Driving political issues with political brand storytelling on social media: an online brand persona perspective

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Abstract

Numerous South African political parties have a social media presence to create more awareness around the political issues which they stand for, and thus to attract more voters. Nowadays political parties act as political brands and adopt brand strategies to gain a competitive advantage over opposition parties. This article proposes adopting a social identity theory as a novel approach to how political brands could drive political issues on social media. It is further suggested that due to the complexity of the South African political scene, more attention could be paid to how political brands could leverage political brand stories in conjunction with an online political brand persona on social media to position themselves in a chaotic online political space. To test this, semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with communication professionals in South African public relations agencies who were responsible for creating content for political parties' Facebook and Twitter accounts. Four themes that became evident in the data collectively indicate that political brands will successfully drive political issues on social media only when they are able to connect emotionally with the political consumer. In this regard, an online political brand persona may be critical in not only eliciting an emotional reaction from political consumers but also establishing a long-term connection with them based on how credible the political brand is in terms of what they care about and their ability to solve issues.

Keywords

INTRODUCTION

"Political branding builds on the principal assertion that political parties, candidates, and causes can be managed as products…and political marketing scholars increasingly agree that these political entities can be managed and studied as brands" (Milewicz & Milewicz, 2015: 234). Political parties started working more professionally and turned to be more commercially oriented with campaigns based on market research that were created by employees who specialised in advertising and journalism. Business and marketing communication concepts were brought into the political sphere and parties and politicians adjusted to become more market-oriented. The political environment in the South African context is complex because South Africa has one of the youngest democratic systems in the world. The fast-moving pace of the development of technology in the last 25 years means that many voters have access to technology, which makes the online space an important communication environment for political parties.

There is an increasing need for political parties to represent issues that set the party apart from opposition parties; in doing so, politicians and political parties have become like brands (Terblanche, 2011). For this reason, they embrace a brand strategy as a means of establishing their principles and

differentiating themselves from rival parties. Therefore, acting as a political brand is increasingly recognised as the primary element driving election performance (Narteh, Mensah & Nyanzu, 2017: 72). Since political parties are required to represent political issues that distinguish them from opposing parties, it can be argued that both politicians and political parties have developed into brands in the sense that they present a public idea of the political brand (Terblanche, 2011). For this reason, the authors refer to the concept of political brand in this paper.

Drawing from the perspective of Le Roux and Du Plessis (2014), the view that a brand is a multidisciplinary concept is supported in this study. Oh, Keller, Neslin, Reibstein and Lehmann (2020: 152) point out that the concept of brand can be defined from an information era perspective, as "brands served as distinguishing symbols on goods" (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2002: 55). From an attribute era viewpoint brand focuses on "distinctive name and/or symbol" (Aaker 1996). And from a brand equity era as "brand equity as the added revenue a branded product received relative to an unbranded product" (Ailawadi, Lehmann & Nelsin, 2003: 4). However, for this article brand is defined as "the sum of all feelings, thoughts, images, history, opportunities and market rumours that manifests itself in relation to a particular sector, group, company, product, service, idea or persona; the sum of all the details communicated by an entity and the associations that can be made with it" (Green, 2009: 32), because it encapsulates all the eras. Also, because the political environment is different from the commercial sector, the political brand is addressed from the perspective of providing a service to the political consumer (Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy, 2007). Branding political parties offers several advantages. For example, branding can drive a political party's strategy (Kornberger, 2010); offer an opportunity to set the party apart from its opposition (Pich & Newman, 2020); build bridges from the past to the future (Campbell & Lee, 2016); can be seen as an opportunity to educate and inform the political consumer about political issues and party policies (Heersink, 2021).Therefore, Lees-Marshment's argument (2014) that the political consumer must be seen as a voter who has new information expectations of political brands and thus requires a more personalised kind of political activity is adopted. In this regard, political brands, like all brands, must establish real relationships with political consumers when providing information about political issues, while at the same time adhering to their core brand values that are relevant to the South African political environment (Lees-Marshment, 2019).

This article adds a novel idea and follows the rationale that an online political brand persona can play a significant role in strategically framing political issues for the political consumer. While brand personas and political brands are well documented in the marketing literature, there is still a dearth of research on how a political brand can use an online brand persona in the context of political stories on social media, which this article will expand on.

Through a social identity theory lens (Turner &Tajfel, 1986), the authors argue that for the purposes of better differentiation, a political brand must build a strong online brand persona with which to tell political brand stories on social media to better connect with the South African political consumer.

To achieve this aim, the study addressed the following research question:

How can an online political brand persona be used on social media to drive political issues through political brand stories on social media?

To address the research question, semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with communication professionals in South African public relations (PR) agencies, who were responsible for creating content for South African political parties' social media platforms.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: To interrogate the prevailing literature, the paper focuses on the political brand, political issue ownership, political brand strategy, social media-based brand storytelling, online political brand persona and social identity theory. This discussion is followed by the methodology, findings, and conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The key concepts pertaining to this article are now briefly explained to provide some clarity on the authors' theoretical position.

Political brand

Many political parties now act as a political brand to enhance their election performance. However, the complexity of the political environment makes building a legitimate brand identity for political purposes somewhat challenging. In addition, establishing an identity for the political party and not the political party leader that political consumers can relate to is still problematic for many political brands (Jain, Chawla, Ganesh & Pich, 2018). To add to this complexity, a political party brand is also often viewed through either a corporate or service brand lens (Jain, Pich, Ganesh & Armannsdottir, 2017; Mensah, 2016; Pich & Armannsdottir, 2022). For this study, a political brand is viewed from the perspective of a service brand in that human performance rather than product performance is the focus of attention. Therefore, a political brand is defined as follows: "A political brand comprises three components: firstly, the policy as the service offering; secondly, the politician as the tangible service offering and; thirdly, the party as the brand offering." (Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy, 2007: 7):

Since the political environment is distinct from the commercial world, it can be argued that the political brand provides a service to the political consumer. The political offering, which is depicted through political issues, is an integral aspect of the political brand that shapes party politicians' behaviour and ultimately affects how political consumers perceive the party's view on political issues (Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy, 2007). It is against this background that the concept of political issue ownership is introduced below.

Political issue ownership

Petrocik's seminal work (1996) introduced the concept of political issue ownership and postulates that issue ownership occurs any time political consumers perceive a specific political party as being better and more competent to address a particular problem than their opponents. Consequently, some political scientists have argued that political parties may gain a competitive advantage by claiming issue ownership on behalf of their voters (Stubager 2018; Walgrave, Van Camp, Lefevere & Tresch, 2015). Political issue ownership has two dimensions, namely associative ownership whereby political consumers believe that a particular political party cares more about an issue than the others (Stubager, 2018), and competence ownership, which concerns the perception that a particular political party is best at handling an issue (Seeberg, 2022; Stubager, 2018).

The authors argue that an online brand persona that is anchored in social media-based political brand storytelling can advance both dimensions of political issue ownership, depending on the political brand strategy. In other words, political issue ownership is fluid in that political parties are continually involved in the process of either claiming or disclaiming ownership of political issues (Van Camp, 2018).

Political brand strategy

There are still different perspectives in the literature about what a political brand strategy entails, such as the various ways to focus on political branding techniques. However, collectively a political brand strategy is described as the different communication methods, styles, rhetoric and tactics used by a political party in the branding of that political party (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Mensah, 2016; Pich & Dean, 2015). A political brand strategy is used to increase public participation in political issues and party politicians (Narteh, Mensah & Nyanzu, 2017) by adopting the most suitable brand communication tactics that are available in different political contexts (Cosgrove, 2012). For this article, social media-based political brand storytelling is proposed as another brand communication tactic for a political brand strategy to enhance the South African political consumer's involvement in political issues.

Social media-based political brand storytelling

Stories have taught us how to engage with people in several ways, in addition to assisting us in making sense of our everyday lives and reality (Engelbrecht & Ngcongo, 2018). In the political context, storytelling has played an important role not just in political campaigns, but also in the formation of a political brand's identity and image (Leslie, 2015). After reviewing the extant literature on storytelling in the political field, it

is clear that this tactic has been effective in using political violence to explain actions (Fine, 2000), creating political identities as an ongoing process (Kane, 2000), achieving successful political policy changes (Stewart, 2012), bridging the gap between different ideologies (Braunstein 2012) and participating in thoughtful discourse with other members of society (Maiangwa & Byrne, 2015; Polletta, 2015). However, there is a dearth of research on the use of storytelling as a brand communication tactic to position or distinguish political brands with political issues from those of opposition parties on social media. The following working definition is proposed:

"Social media-based political brand storytelling comprises political stories, which are created around a political issue that political parties tell on social media to pull political consumers towards their brand", (van Wyk, 2021).

The concept of social media-based political brand storytelling is thus introduced as a distinct brand communication tactic with which to build a political brand persona on social media to drive political issues. This means that from a political party point of view, the political brand persona has become a strategic tool for a political party to differentiate themselves from opposition parties. It is therefore important to examine the concept of online political brand persona.

Online political brand persona

A brand persona is well documented in the marketing communication literature but can also be extended to the context of a political brand. In this regard, political brand stories are carefully planned with a unique online political brand persona, which is then communicated via a distinct social media brand voice. "The character of the brand that is transmitted via online platforms" is how an online brand persona can be defined (Engelbrecht & Ngcongo, 2018: 207). The potential of a political brand to establish a relationship with political consumers is critical in the development of a unique online political persona to represent the political offering (Jain et al., 2018). As soon as a relationship between the political brand and the political consumer has been established, the political brand will be able to maintain their support within the electorate (Needham & Smith, 2015; Pich & Dean, 2015). Therefore, properly developing and integrating brand personas into a political strategy may result in an increase in the likeability of a political brand personality (Armannsdottir, Carnell & Pich, 2020; Jain et al., 2018).

However, the establishment of a brand voice, a key component, is required for political brands to effectively depict an online brand persona on social media. Brand voice, as a component of brand persona, according to Gilbert (2017), is a strategy that may be used to establish a political brand's uniqueness and individuality. The brand voice on social media comprises the following components (Schwab, 2011):

- Character/persona: This is concerned with the personality of the political brand and is essential to communicate with the political consumer.
- Tone: The tone of the brand is concerned with the trustworthiness of the brand which sets the ambiance for the brand.
- Language: Language is the foundation of all online communications.
- Culture: The political brand's word choices may assist in framing problems and engaging with political consumers, which can benefit the brand.
- Purpose: Explains why the brand has an internet and social media presence and the reasons for this presence.

As the South African political field migrates more towards the digital space, there is pressure from political parties to use the brand voice to depict an online brand persona effectively for the political consumer. Engelbrecht and Ngcongo (2018) affirm that the online brand persona creates an emotional connection between the political consumer and the political party.

Social identity theory

Arguments for this study are anchored in Turner and Tajfel's social identity theory (1986), because the concept of identity is the central theme in the theory. Specifically, Turner and Tajfel indicate that organisations that a person belongs to and identifies with contribute to a person's self-concept in part

because of their shared experiences. As a result, the theoretical foundation of this work is based on the concept of intergroup ties, such as people's political membership and the role of the online political brand persona to connect with the political consumer. This intergroup tie can also be referred to as the "us" versus "them" mentality or the in-group and the out-group respectively (Stets & Burke, 2000). Tajfel's (1975: 3) seminal work explains that there are three processes that create the in-group/out-group. These are *social categorisation, social identity, and social comparison*.

Creating a successful political brand which can translate effectively through an online political brand strategy, and using social media-based political brand storytelling to depict a positive online political brand persona, will assist political parties to attract political consumers into their support group through social category, social identity and social comparison processes.

METHODOLOGY

The interpretivist worldview guided the study in terms of the philosophical rationale, including ontological, epistemological, methodological and axiological assumptions for semi-structured interviews with expert practitioners in PR agencies. It was important to explore expert participants' thoughts, feelings and beliefs about the topic (Aurini, Heath & Howells, 2016). Not only did these interviews allow first-hand explanations of practitioners' experiences on the topic (Ahlin, 2019), but also provided more insight into their strategic approaches to social media-based brand storytelling using an online political persona.

The interpretivist research paradigm guided the study in several ways. Firstly, that the topic could have multiple interpretations rather than one single truth (Babbie & Mouton, 2018; Swart, 2020). Secondly, we acknowledged that the findings could not be generalised beyond the context in which the study was conducted (Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). Thirdly, the interpretivist approach favoured a qualitative research approach to data collection and analysis as a methodological assumption (Maree & van der Westhuizen, 2014). Lastly, axiology acknowledged the influence of the researchers' own beliefs and background knowledge and thus the importance of existing values (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). For this study the potential influence of the researchers' personal views and beliefs was firstly addressed by obtaining ethical clearance approval and secondly through a rigorous process regarding the trustworthiness of the findings.

The qualitative research approach was thus deemed the most appropriate to address the study's research question: How an online political brand persona can be used on social media to drive political issues through political brand stories on social media.

Sampling method and unit of analysis

To select the PR agencies for the semi-structured expert interviews, a purposive sampling method was adopted, which refers to "sampling done with a specific purpose in mind" (Maree & Pietersen, 2014: 178). The five PR agencies were therefore selected based on a set list of criteria, namely:

- The PR agency had to be responsible for the social media of a South African political party.
- The PR agency had to have been involved in the political communication field for at least the last 10 years.
- The participant had to have worked within the political communication field for at least the last five years.
- The participant had to be involved in the creation of the social media branding strategy for the political party.
- The participant had to be responsible for creating the political party's social media stories.

The selection criteria specifically aimed at selecting participants who were experts in social media within the South African political field and who were able to provide the required insight to answer the study's research question.

Furthermore, the unit of analysis refers to the "what" of a scientific study (Babbie & Mouton, 2018), namely the key individuals in the selected PR agencies responsible for creating political brand stories for South African political brands on social media. The number of PR agencies was guided by the principles

of data saturation in that no new information became available after five interviews (Guest, Namey & Chen, 2020).

Data collection

An interview guide steered the interviews via the Zoom video conferencing platform. The interviews were scheduled at a convenient date and time with each PR agency's representative. All interviews were recorded with audio after gaining permission and informed consent from the participants. Interviews lasted for about 45 to 60 minutes each.

Data analysis and trustworthiness

Data were analysed by means of reflexive thematic analysis as put forward by Braun and Clarke (2006). This allowed for a flexible interpretative approach and a robust analysis while searching for recurring themes in the dataset. The transcriptions of the interviews were analysed using the ATLAS.ti software program, which enables the analysis of qualitative data in a systematic and transparent manner (Friese, 2019). For the most part, this software was used to import transcriptions, store and organise data, search and retrieve text segments, simulate in-depth interaction with the data and construct a link between the different datasets. Prior to conducting the interviews, a pre-test reduced the inclusion of confusing or imprecise questions, as well as leading questions, while establishing the estimated time it would take to complete the interviews (Babbie & Mouton, 2018). While the findings of this study were not intended to be generalisable outside the sample, to make the study more transferable, the entire process followed was meticulously documented in terms of the setting, participant selection and characteristics, data collection and analytical procedure (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

The interviews allowed for rich detail and new insights into the topic at hand, as discussed next.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After the thematic analysis, the following four themes became evident:

Theme 1: Political brand storytelling as a strategy to drive political issues

Theme 2: Resonance to engage the political consumer

Theme 3: Establishing a connection with the political customer with a political brand persona

Theme 4: The political brand voice as the core of the online brand persona

This section will present the findings and discuss how the findings answered the study's research question, namely how an online political brand persona can be used on social media to drive political issues through political brand stories on social media.

Theme 1: Political brand storytelling as a strategy to drive political issues

This theme reflects all discussions pertaining to the numerous ways in which political brand storytelling can be used as a political brand strategy to drive political issues.

The findings revealed that political brand storytelling may be used as a visual narrative on social media, it can emotionally connect political consumers and it can be used as a tool for framing political problems. All the agencies had a full-time content team, as noted by participant E:

> "[W]e have an internal content team who looks at the various hooks the party can talk about, and what are key messages that they can talk about. We develop our content around it."

Several points were raised during the discussions about the development of political stories on social media. The first challenge was deciding what kind of story to tell and how to convey it. A variety of points of view were expressed on this topic, but three participants agreed that, based on where a brand stands on the problem, the brand may choose from which viewpoint to convey the political brand's story.

However, two other participants felt that it was difficult to tell a political story because:

> Participant A: "[s]ocial media gives us an opportunity to listen to the various stories, but it is critical to understand your audience" and

> Participant C: "[t]here is not only one true story".

It is worth noting that because there is more than one story to tell, the issue ownership will determine the story a political brand will tell. Political parties could therefore use storytelling to frame political problems for political consumers, as pointed out by participant D:

> "The research was always politically motivated, so of course they wanted to know how to frame it [the issue] for them."

The second issue that emerged from the discussion was how, through storytelling, political parties contextualised political issues. Participant C participant pointed out:

> "We need to find a way to make these issues relevant for them."

However, participant B said:

> "You need to make the content unique."

This encapsulates the theoretical aspect of social categorisation of the in-group/out-group by using storytelling to resonate with the political consumer to make them feel part of the group.

There was also consensus among the participants that issue ownership was key, as participant A mentioned:

> "Issue ownership is important, but it is difficult to control."

It emerged from the discussions that ownership was crucial, but that regulating ownership was a difficult task to implement. Lastly, it became evident that issue ownership continually developed and that parties may win or lose ownership. In addition, how a party communicated about an issue could have an impact on issue ownership. An interesting finding was that although issue ownership was believed to be essential, in the South African context issue ownership was found to be driven by emotions, participant B:

> "The driver of SA political decisions is emotional. It is based on history and heritage. …. You have to win the emotional battle before you win the rational one".

This response from the participant emphasised that the political brand's history and heritage helped to reduce uncertainty among the majority of political consumers in South Africa.

Theme 2: Resonance to engage the political consumer

This theme incorporates all of the arguments around the importance of resonance when it comes to political brand storytelling on social media platforms to engage the political consumer. Participants in the interviews had a strong belief that the brand story needs to connect with political consumers; this emerged often in the interviews.

Participant A pointed out:

> "The stories you tell need to resonate with the audience, but still be true to the brand … My advice to my client is no matter what type of story you are trying to tell, try to find a way to resonate with your follower … Every time there is a story to be told, we need to make sure

that the story is accessible and that it resonates with the people."

All participants believed in order for brand stories to connect with political customers, the stories had to be true to the political brand. This encapsulates the theoretical element of social identification. This element amplifies that people adopt the identity of the group that they belong to, and they will act accordingly; for example, participant D said that:

"[I]n leading up to the 2016 elections, we used Mmusi a lot, it was a credible story. He was born in Soweto, a black South African, voted for the ANC, you know, has married a white lady, believes in diversity. People could relate to this story."

Thus for a political brand story to be effective, it must be believable in order for it to connect with political consumers. Given South Africa's political background, the participants believed it was critical to consider the emotional connection consumers have with the brand; an example given by participant B:

"We wanted to orientate ourselves around his idea of what do you need to get life working. Simple stuff. So, every South African can vote for that."

In addition, it became apparent that for agencies to create engagement between the political brand and the political consumer, they needed to create content that leads to an emotional response from the consumer, as participant D pointed out:

"So our job was to tell their [the political brand] stories, to write the script in a way that it is compelling ... [T]he stories have to be real and it had to make that emotional connection."

It became evident that the PR agencies saw social media as a tool that allows the political brand to engage with the political consumer, to create an experience for the political consumer and to create that emotional response from the political consumer. The following comments were made by participants:

"[Y]our chosen content needs to stand out to drive engagement."

"[I]t was important to present them [the brand] as diverse."

"[W]hen somebody speaks to you like that, you can see where the power of authenticity and conviction come from – people will share content like that."

Collectively, the findings revealed that there is a perceived link between engagement success and the emotional connection formed by the political consumer with the political brand, which is supported by the theoretical foundation of the study the "us" and "them" mentality.

Theme 3: Establishing a connection with the political customer with a political brand persona

Details on how the PR agencies opted to create an online political brand persona by using social media brand storytelling to connect with the political consumer can be found in this theme. An online brand persona is especially important to provide human qualities to a political brand (Engelbrecht & Ngcongo 2018):

"Of course, it is important to be very clear about what is the brand, and what the brand is about, and we tried to shift that to a brand that was much more about destination. Our destination, what are we asking people to follow us to?"

The above statement made by participant E amplifies the importance of the political brand persona as an interlink between the political party's brand image in how the political consumer experiences the political party brand image through the brand persona.

The topic of the brand persona connecting with political consumers (Jain et al 2018) emerged several times. Participant B commented:

> "[T]he brand persona plays an important role in connecting the brand with the political consumer … [T]he brand persona has a human element in it, we would like to connect with people on social media not a logo … [T]he party's brand persona is vital to ensure that connection."

The discussions also revealed the application of the brand persona as a differentiator in order to distinguish the political brand from other brands. In this regard participant C mentioned:

> "The brand persona plays an important role in differentiating the brand."

It also became evident that it was important for political parties to continuously evaluate their current brand persona and how it is perceived by political consumers. Participant A stated:

> "[T]here is a huge amount of research and polling that goes into South African politics......."

This response demonstrated that assessment is a critical component of ensuring that the political brand persona and the political customers are consistent with one another. When it comes to brand strategy, political parties must polish their positions to address any discrepancies.

Theme 4: The political brand voice as the core of the online brand persona

This theme incorporates all aspects of a political brand voice, including tone, language and the purpose of the social media post as the core of the online brand persona (Schwab, 2011).

In terms of brand voice, participants were asked if they considered tone, language and purpose while developing social media material. According to participant E, the tone established the environment in which the online brand persona will operate:

> "On social media, what becomes really, really important is your tone and your voice."

With the focus on brand language, there was consensus among the participants that language plays an important role in framing the political issues for political consumers. Participant C commented:

> "We look at the party's views on issues and we make sure that when we create content that the language we use comes across as authentic."

The perception was that language would be influenced by the party's position on a political issue:

> "[T]he language choices should reflect the brand persona which the political brand has adopted."

Interestingly, participant D emphasised the importance of considering the language used to frame a political issue:

> "I think at the end of the day, you do not think about these elements [tone, language, and purpose] in isolation. When you create content on behalf of the political brand, you become

the brand and therefore word choices become crucial in ensuring that the messages come across credible."

What was evident in the above data was that brand voice, as a component of the brand persona, can be related to the need for the political party to create an online brand persona with which its political consumers can engage, share, and relate to.

The last part of the discussions focused on the "why" of a social media post. There was widespread acceptance that social media posts might be made to accommodate several objectives, including journalistic, conversational, or commercial. According to participant A:

"It is not just about broadcasting messages, it is about knowing what you would like to achieve with the post … [W]hen you craft content for social media, it is about creating some sort of engagement – a like, a comment, a share."

Two participants noted that material was clearly defined in terms of which social media posts were intended for social media user participation and which for social media promotion of political brands:

"….. we've created a promotional video that could be used across the social media platforms, and yes, we wanted the public to have conversations around the future of South Africa."

As is evident, the ideas in this theme provide more insight into the significance of the political brand voice and its critical role in developing an authentic online political brand persona on social media (Gilbert 2017; Schwab 2011).

Discussion

The study contributes to our understanding of the important role that an online brand persona can play in the complex South African political environment, as well as how it can be used as part of political brand stories. Firstly, the findings showed that when a political brand uses an online brand persona, it will be able to better connect with the political consumer who can associate with the political party because of some perceived human qualities to which they can relate. Thus, the study puts forward the idea that political brands can create more meaningful messages around a political issue if the messages were centered around the online brand persona. This finding is supported by the social identity theory's category of *social identity*, which refers to the identity the party creates in its posts so that the political consumer can identify with the party. Secondly, the political brand will also be able to better distinguish itself in the competitive South African political environment by eliciting an emotional response from the political consumer (Engelbrecht & Ngcongo, 2018). Thirdly, by also having a distinct political voice, the online brand persona becomes not only more authentic, but also more relatable (Gilbert, 2017). Lastly, an online brand persona can be used in political brand stories on social media that depict stories that are true to the political brand, believable and can help the political brand to build a lasting relationship with the political consumer (Jain et al., 2018). These findings are supported by the social identity theory, which helps to create the in/out group.

It became evident that South African political brands will be able to drive political issues on social media successfully only when they are able to connect emotionally with the political consumer. This is because of the complexity of the South African political field where a political brand's history and heritage are also deemed important when it comes to ensuring election victory. In this regard, an online political brand persona can play an important role in not only eliciting an emotional response from political consumers, but also building a long-term relationship with them, anchored in how believable the political brand is in terms of what they care about and how well they can handle problems (Needham & Smith, 2015; Pich & Dean, 2015; Stubager, 2018). Thus, the study highlighted the uniqueness of the political

sector in terms of brand storytelling, namely, that the political party needs to take into consideration the issue of ownership when choosing what type of social media-based political brand story to tell.

The findings have some theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the findings provide a novel idea of how South African political brands can drive political issues by using a unique, relatable online brand persona as part of political brand stories on social media to create a sense of belonging to the in-group, which forms the basis of the social identity theory. As a result, the theoretical foundation of this work was based on the concept of intergroup ties, such as people's political membership and the role of the online political brand persona to connect with the political consumer. In addition, the findings also add to the research when it comes to social media-based political brand stories in the South African political environment and could stimulate some further academic debate. Practically, the findings can serve as a heuristic for political brands that could consider connecting not only rationally, but also emotionally with the South African political consumer.

CONCLUSION

Despite its exploratory nature, this study offers valuable insight into how political brands can leverage their presence on social media when adopting an online brand persona as part of their political brand stories. A key strength of this study was the insight gained from experts in PR agencies based on their first-hand experiences when creating social media content for political brands. For example, a political brand may develop more resonating social media messages around a political issue if the communications are centred on an online brand persona. Political consumers who will read these stories on social media must also be taken into consideration with regard to whether the brand stories would connect with them, elicit an emotional reaction and be believable.

Limitations of this study are firstly that the findings can only be generalised to the sample, and secondly that the political consumers' perspectives were not included. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study will be of interest to both political communication scholars and political brands. However, more research is needed to clarify why and how an online political brand persona resonates and connects with the political consumer.

Further studies should therefore also gather the viewpoints of the political consumer. Because of the possible influence on the online political brand persona and the perceptions of the political consumer, it is also necessary to investigate the impact of propaganda in more depth when it comes to driving political issues on social media.

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