not used to belong to traditional party programs (Bennet 1998). As Swanson (2004) argues, "the old politics of faith and redemption" (48) have been replaced by a "new politics of opinion and pragmatism" (ibid.), in which political support is gained and lost quickly, often in connection to "post-modern concerns for environmental protection, individual freedom, social equality, civic participation, and a higher quality of life" (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1995: 253)

It becomes apparent that secularization has turned the rigid politics of social cleavages and strong party loyalties into a more fluid and diverse system. Instead of ideologies, mobilizing capacity now rests with single issues. Some scholars even speak of an era of "lifestyle politics" (Bennett 1998), in which political participation is a product of people's desire to "pursue freedom of expression and self-realization" (Inglehart and Welzel 2005: 3), of "considerable self-reflexivity and identity management" (Bennet and Iyengar [forthcoming]: 18), and essentially a means of realizing "personal projects of managing and expressing complex identities in a fragmenting society" (Bennett 1998: 755).

### ***Changes in political communication – from ideological appeals to lifestyle branding?***

Political communication has changed significantly in the face of secularization. With underlying social cleavages vanishing and old mass parties descending, what has become lost in political communication is the traditional "shared context for receiving and interpreting messages" (Bennett and Iyengar [forthcoming]: 2) that used to help citizens in making sense of political life. In the old days of rigid cleavage structures, political communication was structured along a small number of grand themes (Bennett 1998). Especially party communication relied on "great mobilizing ideals" (Swanson 2004: 47) for gaining legitimacy with and support from followers. These mobilizing ideals were the red thread, the signposts of political communication, allowing recipients to easily integrate political messages into their value systems and previous knowledge. Party communication of this type provided supporters with a coherent – but at times certainly simplistic – perspective on political happenings.

Today, these forms of communication no longer work, as Giddens (1999) argues: "In a detraditionalising world, politicians can't rely upon the old forms of pomp and circumstance to justify what they do" (¶ 16). Instead, political actors have come to rely on political marketing techniques, on forms of communication "based on persuasion in which voters, lacking enduring political convictions, are induced to support a particular candidate or party at election time" (Swanson 2004: 46-47). Problematic about these approaches is not only that they can be made responsible for the spread of political cynicism (see below) but also that they actually seem to counteract the establishment of more permanent ties between voters and parties. In conventional political marketing thinking, elections are seen as isolated one-off games, in which voters' support has to be raised from zero again and again. And as differentiating features are rare among "catch-all" parties (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 30), this attraction of voters is mostly done through sloganeering, highlighting of candidates' personal qualities, or the slandering of

political opponents – techniques of traditional political marketing. What is neglected in this process is an appreciation of the rising importance of lifestyle preferences as a structuring element in society (Bennett 1998). Instead of explaining why they might be particularly attractive for adherents of certain lifestyles or societal visions, parties lure voters into buying their 'political product' on the basis of conventional political marketing claims.

Besides the absence of grand themes and great ideals, two further conditions are frequently cited as characteristic of contemporary political communication. Firstly, according to Blumler and Kavanagh (1999), today's politics is communicated through a wider variety of channels than ever before, as media have become abundant and ubiquitous. In a process of "centrifugal diversification" (221), mass audiences are fragmenting and disappearing. 'Mainstream' outlets are losing relevance, as particular segments or subgroups of society tune into specialized, 'narrowcasting' media, increasing the diversity of political agendas and widening cultural gaps in society.

Secondly, according to 'crisis' theorists like Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) or Capella and Jamieson (1997), the media have shifted their focus to the coverage of the tactical, negative aspects of politics – and, in the case of election campaigns, of candidates' skirmishes and publicity efforts. This alienates citizens from the political process and spreads cynicism, which is only amplified by the fact that much of what politicians say is actually directed against their own profession. Especially in election campaigns, it has become common for politicians to run "undercutting the institution of which they are or aspire to be a part" (Capella and Jamieson 1997: 29). This resembles a process of self-destruction, in which politicians weaken the very variable that makes their work successful – people's trust in politics.

Up to now, my analyses of secularization theory and other accounts of the transformations in media and politics have revealed three major challenges for contemporary political communication, particularly for that undertaken by candidates in electoral races:

- Firstly, in an era of secularized politics, parties cannot take for granted voters' support based on ideologies or traditional loyalties. Instead, voters are rather mobilized through particular issues or lifestyles, out of which many involve postmodern concerns.
- Secondly, this diversification of lifestyles and political preferences is accompanied by a fragmentation of the media landscape, dissolving established channels of discourse and replacing them with specialized media that narrowcast for particular segments and subgroups in society.

- Thirdly, campaign communication is complicated by tendencies of political apathy and cynicism in the electorate, making voters less receptive to and more skeptical about campaign messages.

One can see interesting similarities between these challenges and the three above-mentioned characteristics of branding. They suggest that the branding concept might have spread among political communicators because it claims to provide solutions to these three obstacles. Firstly, branding adds a symbolic or emotional layer to political products that may compensate for their loss of ideological roots. Secondly, branding's multi-channel orientation responds to media fragmentation. It appreciates the importance of 'tiny details' – also called "low-information signals" (Popkin 1991: 116) or "cognitive shortcuts" (Needham 2005: 346) – cutting through the clutter and providing people with input for political opinion formation. Thirdly, branding's emphasis on trust-building draws politicians' away from self-destructing behavior.

It should be emphasized that these are just conceptual thoughts based on theoretic ideals mentioned in marketing literature. They might provide a first explanation for the rising popularity of branding among political communication professionals. One should probably not assume that all politicians and campaigners participating in the branding fad these days are familiar with the marketing literature and know about these arguments. However, they might account for the wider context, in which political branding takes place. Now the question is, however, whether branding is actually visible to the recipients of political communication. This will be investigated in the empirical chapters of my study.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTION**

Out of a variety of applicable strands of research, I chose secularization theory for contextualizing my research. Secularization, in this study's context, refers to the vanishing of formerly strong ties between voters and political parties. With the dissolution of these traditional loyalties, parties, especially in their campaign communication, can no longer rely on the umbrella themes and ideological appeals of earlier times. Where campaign messages used to target long-established milieus and feature emotional connotations tied to social conflicts, conventional political marketing techniques are nowadays used for attracting voters. I have argued that in a catch-all party landscape, political branding, as a special marketing approach, might be used for re-introducing well-resonating emotional themes in party's communication activities, which can restore closer ties between groups in society and political projects.

Further reasons drawing political parties towards branding, as deduced from marketing thinking's theoretical treatment of the concept, might be its suitability for multi-channel environments and emphasis on generating trust-based relationships to consumers. While not many political communicators might be accustomed to these arguments from marketing theory, they do make a case for why political branding might be enjoying so much popularity in the contemporary political communication environment.

For political communication researchers, an essential question arising from these arguments would be how political branding affects democratic discourse and political engagement. Above, I presented a variety of normative evaluations, which were, on average, negative in tone. They mainly hypothesized political branding to suppress political debate and to strip politics of its substance, although some positive implications, e.g. the stimulation of voter interest, are also mentioned. Before these normative questions can be tackled, however, it has to be asked to what extent political branding is actually visible in political communication content, whether it can be detected and measured in an intersubjectively verifiable way. If it turns out to be an assessable quality of political communication, further normative scrutinizing of the concept will certainly be needed. If it appears to be more like a buzzword or organizational feature in professional political communication, normative concerns might not have the greatest urgency.

In my empirical analysis, then, I will investigate to what extent branding can be detected in political communication, particularly *campaign* communication. I will use the US Democratic Party's presidential primaries 2007/08 as a test case, as they featured a campaign that was commonly hypothesized to rely heavily on political branding – that of Senator Barack Obama. I will compare his campaign communication to that of his main contender, Senator Hillary Clinton, investigating how both political brands were constructed, especially with regard to the above-mentioned 'emotional wrappers' and 'tiny details.' If large differences can be found in the presentation of these politically very similar politicians, I will assume that political branding was present.

The specific research question to be investigated in this study therefore reads:

- *To what extent can branding be detected in the campaign communication of the two leading candidates of the US Democratic Party's presidential primary race 2007/08?*



This question will be addressed empirically through a quantitative content analysis of the TV campaign advertisements released by the campaigns of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Methodological details of this analysis will be clarified in the next section.

### **3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

While the preceding chapter offered a *theoretical* contextualization of the phenomenon of branding in political communication, this and the next chapter will deal with my *empirical* investigation into the presence of branding in election campaigns.

#### **OUTLINE OF RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study's general theme of whether branding constitutes a new, measurable quality of political communication was narrowed down to the specific research question of whether branding can be detected in the campaign communication of the two leading candidates in the US Democrats' presidential primary race 2007/08, Senator Hillary Clinton and Senator Barack Obama. As the Obama campaign has been described as unique in its use of branded communication (McGirt 2008; Romano 2008a), a comparison with the politically very similar Clinton campaign seems promising. According to my hypothesis, Obama's presumed branding efforts will be visible in his campaign communication.

In drafting up a research design, several decisions had to be made. Firstly, the material for investigation had to be defined. While the candidates' campaign communication comprised various channels (speeches, posters, websites etc.), I opted for an analysis of TV advertisements. Addressing several human senses and allowing a multitude of stylistic elements, I saw TV advertisements as providing the largest freedom for candidates' branding efforts. While a more encompassing analysis should probably take into account more than one communication channel, in order to reflect brandings' above-described multi-channel orientation, this would have been beyond the scope of this study.

The second issue to be addressed was how branding can actually be measured. I decided for quantitative content analysis to be an appropriate method of data collection. The *quantitative* orientation was chosen, because I aimed at getting an overall impression of the presence of branding in a larger number of TV advertisements. The decision for *content analysis* as a method was made due to my interest in how particular brand images were suggested in the

ads. As elaborated above, brand images are ultimately rooted in consumers' – or voters' – minds but can be nourished (and contaminated) through branded communication. I was interested to whether that branded quality was detectable in campaign communication.

It has to be pointed out that my analysis was conceived in such a manner as to provide descriptions of both candidates' brand images as evoked in the advertisements. These descriptions alone, however, do not yet tell us much about the presence of purposeful branding. As described above, 'brand' is essentially a neutral concept, describing a product's intangible values. In this sense, most – if not all – products possess a brand, as they trigger certain emotions or connotations. But this does not mean that these products are always advertised through branded communication (brand images in consumers' minds can also be created through other things, e.g. friends' recommendations or the actual use of the product). As elaborated earlier, one can speak of branded communication only if a product is described as possessing distinct intangible qualities that make it clearly different from other products. Hence, in the context of my analysis, only obvious contrasts in the presentation of politically rather similar candidates could be regarded as evidence for branding.

### **ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS**

Two fundamental features of quantitative content analysis should be mentioned here. Firstly, it provides a research approach that is highly formalized, using "systematic counting and recording procedures to produce a quantitative description of the symbolic content in a text" (Neuman 2003: 311). These procedures, if made transparent, allow for the production of research findings to be inter-subjectively verifiable, i.e. to be reproducible by fellow researchers. Among the formalized steps of quantitative content analysis are the statistically sound definition of population and sample, the careful construction of variables, and the development of precise coding guidelines. All this cannot guarantee the objectivity of research findings but at least provides "repeatable, precise results" (ibid.).

Secondly, quantitative content analysis is suitable for detecting patterns across larger amounts of text. It produces "a big picture" of media content, "delineating trends, patterns and absences" (Deacon et al. 2007: 119). However, some ideas about these patterns have to be existent beforehand, as the method cannot be used for inductively exploring content. Instead, texts are literally 'measured' according to variables that have to be fixed prior to the analysis. Also, the high suitability for larger aggregates of content is at the same time the method's

greatest limitation: "By looking at aggregated meaning-making *across* texts, the method tends to skate over complex and varied processes of meaning-making *within* texts" (ibid.). The emphasis on larger patterns shifts the focus away from smaller details.

### **DATA SELECTION I: THE CASE OF THE DEMOCRATS' PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES 2007/08**

The Democratic Party's 2007/08 presidential primaries were selected as a test case for my analysis. Presidential primaries are party-internal contests, in which party members (in some states also the wider public) choose the candidate they would like to see running for the White House. The 2007/08 Democratic primaries saw seven candidates applying for the party nomination (CNNPolitics.com 2008). The candidates receiving most attention were former First Lady Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton and Senator Barack Obama, with Clinton commonly seen as possessing the highest chances of winning – until Obama's surprising victory at the Iowa caucuses in January 2008. In the following six months, Clinton and Obama engaged in a close race and took turns between winning and losing in the different states. In the end, Obama emerged as the candidate having secured more delegates. Clinton suspended her campaign on June 7, 2008, announcing her endorsement of Obama.

What makes the Democratic primary race highly suitable as a test case for an investigation into political branding is the special character of Obama's campaign. As already described above, his campaign communication has been described as a carefully orchestrated branding operation. According to pundits, his "youthful look and multicultural persona" (*New York Times*, Powell 2008: ¶ 19) resonated well with younger audiences and fittingly represented his 'change' message. Endorsements by many figures from popular culture (some of whom released web videos in his support) helped him to obtain "rock star status" (*The Independent*, Doyle 2008: ¶ 1). Hence, there seems to be a stark contrast between Obama's political "movement" (*CBS News*, Ververs 2008: ¶ 6) and Clinton's "traditional campaign operation" (*Washington Post*, Cillizza 2007: ¶ 6), while both candidates are said to be very similar politically (*MSNBC*, Curry 2006). This makes a good case for a comparative analysis.

### **DATA SELECTION II: POPULATION AND SAMPLING**

My analysis' population includes all TV advertisements broadcast by the campaigns of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama between June 26, 2007 (Obama's first spot after announcing his candidacy) and June 1, 2008 (Clinton's final spot before conceding defeat). Not included are

web videos that were only published on the candidates' websites as well as spots released by PACs and other groups or individuals not affiliated to the campaigns. If a spot was aired in several locally adjusted versions, only one version was included in the population. Spanish-language ads were excluded.

A list of the titles and broadcasting dates of all ads was retrieved from the website of the Political Communication Lab at Stanford University (2008). The majority of spots could be found on YouTube (2008) and downloaded from there, using special software. Where YouTube did not provide the spots, other online sources had to be consulted (4President.us 2008; FactCheck.org 2008), including the candidates' websites (BarackObama.com 2008; HillaryClinton.com 2008). Through this procedure, 155 advertisements (83 for Clinton, 72 for Obama) were obtained in total. To reduce the number to a manageable size, 80 spots (40 for each candidate) were randomly selected with the help of randomizing software. The final sample thus comprised 80 spots that were statistically representative for all TV advertisements broadcast by both campaigns during the primary season.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF CODING FRAME**

In order to measure both candidates' brand images as evoked in the advertisements, I developed a coding frame that was structured along the above-mentioned model of brand components. Consequently, a number of variables explored the *boundary conditions* of the Clinton and Obama brands, i.e. which particular 'political product' the candidates advocated in the spots. With the majority of variables, the presence of *brand differentiators* was investigated, i.e. how the candidates were 'emotionally wrapped' and whether 'low-information signals' (see section 2.2.2) were revealed. The general idea was to systematically collect detailed information about both candidates' brand images as conveyed in the ads, so that conclusions concerning the use of branding could then be drawn. Many of the variables were adopted from earlier analyses of TV campaign advertisements (Johnston and Kaid 2001; Scammell and Langer 2006) but adjusted to the context of my study.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Prior to the analysis, a pre-test was conducted on eight advertisements (10% of n) in order to check the suitability of the coding frame. In response, several variables were supplemented with clarifying descriptions and additional codes. During the actual coding, the data was stored in an SPSS spreadsheet, where it could be analyzed without further data transfer. Eight randomly selected advertisements were also made subject to inter-coder reliability testing. The average inter-coder reliability coefficient across all variables (excluding formal variables like 'length' or 'date of broadcasting'), calculated according to Holsti (1969), amounted to 0.801. This rather low score can be explained by some ambiguities in the measuring of emotional appeals (variables 56 to 60), essentially very 'soft' constructs.

As appropriate for my nominal-level data, the statistical significance of differences between candidates was verified through chi-square tests (Neuman 2003). For most of my statistically significant differences, a significance level of 0.05 applies. The calculated frequencies and cross-tabulations served as the basis for the presentation of results in the next chapter.

## 4. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

After having outlined the methodological details of my empirical research, I will now present its findings. I will first explore how the *boundary conditions* of the Clinton and Obama brands were constructed in the ads, i.e. which particular 'political product' both candidates advocated. In a second step, the *brand differentiators* will be investigated, i.e. the focus will be on how the candidates' political products were 'emotionally wrapped.' It will become evident that the brand images evoked in both candidates' TV advertisements are surprisingly similar. This finding can then be used for answering the question whether political branding is actually detectible by external recipients of campaign communication.

### BOUNDARY CONDITIONS

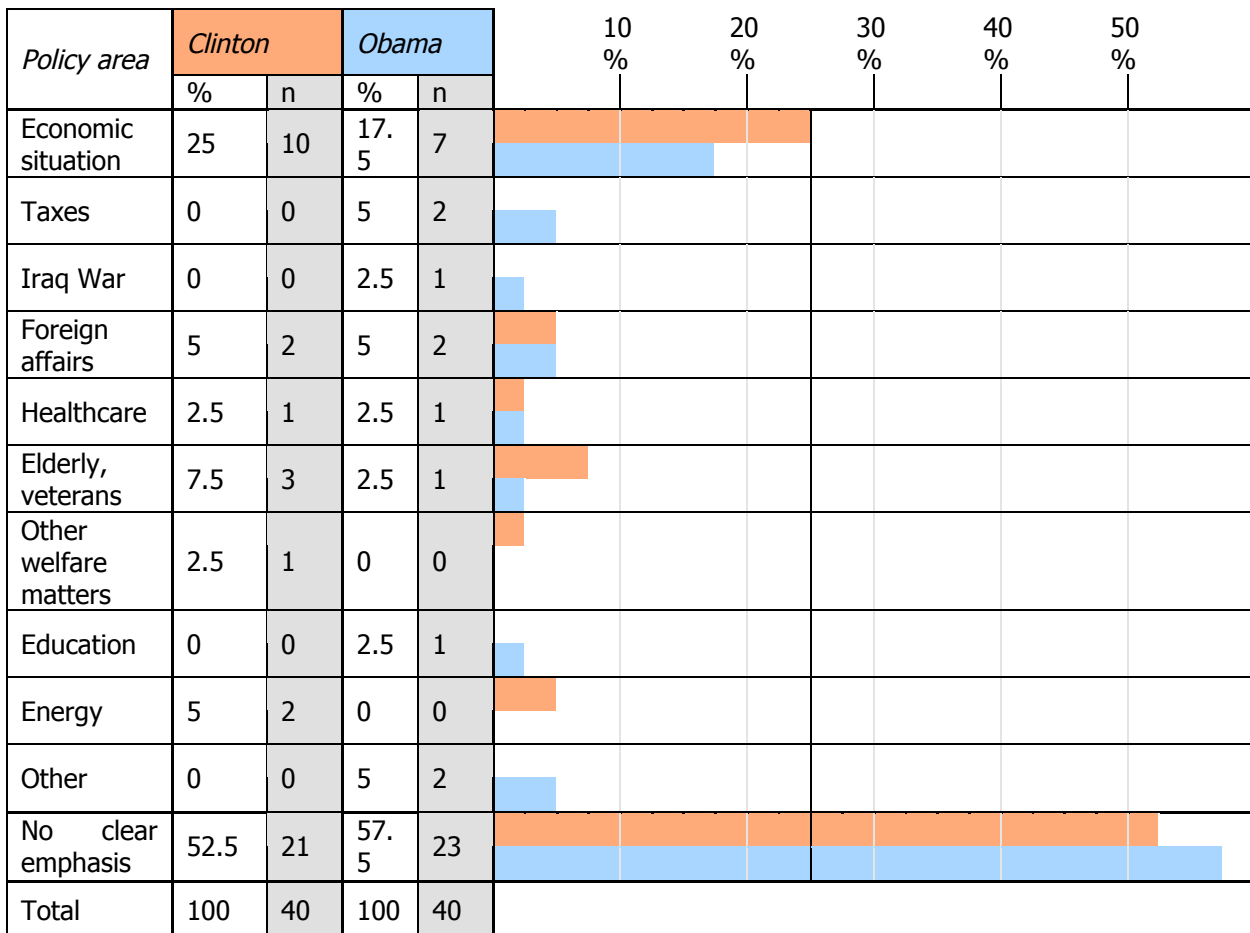
As described above, marketing theory suggests that a prerequisite for the creation of successful brands is the careful definition of a product core, which is the tangible benefit a consumer obtains through making a purchase. In other words, only if a shampoo meets consumers' hair washing needs in a satisfactory way, an elaborate brand of glamour, style, or other attributes can be constructed around it. In the case of political brands, the product core comprises the specific policy positions promoted by a candidate (Scammell [forthcoming]). Ideally, these political products are clearly recognizable and distinguishable in an electoral race. With the above-mentioned trend towards 'catch-all' parties, however, political products are said to have decreased in importance and uniqueness.

In line with popular hypotheses (see above), the political products of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama do not differ much. As illustrated in Figure 1, both candidates placed emphasis on similar policy areas when talking about their political concerns. On both sides, the majority of those ads featuring *one* clearly identifiable policy emphasis related to the economic situation in the United States. Other policy areas were also featured as umbrella topics – but only in a small number of ads. In general, according to this item, both candidates' political products, as marketed in their TV ads, are too similar to differentiate them on a statistically significant level.

This finding is corroborated by another variable collecting data about *all* policy areas touched upon in the spots. Also here, it can be seen that Clinton and Obama promote similar policy products (see Figure 2). The emphasis is again on economic matters, with 50% of all Clinton ads relating to this issue (Obama: 40%). Healthcare is the second most mentioned policy area

(Clinton: 40%; Obama: 42.5%), followed by taxes (Clinton: 32.5%; Obama: 30%) and the Iraq war (Clinton: 20%; Obama: 30%). All other policy areas are only mentioned in a negligibly small amount of ads. Again, with equal policy emphases portrayed, no statistically significant differences could be detected in the political products of both candidates. The only exception was children’s matters, which were mentioned in 20% of the Clinton ads but only in 2.5% of Obama’s. Although based on small numbers of cases, this difference is too large to be due to chance ( $p = 0.013$ ).

**Figure 1:** Policy area emphasized, by candidate (*one code per ad*)

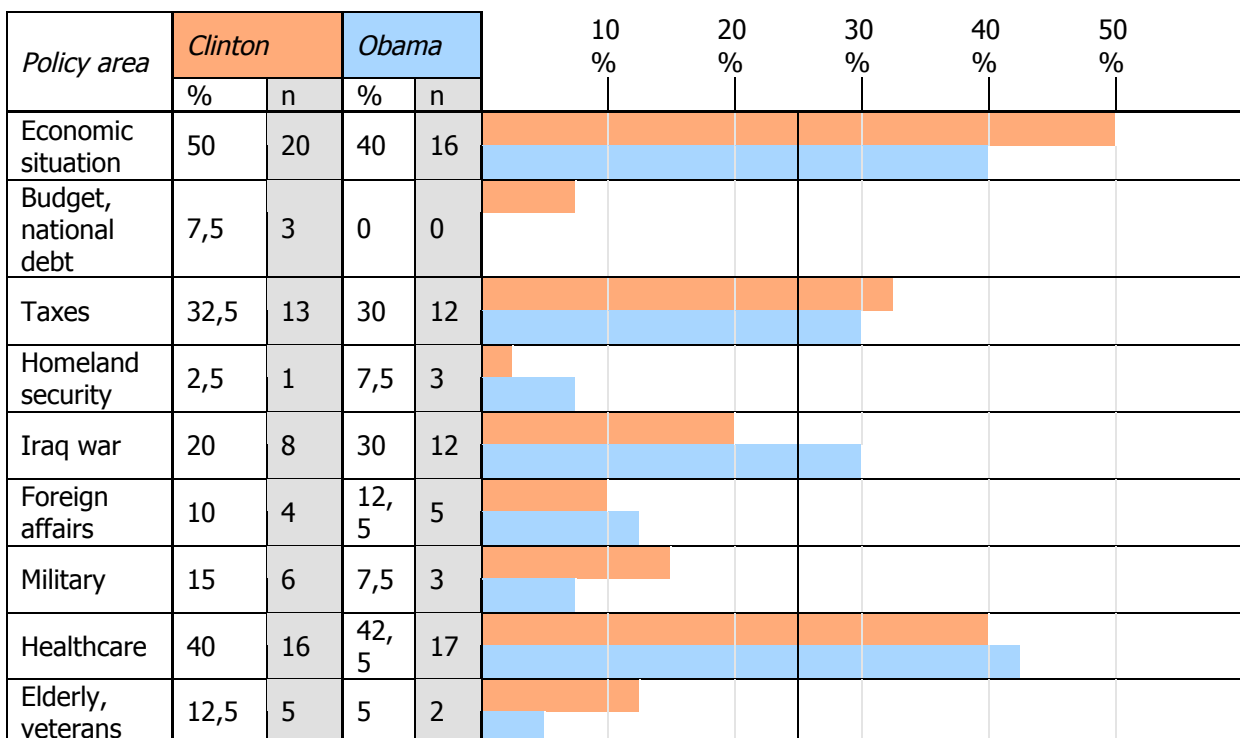


This similarity of policy emphases might be due to the special context of the primary campaign. As explained above, this was no national election but an internal contest within the Democratic Party, aiming at a more or less coherent body of voters (at least more coherent than in a general election) with a predominant preference for traditionally Democratic policy concerns (middle-class issues, healthcare, welfare etc.). By promoting these issues, both candidates tailored their campaigns to the Democratic target group. This, however, does not have to be an indicator for the policy emphases their general election campaigns would be based on. In that

case, a more heterogeneous audience with diverse policy preferences would have to be targeted and the political product adjusted accordingly.

According to Scammell (forthcoming), a political brand's boundary conditions do not only comprise a candidate's policy stances but also other characteristics like his political track record (e.g. past political achievements) or the ability to 'reach across the aisle,' i.e. to work in a bipartisan way. An analysis of the presentation of these political traits in the ads confirms a popular image of both candidates (see Figure 3): While Clinton, in 40% of her ads, emphasizes her 35 years of working in politics, Obama's spots (for obvious reasons) lack any reference to seniority (0%) and instead promote his past achievements in bringing Democrats and Republicans together (22.5%). Clinton, however, highlights her bipartisan efforts in only 7.5% of spots. This difference is noteworthy but misses the status of statistical significance by a narrow margin. Regardless of the particular length of their political careers, both candidates use the ads to talk about policy negotiations, meetings with foreign leaders, and other political experiences that are supposed to qualify them for the job in the White House (Clinton: 35%; Obama: 42.5%). To conclude, while there are no significant disparities with regard to policy positions, the political traits of Clinton and Obama surely show some differences. Clinton plays the card of seniority, whereas Obama tries to promote his achievements in calming political dissent.

**Figure 2:** Policy areas mentioned, by candidate (*multiple codes per ad*)





Children*	20	8	2,5	1	
Other welfare matters	5	2	5	2	
Education	12,5	5	17,5	7	
Energy	20	8	10	4	
Environment	10	4	2,5	1	

Mentioning of children’s issues:  $\chi^2 = 6.135$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ;  $n$  per variable = 80 ads (40 per candidate)

With both brands’ boundary conditions not giving voters much guidance for differentiating the candidates and recognizing the uniqueness of each, more significance is given to the brand differentiators. They will be analyzed in the next section.

**Figure 3:** Political traits mentioned, by candidate (*multiple codes per ad*)

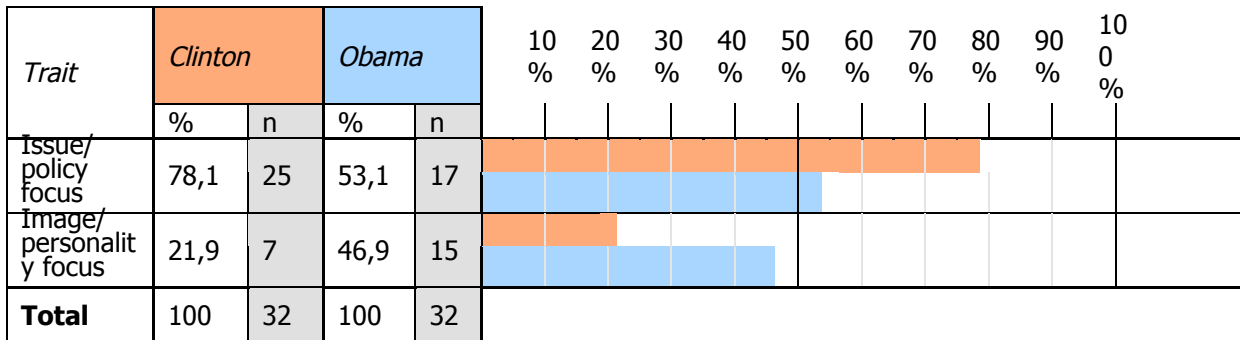
Trait	Clinton		Obama		10 %	20 %	30 %	40 %	50 %
	%	n	%	n					
Length of political career, seniority** *	40	16	0	0					
Political achievements	35	14	42,5	17					
Bipartisan efforts	7,5	3	22,5	9					

Mentioning of length of political career, seniority:  $\chi^2 = 20$ ,  $df = 1$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $n$  per variable = 80 ads (40 per candidate)

**BRAND DIFFERENTIATORS**

The just described similarity of the candidates’ political products should not obscure the fact that the extent to which political substance is discussed in the advertisements varies greatly between Clinton and Obama, as shown in Figure 4 ( $p = 0.035$ ). In accordance with popular hypothesizing, the majority of Clinton’s spots (78.1%) employ a policy focus, dealing with what she considers the most pressing issues she would address as future President. Among those issues are, as described above, economic and healthcare matters. The Obama campaign, however, chose a different strategy, releasing twice as many (46.9%) personality-focused ads than policy-oriented spots. Thus, the focus was put on communicating his personality traits, rather than elaborating on policy specifics.

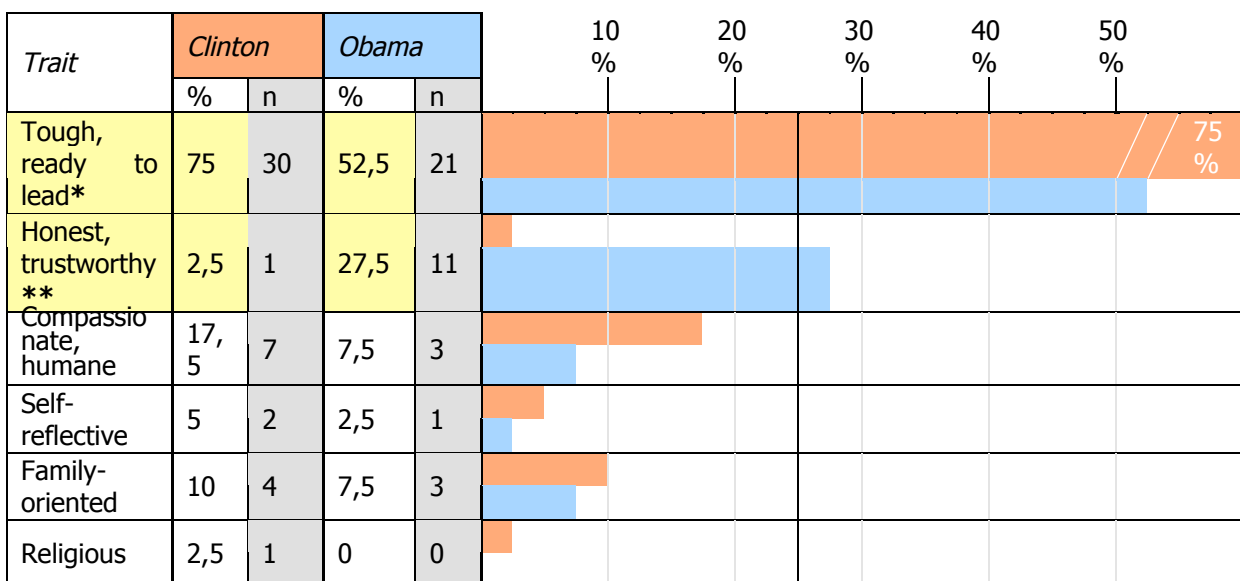
**Figure 4:** Focus of ad, by candidate\* (*one code per ad*)



$\chi^2 = 4.433$ ,  $df = 1$ ;  $p = 0.035$ ; ads featuring a different focus (e.g. attacking of opponents) were excluded from this analysis

These findings provide empirical evidence for the general impression voiced by many pundits that Clinton is “always in perfect command of policy details” (*The Economist*, Wooldridge 2007), while Obama appears “big on excitement and glamor but short on policy details” (*Newsweek*, Breslau 2008). As an interim result of my analysis, this means that boundary conditions take up a much smaller space in the Obama brand than in Clinton’s. Instead, Obama’s communication relies more on brand differentiators – the emotional wrapping and personality traits of the candidate, which were analyzed through a later variable in my coding frame. First, the focus was on which personality traits were attributed to each of the candidates through their statements or visual appearance.

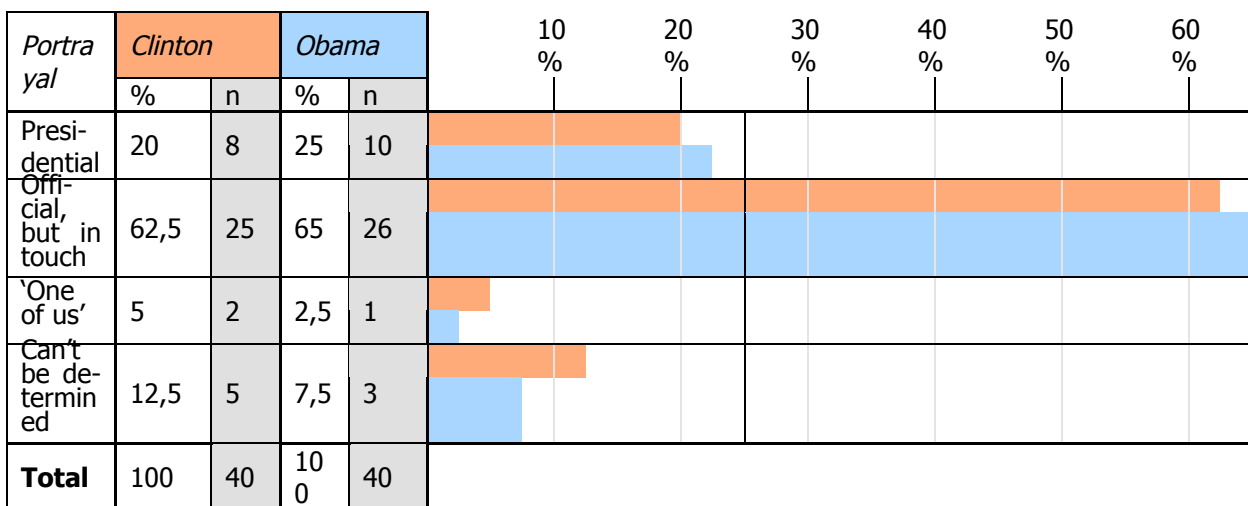
**Figure 5:** Personality traits mentioned, by candidate (*multiple codes per ad*)



Tough, ready to lead:  $\chi^2 = 4.381$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.036$ ; honest, trustworthy:  $\chi^2 = 9.804$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ; n per variable = 80 ads (40 per candidate)

The findings draw an interesting picture of the personalities of the two candidates as communicated in the spots (see Figure 5). Both politicians emphasize their leadership qualities, their ability to be strong and uncompromising. Clinton’s ads, however, highlight this trait much more often (75%; Obama: 52.5%), which constitutes a statistically significant difference ( $p = 0.036$ ). Besides the leadership trait, Obama’s ads feature another frequently-mentioned characteristic: his honesty and courage to tell people “not what they *want* to hear but what they *need* to hear.” This trait was brought up in 27.5% of his spots, marking another statistically significant difference to Clinton’s portrayed personality ( $p = 0.002$ ). No such differences could be detected regarding all other analyzed traits.

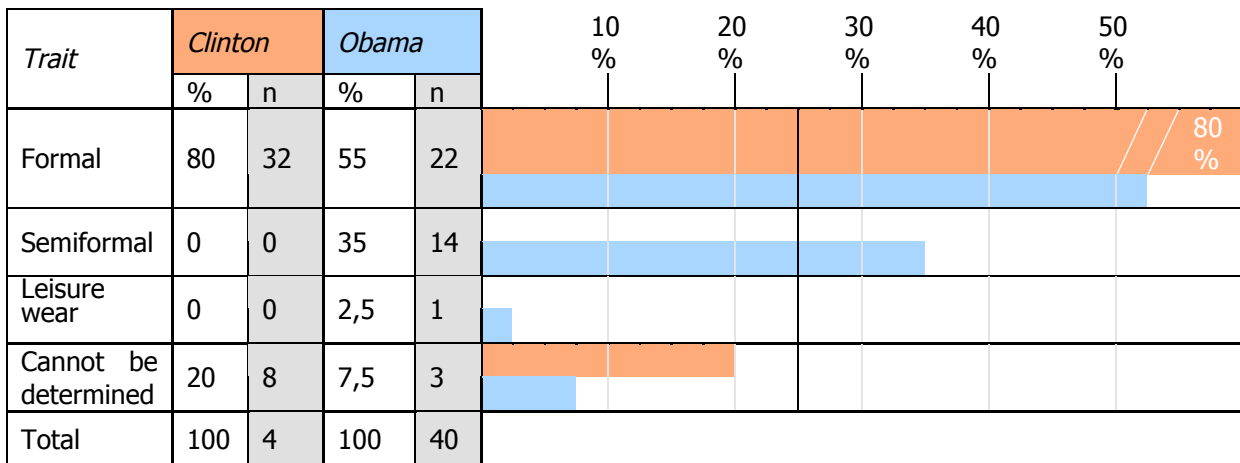
**Figure 6:** Portrayal of candidates, by candidate (*one code per ad*)



Beyond specific personality traits, I also analyzed the overall portrayal of candidates, in particular whether they were presented in a ‘presidential’ manner (i.e. without common citizens, in official settings, or surrounded by presidential symbols, such as black motorcades and security personnel) or as ‘one of us’ (i.e. interacting with – not just talking to – common citizens, attending barbeque parties, or being dressed in leisure wear). In most spots on both sides, however, the portrayal of the candidate was located somewhere in the middle between the ‘presidential’ and ‘one of us’ poles (see Figure 6): In 62.5% of Clinton’s ads and 65% of Obama’s, the candidates were presented as extraordinary politicians who possess special talent but, at the same time, are in touch with common people. No statistically significant differences could be detected.

Several other variables in my content analysis also aimed at measuring the various facets of the candidates' presentation and possible differences in this regard. The idea was to measure the above-mentioned 'tiny details' that are often ignored when investigating the formation of political opinion but, according to the brand concept, are very relevant for shaping audiences' brand images. I chose those details to be the geographical setting of an ad (e.g. rural, suburban, metropolitan), the character of depicted campaign events (e.g. speeches, casual gatherings, one-to-one conversations), the appearance of those people surrounding the candidate (e.g. families, uniformed servicemen), the tone of candidates' language (formal/colloquial), the style of candidates' clothing (formal/semi-formal/leisure wear), the featuring of national symbols (e.g. Stars and Stripes, the American Dream), and the inclusion of advertising elements (campaign logo/slogan). Most of these items, however, did not show any statistically significant differences between the two candidates. The average spot (both by Clinton and Obama) showed the particular candidate addressing mixed crowds at larger rallies in rural or suburban settings, employing formal language. The US flag was depicted in about every fourth spot. No candidate-specific patterns could be detected regarding any of these characteristics.

**Figure 7:** Dominant clothing of candidates\*\*\*, by candidate (*one code per ad*)

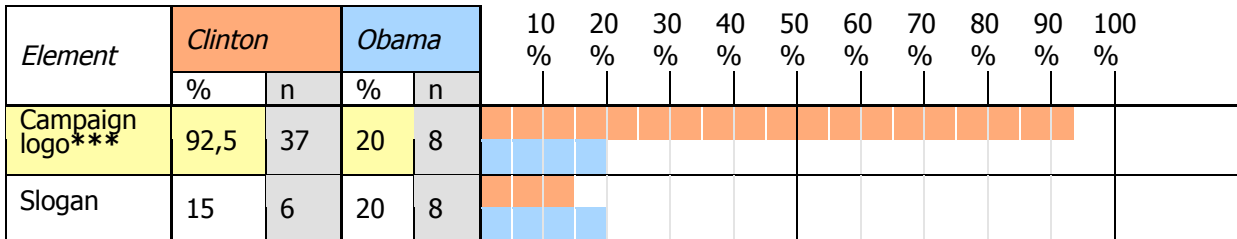


$\chi^2 = 19.125, df = 3, p < 0.001$

Two of the mentioned items, however, delivered interesting results illustrating statistically significant differences. Firstly, Obama is portrayed in formal clothing considerably less often than his competitor (see Figure 7). While Clinton wears a formal pantsuit in literally all spots that feature moving images of her (80%), Obama is dressed in a dark suit with tie in only 55% of spots. In 14 ads (35%), he appears in more casual attire (e.g. without jacket and/or tie, with sleeves rolled up). While these findings ( $p < 0.001$ ) might have something to do with the

particularities of male and female fashion, they at least give empirical backing to what some observers have called “the Obama look” (Wall Street Journal), i.e. a more casual appearance (compared to other politicians) that is to stress his ‘change’ message.

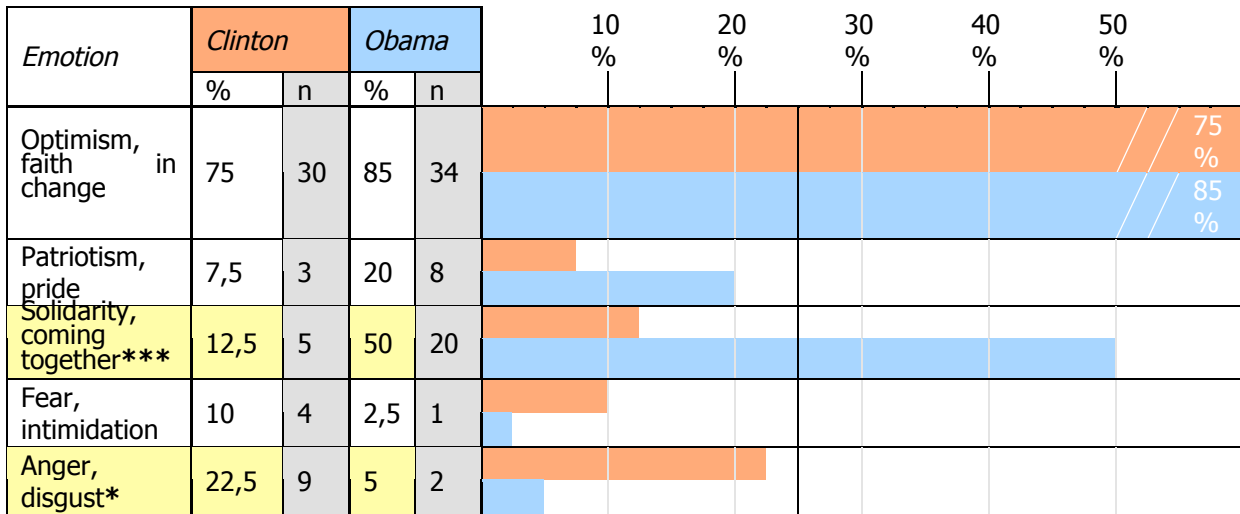
**Figure 8:** Inclusion of campaign logo and slogan, by candidate (multiple codes per ad)



Inclusion of campaign logo:  $\chi^2 = 42.717$ ,  $df = 1$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $n$  per variable = 80 ads (40 per candidate)

Secondly, there are some differences between the campaigns when it comes to the inclusion of logos and slogans (see Figure 8.) While almost all (92.5%) of Clinton’s spots end with a depiction of the campaign logo, only 15% of the Obama ads feature the well-known ‘O’ symbol ( $p < 0.001$ ). This is surprising, as Obama’s marketing has been described as “much more cohesive and comprehensive than anything we’ve seen before, involving fonts, logos and web design” (*Newsweek*, Romano 2008a). Interestingly, in the case of logos, this was not valid for his primary campaign TV ads. The figures look a bit different when it comes to slogans: Most ads by both candidates do not involve visually presented slogans (Clinton: 85%; Obama: 80%). However, those ads that *do* involve slogans feature a much wider variety for Clinton (“A President who will be strong for us,” “Solutions for America,” “It’s about people,” and “It’s time for leadership”) than for Obama, whose notorious credo “Change we can believe in” is used most of the time. In the case of slogans, the Obama campaign seems to be more disciplined.

**Figure 9:** Emotions evoked in ads, by candidate (*multiple codes per ad*)



Solidarity, coming together:  $\chi^2 = 13.091$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; anger, disgust:  $\chi^2 = 5.165$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.023$ ; n per variable = 80 ads (40 per candidate)

Searching for the brand differentiators of both campaigns, I have so far analyzed both candidates' overall portrayal in their TV ads, their emphasized personality traits, and several more specific facets of their spots (the 'tiny details'). What is still missing is an analysis of the overall 'emotional wrapping' that has been cited above as a characteristic of branding. As presented in Figure 9, for each ad, I identified the emotional undertones brought across, based on candidates' statements and the general mood conveyed. Not surprisingly, most ads on both sides promoted the general feeling of optimism, of things being able to improve under a new administration (Clinton: 75%; Obama: 85%). While Obama triggered these emotions through his sometimes flowery 'change' rhetoric, Clinton also evoked similar feelings by stressing her capability of fighting for the benefit of common people. Hence, no differences exist between the two candidates when it comes to these kinds of emotions.

Interestingly, for other emotional appeals, candidate-specific patterns can be observed. Four times more often than Clinton, Obama dwelled on the theme of solidarity, of the need for the country to come together (Clinton: 12.5%; Obama: 40%). This illustrates the effect of his other great campaign theme besides 'change': unity and the healing of the nation. Often, his appeals for solidarity also have a patriotic tone to them, a fact accounting for the high numbers in the 'patriotism, pride' category. In general, the difference between Clinton and Obama when it comes to calling for solidarity is strong enough to attain the highest level of statistical significance ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Another differentiating feature between both candidates is the extent to which their ads express anger. While it is present in only 5% of Obama's spots, 22.5% of the Clinton spots express feeling of fury or disgust (e.g. about tax evasion by companies or the relocation of industrial jobs to Asia). This finding might offer some evidence for what some commentators' and opponents have described as Clinton's sometimes "angry" (*ABC News*, Davis 2006) and "shrill" (*The Guardian*, Goldenberg 2008) appearance. Especially in contrast to Obama's unifying and healing approach, this attribute of Clinton's campaign communication is worth mentioning. It marks a statistically significant difference to Obama's TV advertisements ( $p = 0.023$ ).

## **SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

Before drawing conclusions regarding the differences between the candidates' presentation in their TV campaign advertisements and the presence of branding in the case of the US Democrats' presidential primaries 2007/08, I will briefly summarize my findings on each of the two political brands.

- *The Clinton brand:* In her advertisements, Hillary Clinton conveys a brand image that is to a large extent based on boundary conditions, i.e. on her actual 'political product': Policy statements, especially regarding the economic situation and healthcare, take up a large portion of her ads. They are commonly surrounded by arguments promoting her seniority and political achievements. When it comes to brand differentiators, Clinton's brand is primarily about a tough politician who is ready to lead. She is usually shown with common people, although some distance is always kept. This impression of mild detachment is amplified through her always formal clothing. Her ads mostly evoke feelings of optimism, although anger is also surprisingly common.
- *The Obama brand:* In his advertisements, Obama conveys a brand image that relies to similar degrees on boundary conditions and brand differentiators. Most of his policy-focused ads deal with economic matters and healthcare, supplemented by claims about his political achievements and bipartisan efforts. Through the brand differentiators, Obama is portrayed as proven leader who is candid and trustworthy. He is usually surrounded by common people, although his official status is not concealed. Some of the gap between him and supporters is bridged through his sometimes semiformal or even casual clothes. Obama's ads convey feelings of optimism and solidarity.

The statistically significant differences between the two brands are noteworthy – but small in number. Considering that the two campaigns have been described as employing very different campaigning approaches, with Obama presumably engaging in heavy political branding, the two brand images conveyed are surprisingly similar – contrary to my (and popular) expectations of the Obama campaign showing a clearly distinguishable profile. While in journalistic discourses, the Obama campaign has been described as employing an innovative, unorthodox approach at communication, the empirical evidence supporting this statement is limited. Admittedly, there are several statistically significant differences between both candidates' brand images, and I have pointed them out throughout preceding sections, but considering the extent to which the Obama campaign has been hyped and declared different from Clinton's approach, the Obama and Clinton brands, as communicated in their TV campaign advertisements, are amazingly similar.

These findings open up a sobering perspective on the detectability of political branding. If not even the Obama campaign, subject of so much political branding talk in early 2008, can be identified as promoting comprehensively differentiated boundary conditions and brand differentiators, as employing a unique mix of 'emotional wrappers' and 'tiny details,' it seems hard to imagine a campaign that could. Obama does not convey a brand image that is clearly distinct from Clinton's and would be in line with the often-praised unique 'branded' character of his campaign.

This finding has to be supplemented by two cautionary remarks, however. Firstly, the similarity between the Clinton and Obama brands might be due to the nature of TV campaign advertisements in the United States. Gaining large attention from audiences and the media, maybe TV ads are just not a platform for unconventional, more innovative forms of communication. Instead, traditional narratives and styles are used – even if the candidate generally employs a more innovative approach for other channels of communication. Secondly, my overall finding could also be due to low levels of validity of my research design. Maybe a quantitative design is not the most suitable method for investigating the branded character of campaign communication, as many of the 'tiny details,' that are deemed so important for the evoking of brand images (e.g. tone of music, physiognomy of the candidate, tone of narrator's voice) cannot be adequately captured. Qualitative designs might be more suitable – although intersubjective verifiability would be more difficult to attain in that case.



If both remarks were found non-applicable, this study's final conclusion would be that branding in election campaigns indeed seems to be more like a buzzword used by journalists and pundits to describe certain features in campaigning or campaign organization. It *cannot* be measured as a distinct quality of political communication in an intersubjectively verifiable way.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study was devoted to the phenomenon of political branding, in particular to the question whether political branding lends a unique, identifiable character to campaign communication. In my theoretical chapter, the popularity of political branding was framed as a consequence of the secularization of politics. Where campaign messages used to target long-established milieus and feature emotional connotations tied to social cleavages, today's parties and candidates might be trying to re-introduce well-resonating emotional themes in their communication activities and thereby restore closer ties between particular groups in society and political projects. Further reasons drawing political actors towards branding, as deduced from marketing thinking's theoretical treatment of the concept, might be its suitability for multi-channel environments and emphasis on generating trust-based relationships.

The question of whether branding can actually be detected as a measurable quality of campaign communication was then investigated on the basis of the US Democratic Party's presidential primaries 2007/08, in which the campaign of Senator Barack Obama was commonly described as relying heavily on political branding. Through a quantitative content analysis of TV campaign advertisements (n = 80), Obama's campaign communication was compared to that of his main contender, Senator Hillary Clinton. In particular, the composition of both candidates' brand images was investigated – with the hypothesis being that the Obama campaign would communicate a comprehensively different brand from Clinton's and could therefore be seen as engaging in political branding.

The results of my analysis, however, revealed only a limited number of statistically significant differences in the presentation of both candidates. The greatest disparities could be found in the extent to which they relied on personality-related (rather than issue-focused) information as well as in the combinations of personality traits conveyed and emotions triggered. Other than that, both political brands are very similar – a surprising fact, taking into account that the two campaigns have been described as employing different campaigning approaches and Obama as engaging in heavy political branding. This suggests the conclusion that branding cannot easily be detected in political communication – or at least not in a quantifiable, intersubjectively verifiable manner.

This opens up a methodological perspective for the future research on political branding. If the branding concept is to be treated not only as an analytical framework but also as a distinct

quality visible in political communication, strategies for a valid operationalization of political branding have to be thought of. Also, as a test of my theoretical framework, an investigation of the incentives and reflexive capacities of political communicators engaging in political branding might be promising. This would reveal if for them, political branding might be more than just a buzzword.

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