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### Voter-customer brand loyalty: A proposed model

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#### ABSTRACT

In this paper, the authors propose a voter-customer brand loyalty model using a mixture of associative network memory model, brand signalling theory and social identity theory. The model will describe the behavioural influences of the political celebrity credibility, the political party brand credibility and the political party brand image on the brand equity of the party presidential candidate, voter-customer-party identification and the voter-customers loyalty. In this model, the authors propose that credible political celebrity endorsement can effectively enhance the brand equity of the party presidential candidate and the brand credibility of the party. In addition, the brand credibility of the party may enhance the brand equity of presidential candidate. In sum, the model framework will show that the use of credible endorsers and investment on the enhancement of the party brand image will lead to enhanced brand equity and committed meaningful relationship with the party presidential candidate by voter-customers.

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#### Introduction

The political community represents distinguished values, attitudes and beliefs characterizing a political party. Considering the political party as political product represents a challenge due to several unusual and under-research characteristics. A review by Schneider (2004) found the unusual and under-research characteristics include the duration of customer choice, the dependency of the political product delivery on electoral choice of the voter-customer majorities, the absence of monetary price involvement (Lock & Harris, 1996), the inability of service identification in advance (Harrop, 1990), and the mutability aspect of the product (O'Cass, 2003; Butler & Collins, 1994). As a result of the complexity and the intangibility of political product, studying the product image may outweigh the importance of the political product (Egan, 1999). Certain levels of future promises, vagueness, uncertainty, and the satisfaction derived are the main components of the political product which encouraged the study of the party perceived brand image (Lock & Harris, 1996).

O'Cass (2003) identified the six aspects of political product to be: i) the party prospective, ii) the political party, iii) policies, iv) leader, v) candidates, and vi) issues and services. The inability to separate between these aspects from the voter customer prospective presents the crucial influence the party brand image play over voter-customers electoral decision (O'Cass, 2003). Rentoul, Robinson, and Brauholtz (1995) studied the voter-customer perception of the party in 1992 election. They acknowledged the limited voter-customer's political knowledge in the election. In another electoral study, it was revealed that the strategic aspect of political marketing provided little evidence on how politicians build their brand equity and retain loyal voters in the light of their political parties (O'Cass, 2003). The lack of knowledge especially on the strategic aspect of political marketing calls for the need to explore other related but critical issues such as – 'what do voter-customers value the most when they vote?', and 'what are the

basis of their perception on the brand equity of the presidential candidate that they evaluate and voted?'

The brand equity of the presidential candidate is crucial, because most voter-customers never have the chance to meet him/her. Therefore, they do not have the chance to form direct and unfiltered opinion about the politician representing the party they are involved in or are attached to (Phipps, Brace-Govan, & Jevons, 2010). However, voter-customers expect the quality of the political product (i.e. the politician) to be correlated with the brand name (i.e. the political party like the Democratic and Republican parties in the USA environment) (Erdem T. , 1998). Expanding on Erdem's (1998) idea, it may be safely assumed that consequently, voter-customers rely on the suppliers image (i.e. the political party brand image and the political celebrity endorsers) to help them in deciding who and which party to vote for.

To date, little work has been done on the contribution of voter-customers perception of political party brand image and political celebrity endorsement credibility. The questions asked earlier emphasise the crucial need for researchers to provide more evidence on how endorser credibility affects voter-customer perception and how voter-customers build their loyalty. The voter-customer brand loyalty model proposed in this article is expected to help answer the questions posed earlier which could contribute to the literature by examining the variables that link the relationship of the endorser credibility to the voter-customers loyalty.

#### Conceptual framework

The framework proposed (see Figure 1) is based on several related theories found in the literature. These are the social identity theory from social cognition, the associative network memory model from cognitive psychology, and brand signalling theory from information economics areas. In the proposed model, Social identity theory explains the behavioural influence of the party brand image and its presidential candidate brand equity on the voter-customer-political party identification. The

associative network memory clarifies the relationship between endorser credibility and brand equity. The brand signalling theory is used to explain the mediating variable role of brand credibility.

### Social identity theory

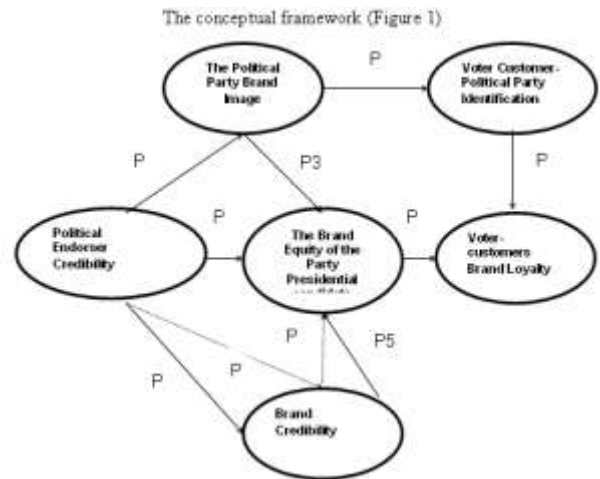
Social identity theory is a theory of behavior and group membership (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). The way people within an environment try to make sense of themselves was the purpose behind developing social identity theory. Basically it is a sub-theory of social cognition. This research will contribute to the literature of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) by demonstrating the relevant role of voter-customer-political party identification on the effect of the party brand image on voter-customer loyalty.

### The associative network memory model

According to one of the associative models the memory consist a set of nodes and links (Wyer & Srull, 1989). Stored information represents the node which connects with the others by links of varying strengths. A “spreading Activation” process connects node to node and determines the extent of retrieval provoked by the recognition of problem by the voter-customer and it happens even if a voter-customer simply think about the party presidential candidate (Keller, 1993). The conceptualizations of memory structure which involve associative models represent the most of widely accepted work in this field. Brand equity was conceptualized by Keller (1993) using associative memory model, the model focused on brand knowledge which encompasses two components: brand awareness and brand knowledge. The process of endorsement can be described through the associative network memory model (Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011). If a voter-customer thinks about the politician celebrity endorser, they may directly relate it to the endorsed brand (Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011). The current study will use this model to bridge the relationship between politician celebrity credibility and brand equity.

### The brand signaling theory

Erdem and Swait (1998) defined brand signal as all past and present marketing mixes strategies and activities to market a brand. The signal is determine by the clarity and credibility. The absence or lack of ambiguity of the brand signal content represents its clarity (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011). The degree of effectiveness of the information conveyed by the brand signal, its trustworthiness, and dependability refers to the signal credibility (Tirole, 1988; Erdem & Swait, 1998; Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011). Probably the credibility of the brand signal is the most crucial characteristic (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011). The brand signaling literature is the source of brand credibility term (Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011). Based on the brand signaling theory the party brand credibility is considered as primary determinant of the political party presidential candidate brand equity (Erdem & Swait, 1998). Due to the voter-customer uncertainty of the political product offered by the corporate party, parties may use brands to assure the voter-customer their claims are credible (Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011). Brand signaling may improve the party credible position, leverage voter-customer trust in the party brand, and enhance the voter-customer perception about the party brand attribute. The brand signaling theory was employed to bridge the relationships between the party brand credibility and the brand equity of the presidential candidate.



### Endorser credibility

The politician endorsement can be defined as any politician who has public recognition, and who uses this popularity by appearing as a loyal patron in an advertisement (McCracken & Grant, 1989). Political celebrities are being used because of their personal qualities of attractiveness, likeability, reputation, and believability of the political celebrity toward the endorsed party (Atkin, 1983; Nelson, 1974). The political party corporations may influence their voter-customers perception using endorser credibility (Barbara & Ronald, 1999). The politician celebrity credibility is the combination of physical attractiveness, trustworthiness, and experience (Ohanian & Roobina, 1990). The credibility of the politician endorser can influence some property of the party brand image. Political celebrity endorsement is a widely used strategy, whereby political celebrities are being used as promotional tool. Celebrity politicians' endorsements can be seen as expert opinions, a spokesperson's presentations for the party presidential candidate, or just an association with the party presidential candidate (McCracken & Grant, 1989; Seno & Lukas, 2007). Forms of endorsements are explicit ('I endorse this party'), implicit ('I vote for this party'), imperative ('you should vote for the same party'), and co-presentation (merely appearing with the party officials). The “association transfer” or a “meaning transfer” happens during the politician celebrity endorsement through the unmediated relationship between such a politician and the party. This type of promotional strategy allows the corporate party to transfer the perceived quality of the endorser to the perceived one of the party, which can improve their perceived brand image, therefore:

P1: The greater overall political celebrity endorsement credibility perceived by the voter-customer, the more positive the party perceived brand image.

### Brand credibility

The party brand credibility can be defined as the believability of the party position information as part of its brand. This implies consistently delivering what is promised (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Erdem, Swait, & Jordan, 2002). Political parties may use various marketing mix to send more signals about the quality of their political product, these signals can be credible or incredible based on the market condition. Therefore the party brand credibility reflects all the individual marketing mixes have been used by the party to market its political products (Erdem, Swait, & Jordan, 2002). Since politician celebrity endorsement is commonly used as a promotional tool by political parties, the signals derived from such endorsement can affect the party brand credibility. Spry et. al (2011) stated

that, the credibility of endorser has a significant impact on the credibility of the brand. Therefore using credible endorser should enhance the political party brand credibility. The brand investment is an indicator of brand credibility, because parties that make large brand investment are mostly the ones that deliver their promised political product. Therefore:

P2: The credibility of a politician celebrity endorser has a positive impact on credibility of the endorsed political party brand.

#### **The party brand image**

The political party is an intangible complex product that is difficult for voter-customer to unpack. As a result the voter-customers have to judge the overall party image. Due to the inability to unpack the political product, most of the voter-customers make their decision about the political product bundle on a cognitive basis. In the political products market, voter-customers have abnormal homogeneous perception of the political parties' characteristics (Holbrook, 1995).

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, 2008). As Keller (2002, P. 151) stated, "branding principles have been applied in virtually every setting where consumer choice of some kind is involved, e.g. with physical goods, services, retail stores, people, organizations, places or ideas".

Brand image can play a significant role in directing voter-customers preferences, choices, and enables them to differentiate between competing offers (Aaker D. , 1991; Tybout & Sternthal, 2001; Kapferer, 2004; French & Smith, 2008). The brand of both politicians and parties have been studied and differentiated (Kavanagh, 1995; Kotler & Kotler, 1999; Harris & Lock, 2001; Smith, 2001; White & de Chernatony, 2002; Schneider H. , 2004; Needham, 2005; Needham, 2006; Reeves, de Chernatony, & Carrigan, 2006; Scammell, 2007; 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 (Kirchheimer, 1966; 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 (Downs, 1957; 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. Therefore we propose:

P3: The greater the party brand image associations perceived by the voter-customer, the more positive the politician brand equity.

Parties influence the customer perception through their unique attributes and distinctiveness (Albert & Whetten, 1985). The degree to which the party members identify themselves with the party is influenced by the mental picture of the party identity (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). Based on the social identity theory and self-categorization theory, people realize their social categories from its multitude, which provides them with the sense of belonging based on their self-definitions (Tajfel , 1988). Customers perceive the party characteristics in term of self-concept, taking

into consideration the task of the party to enhance their self-esteem (Scott & Lane, 2000). Voter-customer-party identification refers to the psychological link of voter-customers to a party. This identification happens when voter-customers perceive the match between themselves and a particular party. Previous research on organization identification showed party perceived image influences the way the voter-customers perceive the identity of the party and this perception has a positive influence on the voter-customer-party identification (Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004; Maignan & Ferrell, 2004; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). The party active practices, in terms of economic growth or foreign affair policies reflect a responsive image of the party to the voter-customers who are aware about these issues. Therefore these voter-customers display higher levels of identification. As a result we propose:

P4: The greater the party brand image perceived by the voter-consumer, the greater the voter-customers-party identification.

#### **The brand equity of the presidential candidate**

The term brand equity had been studied in many researches and there had been many perspectives in viewing what does the term means (Farquhar, 1989). The brand equity of a politician can be defined as the value of the brand name which is added to a politician. The value in this case can influence other partisan aspects. More fundamentally, brand equity is generated from all activities required to market the party presidential candidate brand. Voter-customers memory is the underlying basis of party presidential candidate brand equity. The memory structure and the process of memory have been studied under the literature of cognitive psychology. The conceptualizations of memory structure which involve associative models represent the most of widely accepted work in this field. Brand equity has been described by many authors in terms of brand knowledge. Keller (1993) defines it as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to marketing of brand" (Keller, 1998, p. 45). The condition in which voter-customers are familiar with the presidential candidate brand is where they are able to recall some favourable, strong, and unique brand associations which represent the brand equity. Brand equity was conceptualized by Keller (1993) using associative memory model, the model focused on brand knowledge which is about two components, brand awareness and brand knowledge. Based on this model, the marketing manager's first task is to create and enhance the awareness of voter-customer about their party presidential candidate brand. Then build on this foundation and craft a salient image composed of a group of positive associations about the presidential candidate brand.

The political party brand credibility improves the political party presidential candidate brand equity (Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011). Based on the signalling theory, the political party brand equity can be built by the party brand credibility. The brand credibility of political parties can result in low political information gathering cost, lower perceived risk, and higher perceived political product quality offered by the party. These outcomes through their enhancement of the perceived quality of the party presidential candidate will transfer the objective quality to perceived subjective quality (Erdem, Swait, & Jordan, 2002; Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011). Therefore, the brand credibility of the party leads to a higher expected performance by its presidential candidate. This will result in more perceived added value to the political product from the voter-customer perspective. The brand credibility of the party is very crucial, without it, the most credible political endorser will

not be effective in enhancing the brand equity of the presidential candidate, therefore:

P5: The credibility of a political party brand has a positive impact on the brand equity of the presidential candidate of the endorsed party brand.

Based on the associative network memory model, the endorsement of political celebrity is a trigger of brand recall and recognition, because it creates a brand node by establishing additional node to the voter customer memory (Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011). When the credibility of the political celebrity is strong, voter-customers will have deeply rooted memory about the endorsed political party brand. For example, former Democratic presidential candidate Sen.

Chris Dodd who promoted the Family and Medical Leave Act is perceived to be highly trustworthy (Sperling, 2008). Therefore, when Chris Dodd endorsed Sen. Barack Obama for the presidency in 2008, The Democrats voter-customers perception of the brand credibility of Sen. Barak Obama are likely to be positively affected at that time (Candy, Alexander, & Mark, 2008). Marketers control associated memory about their brands by managing their brand equity (Keller, 1993; Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011). Researchers claimed that strengthening brand equity can be a result of leveraging secondary association like the endorser entity (Keller, 2005; Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011). For instance, endorsement by the former Democratic vice-presidential nominee, Sen. Joe Lieberman Ricky, who is trusted by Democrats voter-customer, may help the Republican "Sen. John McCain" brand by communicating associations such as "high performing" and "reliable" (William, 2007). The exposure of voter-customers to the endorsement provokes them to make a cognitive match between the association of the political celebrity and the brand being endorsed. Such a match may enhance their positive judgement about the perceived brand quality of the party presidential candidate.

Political celebrities act as external stimulus to provide more information about the political product attributes and quality. This information probably allows voter-customers to eradicate their uncertainty with regard to the political product future performance. Therefore strong endorser credibility has a positive influence on the brand equity of the endorsed brand, as a result we propose:

P6: The credibility of a politician celebrity endorser has a positive impact on the brand equity of the presidential candidate.

P7: Brand credibility mediates the relationship between endorser credibility and the brand equity of the presidential candidate.

The brand equity of the presidential candidate differs from the voter-customer loyalty. The brand equity of the party presidential candidate is the differential effect that the brand knowledge of the party presidential candidate has on voter-customer response to the marketing of that party presidential candidate brand (Keller, 1998).

The degree to which voter-customers prefer a party brand is directly related to the brand equity of the presidential candidate of the presidential candidate. Keller (1998) stated that the stronger brand equity the more the customers are to be loyal to that brand. Furthermore, Aaker (1991) argued the nature of brand loyalty can be considered both a dimension and outcome of brand equity. Therefore:

P8: The more positive the brand equity of the presidential candidate, the more likely voter-customers are to be loyal to that candidate.

### **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; McCracken G. , 1986). 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 (Fournier, 1998) 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 (Berscheid & Walster, 1969; Byrne, 1971), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985) are 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 attract 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).

The studies on self-identity (Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000), social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1985), organizational identification (Pratt, 1998), brand identification (Curlo & Chamblee, 1998), and corporate identity (Simoões, Dibb, & Fisk, 2005) portays that the identification concept is well covered by organizational researchers (Smidts, Pruyn, & Riel, 2001; Pratt, 1998). Researchers have studied the process in which Individuals identify themselves with an organization (Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004). The definition of party identification is extracted from the "organizational identification" proposed by Dutton et al. (1994) which is perceptual link between the identification of the party and voter-customer self. In this study, the term identification has been moved from the employees prospective to the voter-customers. Considering this movement, voter-customers are key stakeholders who play a significant role in establishing the party reputation and identification.

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; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). 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. Therefore:

P9: The greater the voter-customer-party identification, the more likely voter-customers are to be loyal to that party presidential candidate.

#### Discussion and implications

The model includes flow of effects from the celebrity endorsement credibility to voter-customer loyalty. This could provide marketers with better understanding of the possibilities of the party marketing investments. The framework shows that the enhancement of both brand equity and committed meaningful relationship with the party presidential candidate can be made with their voter-customers through using credible endorsers and the party brand image enhancements investments. Furthermore the customer committed relationship with the party is a result of sharing a set of values (identity attractiveness) that the voter-customer believes can satisfy basic self-definitional needs (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

Based on the framework of this study, poor monitoring of the brand equity of the presidential candidate may damage his/her reputation and create misunderstandings and wrong perceptions about the party presidential candidate. In contrast, the proper focus on various determinants (endorser credibility, the party brand credibility, and the party brand image) may help in maintaining long-term meaningful relations with voter-customers, contributing to building strong brand equity of the party presidential candidate, and retaining voters for next campaigns. Thus, pursuing such type of study at democratic countries could provide a roadmap for parties to proceed further to strengthen their image and credibility from various stakeholders' perspectives.

The present study indicates various investments in marketing programs that enhance the party brand image, the party brand credibility, the brand equity of the presidential candidate, and the use of credible endorsers are important strategic tasks to improve voter-customers loyalty. In order to market the party presidential candidate, marketers have to expand the marketing mix. Identities of both the party and its presidential candidate and their reputations can be included to the conventional marketing mix in order to come with proper marketing programs to enhance the voter-customers loyal behaviour toward the party and its presidential candidate.

Partisan attributes are more enduring and resistant to competitive claims than politician attributes (Aaker, 2004). Copying politician attributes is easier for competitors than copying partisan attributes. Marketers have to consider their party identity when they target their markets. Therefore, when campaigners target their voter-customers with a promotional mix they have to be sure that the attributes of identity attractiveness, especially the one valued by their customers, is delivered. This may enhance the party and the presidential candidate identity and could enable the party to build a better brand knowledge about its presidential candidate. Which probably result in acquiring larger number of loyal customers'.

#### Future research

Overall, this paper has contributed several key new insights into political marketing. It has conceptualized a framework of relationships that links the brand equity of the party presidential candidate in relation to the party brand perceived image and endorser credibility to voter customer loyalty. It employed the social identity theory by encompassing the voter-customer-party identification. This may result a better understanding of voter-customer behaviours, especially the process in which they build their identification and loyal behaviour.

However, this research is just a conceptual starting point and it can't provide many claims. This makes it essential for other researchers to test various research propositions made in this paper. The proposed model showed three internal outcomes linked to the political endorsement credibility. Those outcomes are the party brand image, the brand equity of the presidential candidate, and the party brand credibility. It also demonstrates that there is a framework of relationships among these variables. Testing the effects of these outcomes, the framework of relationships, and the determination of whether politician's brand equity competes with or enhances the corporate political party brand image has to be resolved in future researches using empirical studies.

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