

What is a political brand?: Justin Trudeau and the theory of political branding

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Within Canada, the public image of former Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau (1919-2000) has stood above his peers. The Trudeau name has become a mythical construct that is akin to Kennedy in the United States. Pierre Trudeau was an outlier, a special case of a politician transfixing the media and capturing the imagination of romantic idealists. The enduring public memory is that he had a rare combination of style and brains. He famously wore a rose in his lapel, drove a sports car, did a pirouette behind the Queen, was playful with journalists and canoed in the Canadian wilderness. Media coverage of young women fawning over him and of his dalliances with pop culture celebrities contributed to so-called Trudeaumania in the late 1960s. But he was also an intellectual who quoted Plato, a Quebecker who defended Canadian federalism in the face of Quebec separatism, an internationalist and a visionary whose policies have shaped modern Canada. Pierre Trudeau remains a media darling and is a Liberal icon. However, the party and its leaders have fallen on hard times, making partisans long for the Trudeau heyday when the Liberal Party of Canada's brand dominated the political marketplace. So in October 2012 when Trudeau's eldest son, Justin (1971-), announced his candidacy to become Liberal leader it was not surprising that journalists, pundits and even NDP leader Thomas Mulcair pontificated about "the Trudeau brand".

The word brand is now commonly used in political discourse and popular vernacular. In political science, it tends to be used as a surrogate for party labels, packaging, personalities and valence issues in a manner that does not suggest academic familiarity with the brand construct. A brand is a fuller concept than image. An image is the evoked impression of an entity formed from the recall of all communication impressions; a brand is an evoked image that resonates on an emotional level and which stimulates customer loyalty. By examining the Trudeau brand, we can test a number of marketing theories and use a topical Canadian case to broaden the conceptual differences. We can also assess the extent to which Justin Trudeau is "a bit of a product rebrand" (Delacourt 2013: 5).

This paper begins with a literature review exploring why image management matters in politics, what branding and brand extensions entail, and what political branding is. The case study reviews the public image of Pierre and Justin Trudeau; a future iteration will feature a frequency analysis of Justin's celebrity treatment in *Macleans*' magazine.¹ Marketing theory is applied to identify insights about the Trudeau brand specifically and political branding generally. This contributes to knowledge by connecting concepts from a variety of academic fields, including communications, marketing, political science, psychology and sociology. It melds the concepts of ascribed celebrity, brand line extension and political dynasty into the concept of political brand extension which is epitomized by the candidacy of Justin Trudeau.

¹ This paper is somewhat inhibited by an absence of data obtained through depth interviews with party insiders. Attempts to interview Justin Trudeau have been unsuccessful.

REVIEW

a) Why does image management matter in politics?

Political propaganda and image management have always been present in democracies. George Washington was not defiantly standing in the boat that was crossing the Delaware; Abraham Lincoln's portrait was doctored to elongate his neck; and a polio-stricken Franklin D. Roosevelt avoided being photographed in a wheelchair. So it should come as no surprise that today's political leaders seek to control how they are publicly viewed, whether this is Barack Obama choosing to smoke cigarettes in private, Vladimir Putin fishing while bare-chested or Stephen Harper cuddling kittens.

Projecting a desired public image requires information control. At a minimum, politicians must guard against 'gotcha' politics where a single blunder can damage their career. In his seminal study of public performances, Erving Goffman referred to this as "unmeant gestures" and "faux pas" that are observed during "inopportune intrusions" which lead to a "performance disruption" (1959: 208-209). The need to guard against performance disruption has increased with the growing possibility of inopportune intrusions. The press corps no longer has a monopoly on visuals, as it did with the biased selection of that infamous Canadian Press photo of PC Party leader Robert Stanfield fumbling a football during the 1974 election campaign. Politicians have to contend with the ability of crowds to instantly capture and mass circulate information. Political parties are complicit, given that they exploit the media's appetite for strange and sensational free content by encouraging their supporters to seek and distribute gotcha video about their opponents (Zelizer 2010). Sometimes a democratic service is rendered, such as grainy video revealing that Virginia Senator George Allen used a slur when referring to an opponent's staffer in 2006, and yet this contributes to the so-called spiral of cynicism that describes citizen disengagement (Capella and Jamieson 1997). But it is the risk of a trivial matter damaging a politician's image and derailing a political agenda that is troubling. Video of Howard Dean's peculiar roar during the 2004 Democratic Party nominations, of Kevin Rudd eating his earwax in the Australian legislature and of Stephen Harper allegedly pocketing a communion wafer are examples of pseudo-scandals that commanded considerable media attention.

Thus when image handlers attempt to control how their clients are publicly viewed this simultaneously is an insulator from external risks. Their methods are too extensive to discuss here, but include advertising and news management techniques such as media releases and email interviews; the use of spin to promote a point of view; and the permanent campaigning which leverages all available resources. In this environment, public appearances have become tightly scripted affairs, and political personnel are increasingly unwilling to allow the media to control camera angles, select which shots should be used, decide how the story should be packaged, and reuse those visuals at whim (Grabe and Bucy 2009: 5). Behind the scenes, opinion research plays an integral role as communications managers monitor the political environment, and it assists them with packaging leaders and policies.

The political class is obsessed with reputation management as a means to advance a political agenda and to win elections. They recognize that voters place considerable emphasis on a leader's attributes. Indeed, the more media that electors are exposed to the more likely they are to prioritize leadership considerations (Mendelsohn 1994). Given the prominence of visuals in voter recall (Grabe and Busy 2009), image makers are cognisant that electors often rely on heuristic cues, including impressions of a leader's personality traits. For instance, physical characteristics

become visual cues for voters to form impressions about a leader's skills and competence (Cherulnik, Turns and Wilderman 1990). But the electoral importance of leadership image can be overstated. In recent Canadian elections, leadership mattered most when there were notable variances in how electors rated the party leaders, and leadership did not explain the parties' electoral fortunes (Gidengil et al. 2012). This is because candidate traits are associated with issue positions; that is, a voter is more likely to support a leader with similar sociodemographic, ideological and/or partisan traits. Image makers are thus incentivized to use stunts, negative communication and dirty tricks to improve public sentiment towards their client compared with his or her opponents (Axford, Madgwick and Turner 1992). This propensity for negativity is a source of concern for students of democratic systems of government, including in Canada.

There is one phenomenon that enables politicians to easily achieve the publicity that they crave among floating and disengaged voters. Celebrity politics refers to the movement of famous people into politics, the treatment of politicians as celebrities and the public interactions between celebrities and politicians. Many categorizations of politician celebrities exist (Marsh, 't Hart and Tindall 2010) but there has been little study of the fame associated with political dynasties. Rookie candidates who are related to politicians have an existing media profile by virtue of their pedigree. Their family's followers may form an emotional and parasocial bond, especially if the candidate shares attributes with other famous family members. Their victory is often explained away as a result of familial relationships. While political celebrity may be a competitive advantage in reality voter behaviour encompasses many more considerations.

Rojek (2001: 17) differentiates between three types of celebrity. Ascribed celebrity entails a heightened public status and media fascination that is predetermined by bloodline and biological descent, such as the descendants of royalty. People with achieved celebrity have earned fame in recognition of their extraordinary performance in fields such as entertainment, business, science or politics. These people may be deemed to have attributed celebrity because of the media attention paid to them, but attributed fame also includes media personalities and flash-in-the-pan phenomena, such as reality TV performers. The media's treatment of the Kennedy family is emblematic of the ascribed celebrity that accompanies the relatives of a political celebrity. For instance the good looks and charm of JFK Jr. led to his designation as the "sexiest man alive" by *People* magazine whereas his training as a lawyer and collaboration on a political magazine tantalized journalists and Democrats who saw him as a president-in-waiting. Even his death in 1999 oddly added to his family's fame by becoming the latest tragedy of the so-called Kennedy curse. Conversely, we know little about Patricia Nixon Cox or Julie Nixon Eisenhower, the children of the publicly maligned Richard Nixon.

However ascribed celebrity is no longer the social norm. Aristocracy has been displaced by commoners who have achieved fame by virtue of their perceived talents in open competition. This leaves ascribed celebrities vulnerable to being attacked and ridiculed as elitist (Rojek 2001: 105). They also risk being associated with the vapidness of untalented people who vie for public attention on reality TV or social media. In a world of media fragmentation and convergence, fame has become omnipresent and diluted, settled only by the fickle tastes of public opinion.

Political celebrities who have an aptitude for media relations are in a better position to advance their agenda. Charisma is a natural communications talent that cannot be manufactured by image handlers in a free media system. It is an attribute of the great man theory of heroes which posits that people who exhibit transformative leadership have enchanting personalities. Charisma prompts followers to form an emotional connection with these superhumans and their

idealized vision (Javidan and Waldman 2003). This captivating magnetism is difficult to pinpoint because it is an ephemeral, ambiguous and/or ethereal concept (Bligh and Kohles 2009: 484). In terms of branding, charisma is a powerful human quality that distinguishes successful personal brands that connect on an emotional level from the evoked image of inanimate objects.

b) What is political branding?

This brings us back to the public image of parties and politicians. Politicians, image handlers and the news media draw audiences' attention to select information. This emphasis of a perceived reality is known as priming and how the subject is publicly presented is known as framing (Entman 1993). As commercial marketing techniques become more pervasive, political actors are treated as brands, a lexis that is attracting increasing attention in the study of political communication. The American Marketing Association uses a conventional definition that a brand is the "Name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers." But a brand is much more than a proprietary name. It is a complex concept that is comprised of a multifaceted combination of tangibles, such as a logo, and intangibles such as emotional attachments (de Chernatony and Riley 1998). It is an artificial construct that becomes a public entity that is superficial, manipulated and open to interpretation.

The purpose of branding is to provide marketing efficiencies while building customer loyalty. Branding seeks to add value to a product or service so that a consumer develops an emotional preference for that choice over the alternatives. To accomplish this, marketers avail of research intelligence to inform consistent and simple messages across media platforms, and attempt to reinforce impressions. Priority is placed on visual communication. However, managing the public image and credibility of a brand is difficult. Reputation is based on many touchpoints, including consumer experiences, and organizations may lack integrated communications (Hutton et al. 2001).

Students of politics can learn from the study of branding. In academia this is an emerging way of thinking that connects a number of scholarly approaches to explain political behaviour. We can consider a *party brand* to encompass the party name, logo, colour schemes and the party's history of policies and leaders. A *candidate brand* is the public image of a politician which is formed from the sum of all communications impressions on a member of the citizen audience. The practicalities of branding are intuitive. For instance the name Green Party of Canada, combined with its use of a green colour scheme, is easy for electors to associate with environmentalism without significant marketing. Conversely, if an unknown and unremarkable citizen runs for public office, it may be impossible to develop any personal brand equity.

This is not to say that branding concepts can be seamlessly applied to politics; we must recall that politicians are not malleable like a product. Furthermore, the concept of personal brands is still being debated by academics and it is instructive that business marketers often shape their brand along human-like personality dimensions (Aaker 1997). Nevertheless political branding is a burgeoning area of practice and study. Academics have explored the nature of the Barack Obama brand, which has been deemed to be a commodified entity that is marketed in place of policy (Zavattaro 2010); of Mexican presidential candidates, who voters preferred when a political brand image projected capability, energy, empathy and handsomeness (Guzmán and Sierra 2009); and Tony Blair's Labour Party, which was rebranded in response to elector disappointment with a deteriorating premium brand (Scammell 2007). Other scholarship has

applied this marketing nomenclature to political parties (White and de Chertanony 2002), party leaders (Smith 2001), candidates' private brand names (Grynaviski 2010), permanent campaigning (Needham 2005), voter behaviour (Reeves, de Chernatony and Carrigan 2006) and nation branding (Chiu 2007). Further attempts to apply branding theory to politics are needed to develop the concept of political branding, especially in the Canadian context.

One area that has not yet been explored is what we can call a *political brand extension*. This refers to a party brand with regional units or a candidate who literally has political offspring. It applies knowledge about the marketing of a line or product extension. Extending a product line is common in business, where the equity in a brand can be leveraged by attaching the parent brand name to a new product introduced within the same category, such as creating a diet version of an established food product.² Leveraging awareness and goodwill towards the parent brand enables marketing efficiencies, especially if symbols such as names, visuals and slogans are consistent (Reddy, Holak and Bhat 1994). Extensions can capitalize on an existing market demand and a greater willingness among consumers to try the new product. An extension is a way to revitalize the core brand, to enter new markets and to leverage customer brand loyalty. However, the ability to extend is constrained by the perceived credibility of the parent brand, and marketers may have unrealistic expectations of success (Munthre, Bick and Abratt 2006). As well, product extensions that are dissimilar to the parent brand incur increased marketing costs and can dilute knowledge of the original brand (Pullig, Simmons and Netemeyer 2006). In fact, the line extension can damage the parent brand, and if the parent brand is damaged this will have a negative spillover effect on the brand extension (Sullivan 1990). Furthermore, while consumers who have deep attachments to the parent brand are likely to be more accepting of a lower quality line extension, those with weak familiarity with the parent brand are less willing to try it or be as forgiving (Kim and Sullivan 1998).

Concepts associated with the line extension of a family brand are loosely applicable to the concept of political dynasties.³ Candidates with family ties in politics have name recognition, can leverage successful social and financial networks, and can access their relatives' political knowledge. Those who seek public office exhibit hereditary traits such as an interest in public service, talent, ambition and energy. On this point we are reminded of JFK Jr., whose brand image was comprised of attributes that were assumed from his more famous and accomplished father. The romanticism about his candidacy overlooked the democratic implications of political brand extensions. Political dynasties invite questions about concentration of power, the ability of heirs to be elected with limited experience and the lack of competition for a position (Bó, Bó and Snyder 2009). Thus the presence of political kinship in politics is interpreted as a signal of the lack of modernity of a democracy (Camp 1982; Clubok, Wilensky and Berghorn 1969).

² This is somewhat different than brand extension, which is when a brand name is attached to a product in a different category, such as a food brand name being applied to a different type of food product, or to a non-food product. It is also different than brand image transfer which occurs when one brand endorses another, such as with corporate sponsorship advertising. Since we are interested only in the category of leadership of Canadian political parties these concepts are less relevant for our purposes.

³ Similarities can also be drawn with leadership succession within family businesses.

c) How do we measure a political brand?

There is no obvious way to measure a party brand, a candidate brand or the image of a political brand extension. Brand research tends to be qualitative because of the need to understand layers of information (Scammell 2007: 181). Conversely the measurement of leadership tends to use quantitative methods however there is debate about what indicators researchers should look for. Consumer attitudinal research often examines the “Big Five” human personality dimensions of competence, excitement, ruggedness, sincerity and sophistication, each of which can be judged to include a variety of adjectives (Aaker 1997; Azoulay and Kapferer 2003; Capara et al. 2007; Louis and Lombart 2010). No such consensus about leadership models exists in political science which has not concerned itself with measurement replication. The typology developed by Brown et al. (1988) measured competence, dynamism, empathy, episodic judgments, integrity, party references, personal style, political positions, political skills, responsibility and social background attributes. Funk (1999) bundled ratings on a number of traits within the interrelated categories of competence, leadership, integrity and empathy. Blais (2011: 4) observes that political behaviourists argue that voters prioritize competence, which favours the experience of incumbents, and trustworthiness, which is an assessment of the leader’s character. Helms (2012) considers good democratic leadership to consist of authenticity, effectiveness and responsibility. There is likewise debate about how to measure reputation management because of the divergence of perceptions among different stakeholders (Hutton et al. 2001: 249). Evidently, there is no agreed upon method for analyzing a brand or public image.

These measurement variations are explained by fluctuating temporal dimensions, candidate turnover and the different emphases placed on select attributes by voters and image managers. When a human being is viewed as a political brand there must be consideration given to a combination of characteristics that are unique to that candidate at that time. An example is Malloy’s (2010) interpretations of political writings which led him to identify Brian Mulroney’s multiple images as perfection, a pseudo-American, a neoconservative, a possible crook and a comeback kid. Malloy’s assessment demonstrates that a public figure can occupy a range of characterizations. However, as with any interpretation of a political brand, the images that he identified may not necessarily be replicated by other scholars. Funk’s conclusion that candidate evaluation “is likely to be formed on the basis of different considerations for different candidates and electoral contexts” seems apt (1999: 716).

Since there is no standard method to inform the analysis of a candidate brand or political spinoff brand, and brand analysis is an inherently subjective exercise, an assessment of the Trudeau brand first requires the informed identification of invoked characteristics. I begin by consulting academic literature to describe the Pierre Trudeau brand of achieved celebrity; in doing so I assume that readers have an existing familiarity with his career. I then consult media reports during Justin Trudeau’s brief political career to indicate his ascribed celebrity and the development of his achieved celebrity. I attempt to differentiate between the two public images of Justin Trudeau: one as a person whose brand is a variation of his more famous father’s (political brand extension) and the other as a politician who is earning public attention on his

own merits (candidate brand). This will inform theoretical understanding of political branding as well as the nature of political celebrity.⁴

THE TRUDEAU BRAND

a) The Pierre Trudeau brand

Canadian politics is considered to be “quiet, moderate, and incremental” and Canadians expect their leaders to be “pragmatic political fixers and problem-solvers” (Azzi and Hillmer 2013: 242). But the media and electors can bore of bland. In 1968 the brand image of Pierre Trudeau was exciting, progressive and modern. His achieved celebrity was anchored in the rare attribute of intelligence with pizzazz. His image as a philosopher king grew from his occupation as a law professor, his engagement in Quebec political debate including the founding of *Cité Libre*, his recruitment to elected politics in 1965 as one of Lester Pearson’s so-called “three wise men” and, as minister of justice from 1967-68, his reasoning for reforms to the *Criminal Code*. He was packaged and presented as a debonair anti-politician who drove sports cars and spent time with pretty women. In 1968 Trudeau was a political celebrity within whom the Canadian media found its John F. Kennedy and who presented a refreshing change to the comparative insipidness of Canadian politics.

Goffman’s (1959) thesis that public figures are like actors on a stage, whose public image is a morphed version of their real self, applies to Pierre Trudeau. Politicians, like actors, play a variety of characters. During the 1968 Liberal leadership race, when Trudeau met with party delegates in private settings he was “restrained, candid, quietly charming, and meticulous about outlining his policy views”; but in public and in front of the media, he “adopted a more playful posture, sliding down banisters, kissing pretty young girls, nibbling at flowers” (Radwanski 1978: 10). Like all politicians, Trudeau was aware of the importance of the public image, and was conscious of wearing a public mask:

“Television cameramen photographed him as though he were a male Garbo...The real Trudeau was being falsified. What the public saw was indeed a mask, a heroic image it wanted to believe in that sat uneasily on a man whose complexities were unknown to his euphoric admirers. The inflation of his intellectual and physical attributes in the leadership process – in which he was on the whole a willing participant – was the final factor in turning Trudeau into a charismatic figure.” (Clarkson and McGall 1990: 111-112)

Trudeau was the final authority over his public image. He would consider the advice of a variety of advisors including communications staff, advertising agency personnel and the communications philosopher Marshall McLuhan. He was aided by a disenchanted media that connected Trudeau on emotional levels of optimism, romanticism and idealism. Trudeaumania emerged in an era of Canadian nationalism and declining deference to political elites. Journalists and progressives “generated an idealized image of a candidate who personified change. The

⁴ Among the variables that I do not explore include the nature of the Liberal Party’s brand, public opinion survey or voting results, policy positions, political opponents and the political environment (e.g., global economic circumstances).

Trudeau image embodied a set of modern values that culturally progressive Canadians wanted to project onto the nation as a whole” (Litt 2008: 30).

An important part of Trudeau’s image was that he an intriguing personality to the media. Anti-establishment tendencies came through in media-friendly acts such as sliding down bannisters, jumping off diving boards and his famous pirouettes that mocked the monarchy. He exhibited a consciousness that his media image was an illusion and that the media should be distrusted (Litt 2008: 51). But he also had a temper and used vulgar language to express his authority. “Cut that out or I’ll come down and kick your ass,” is a lesser known retort to a heckler (Vastel 1990: 116) than the more famous fuddle duddle or Trudeau salute incidents. A young Trudeau was described as “A perfect balance between the scholar and the fool” (Vastal 1990: 4) and the persistence of this image was a counterfoil to the staidness of his Liberal predecessors and to his Conservative opponents Robert Stanfield and Joe Clark.

To cultivate an image of a pop culture phenomenon, in 1968 Liberal strategists recruited young Liberal women to behave as obsessed fanatics in the presence of reporters. He was transported by motorcade to waiting crowds and his team conveyed momentum by coordinating visits to small events before proceeding to big ones (Litt 2008). When his opponents attempted to brand him as a homosexual this added to the narrative of his sex appeal. He was a playboy who piqued the media’s interest in his personal life and yet who guarded his privacy. He dressed differently than regular politicians and wore a rose in his lapel. By cavorting with beautiful women, being seen with celebrities like Barbara Streisand, by favouring female journalists and by marrying a much younger woman he sustained the aura. It was not just young women who were attracted to Trudeau: a study of the 1968 general election found that male and female voters had similar impressions of him, and his appeal was constant among voters under the age of 60 (Winham and Cunningham 1970).

As with other leaders who hold office for a long time, Trudeau’s image fluctuated, involved inconsistencies and was ephemeral. The moment he became prime minister his image assumed the characteristics of the office; the more he became a statesman the less he resembled the pop culture phenomenon of Trudeauomania. In meeting with John Lennon in 1969, Trudeau was “trying to hold onto his popularity while changing his image from swinger to responsible head of government” (Westell 1972: 132). Many of his political decisions were contradictory, such as his suspension of civil rights in the FLQ crisis, followed by the introduction of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. He went from being a media darling to having a hostile relationship with journalists. To adapt to different circumstances he would draw upon aspects of his personality that fit the situation, such that his public image was akin to “a kaleidoscope whose pieces are constantly rearranged into ever-changing patterns” (Radwanski 1978: 24).

Despite such inconsistencies a successful political brand is anchored in some core values. Above all, the Pierre Trudeau brand stands for French-English unity. He was first a French Canadian, and a Quebecker second, and defended federalism against Quebec separatists such as René Lévesque, the FLQ and those who argued for special status. During the 1968 Liberal leadership convention the Ottawa Civic Centre was filled with constant chants of “Trudeau, Canada! Trudeau, Canada! Trudeau, Canada!” (Vastel 1990: 1). National unity was the thrust of his party’s election platforms and was sustained by policies such as official bilingualism, constitutional negotiations and promoting Canada in the 1980 Quebec referendum. It is why his voice mattered on Meech Lake and Charlottetown. The Trudeau brand was centred on the idea of “holding Canada together in its existing form” and was about “reconciling unity with diversity”

(Hunt 2002: 88, 98). Media coverage of his state funeral emphasized themes of nationalism and unity (West 2008) which is in line with the frame of Trudeau as a Canadian patriot. In the final analysis, he is thought to represent “what many want Canada to be” (Malloy 2010: 21), and in public opinion surveys he has ranked as the best recent prime minister if not one of the greatest Canadians (Azzi and Hillmer 2013). Pierre Elliot Trudeau (hereafter “PET”) has such a strong brand image that for many electors, including those born after he left office in 1984, he is a mythical figure.

b) Defining Justin Trudeau’s brand

“This is the age of the brand and you can’t beat the Trudeau brand,” said the president of Forum Research in October 2012 (Kitching 2012), a remark rooted in the many opinion surveys pointing to positive public assessments of Justin Trudeau (hereafter “Justin”). An April 2013 Abacus Data poll found that 75 percent of respondents agreed that he was likeable and just 21 percent had a negative impression of him. Atlantic Canadians, Torontonians, Quebeckers, women, those aged 30 to 44, Liberals, NDP voters and Greens had especially positive feelings. However, 52 percent agreed that Trudeau is more style than substance and 34 percent felt that he was out of touch with ordinary people (Abacus Data 2013). The survey was administered shortly before Trudeau became Liberal Party leader.

In pure marketing speak Justin Trudeau is a line extension of his father’s brand. This means that by necessity he is somewhat different than the parent brand. The challenge for his image handlers is to figure out the extent to which they should communicate similarities with his famous father in a competitive electoral market that will need a unique selling proposition to inspire a favourable emotional connection with new supporters.

As with JFK Jr., Justin Trudeau has been in the public eye since he was born. The media’s interest in his political prospects was piqued when he delivered an emotional eulogy at his father’s funeral.⁵ Justin is aware that his lineage attracts attention, referring to “the ‘Wow’ factor” of being PET’s son and using his celebrity as a vehicle for other ambitions (Hamilton 2011). However, as with most politicians, he does not talk about wearing a public mask or that his image is a constructed reality, other than to say that he has always experienced people drawing conclusions about him based on his family ties. He insists that his public persona is based on reality, saying “I’m not trying to pretend to be something I’m not,” but nevertheless remarks that how audiences interpret that image leads some to views that are “based on perception, based on prejudice, based on expectations that have nothing to do with reality” (MacKinnon 2013).

Marketing literature can guide an analysis of the Justin Trudeau brand in the following ways.

First, what are the similarities and differences with his father’s brand? Having progressed from endorsing a candidate in the 2006 Liberal leadership campaign, to becoming the MP for the Montreal riding of Papineau in 2008, to winning the Liberal Party leadership, we can establish that Justin Trudeau’s entry into politics has ensured some sort of Trudeau political dynasty. He

⁵ A detached Goffman would undoubtedly have peered into the presentation, observing that the address began with “Friends, Romans, countrymen” from a Shakespeare play, that the speaking style was dramatic and that Justin would go on to act in a CBC film in 2005.

has the interest in public service that is characteristic of political heirs, saying in February 2013 that, “what is important for me is to put everything I have received...in service of my community. That is what my identity is all about” (Mas, 2013). Justin is attempting to leverage his fame to attract support from new segments of the electorate. He is motivated and can tap into political networks. PET-loyal audiences like and trust the dauphin—as he is often referred—whom they have watched grow up and with whom they have developed a parasocial bond. However, unlike some members of family dynasties, for much of his life he chose to stay away from politics. He is also simultaneously revitalizing his party’s brand and is unable to benefit from his father’s counsel.

Looking at his candidacy as a brand line extension draws attention to the two men’s identical surname, their good looks, their sense of style including a tendency to wear sandals with business clothing, their cosmopolitan attitude and their ability to draw a crowd. Their core product is national unity: in visual communication Justin is often positioned near a Canadian flag and its red/white colours, he promotes a message of Canadian multiculturalism and he unseated a Bloc Québécois incumbent. There are occasional reminders of his father’s panache, such as writing “Just watch me” on a note from a fan asking whether he could defeat Harper, as well as symbols of his father’s athleticism and political triumphs, as in the case of Justin winning a boxing match against a Conservative Senator. The Trudeau rose has been deemed proprietary to his father except on momentous occasions such as PET’s funeral and Justin’s wedding.

As with all line extensions, Justin Trudeau’s public image is not identical to the parent brand. His unique selling proposition is that he is a humble celebrity who loves Canada and is enthusiastic to serve its citizens. This is backed up by a remarkable ability to engage people in person and online. Otherwise his product positioning is unclear, as he has steadfastly avoided policy commitments. This is sensible, because if Justin sways too far from his father’s brand image or policy positions he risks alienating non-Trudeau loyalists, and there is no pressure of a pending general election. Disavowing his father’s unpopular policies (such as the National Energy Program) while advancing the theme of a Just Society (such as the decriminalization of marijuana) is a strategy that hugs the parent brand. This is constrained by his ascribed celebrity and the weakened position of the Liberal label. During the party’s leadership campaign the media reported on contestants raising concerns about Trudeau’s lack of policy substance and his social class. As well the economy is a priority issue to Canadians that the Conservatives have sought to monopolize and is a major weakness of the PET brand. In other words, there is much more to a party brand than its leader’s media image.

As soon as Justin became leader, the Conservative Party ran negative TV spots designed to frame him as a policy lightweight, especially on economic management. The ads played up associations with vapid celebrity and raised questions about his qualifications to be prime minister. This comes through in many ways: mention of Justin being born with a famous name, visuals of him participating in a sexy fashion show, the announcer’s snickering style, the use of merry-go-round background music, and the choice of a Tinkerbell-like moving font and sound in the closing moments. The tagline that he is “in over his head” will resonate whenever he makes a mistake or naïve remark. The English version of the ads also sought to inhibit Trudeau’s ability to play the Liberal Party’s trump card as the party of national unity by pointing to his alleged favouritism of Quebec. Ensuing 10 percenter flyers portrayed Trudeau as young and inexperienced compared with the steady hand of a knowledgeable Stephen Harper. Furthermore,

a conservative author released *The Truth about Trudeau* (2013), which attempts to discredit the parent brand and which could harm the new leader's brand image.

The media went into a frenzy over the negative communication. Minor controversy ensued over the Tories' claim that Trudeau was a drama teacher; the Liberals say he taught math and French. The media reported that electors were upset with the 10 percenters and that a number of Conservative MPs refused to circulate them. *Maclean's* suggested that they questioned Trudeau's "manliness" and observed that in fact Trudeau often attracts "throng of women" despite being married (Geddes 2013). Pundits debated whether the ads would be effective. Marketing literature suggests that the campaign will resonate because it breathes life into existing perceptions, especially among journalists. As one CBC staffer mused before the ads were launched, the Conservatives "might simply appropriate the usual jibes tossed at Trudeau: he's vacuous, has no substance and is merely a celebrity with great hair" (MacKinnon 2013). Indeed one subsequent op-ed in *The Hill Times* flagged Justin's repeated use of phrases "you know" and "I mean" to indicate his "political immaturity" (Dobbin 2013). This may feed low expectations, leading to media like the *Toronto Star* being impressed with his performance in an editorial board interview in April 2013, or it may erode the Trudeau brand mystique.

Second, how is the Trudeau brand inoculated from gotcha politics? In addition to negative advertising, the Conservatives and other opponents will seek to capitalize on any faux pas that can lead to a performance disruption for Justin Trudeau, and weaken his ability to connect emotionally with audiences. This includes any number of remarks, for instance a Twitter debate about the use of the word barbaric to describe gender-based violence. Some gaffes are in the eye of the beholder: for instance his yelling "You piece of sh*t" at a Conservative minister in 2011 could be framed by supporters as consistent with PET's occasional blue language or framed by opponents as inconsistent with Justin's promotion of positive politics. The intolerance for personal attacks in Canadian politics suggests that opponents will not dare touch the associations with his famous mother, who exhibited questionable public judgement as a prime minister's spouse, and has since been diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. Doing so would be a marketing blunder. But his wife is in the public domain and if she is projected as a potential first lady then opponents may draw attention to their ascribed and attributed celebrity. Over the years media have reported that Trudeau met his wife when they co-hosted the Mercedes-Benz Grand Prix ball; that he proposed to her in the royal suite of a luxury hotel over champagne and oysters after a couple's massage; that she worked as a Holt Renfrew personal shopper and as a celebrity interviewer on CTV's *eTalk*; and that she is a certified yoga instructor.⁶ Whether these details matter is in the eye of the beholder.

To inoculate himself from gotcha politics, Justin Trudeau seeks to attract the residual goodwill associated with the Jack Layton brand, and leverage some of the deceased NDP leader's brand equity. Layton's famous "let us be loving, hopeful and optimistic" final message has become "politics should be positive, optimistic and hopeful" in Justin's communications (JustinTrudeau 2013a). Justin's brand identity as an inspiring champion of democratic idealism and government compassion draws in fans eager to shake his hand. He has urged supporters to donate so that the party can defend him against the Conservatives' negative advertising. The

⁶ Note that Ben Mulroney, son of former PM Brian Mulroney, is a host of *eTalk* and Catherine Clark, daughter of Joe Clark, hosted public affairs programming. Both have charisma but show no signs of pursuing a political career.

Liberals did so in a spot in April 2013 where he scolded the Tories' negativity and promoted positivity. The ad also attempted to shield him from attacks that he lacks substance by depicting him in a classroom in front of a blackboard adorned with mathematical equations.

Third, how is Justin Trudeau's ascribed celebrity turned into achieved celebrity? Ascribed celebrity affords marketing advantages and disadvantages. The birth of Justin Trudeau's first child was national news including in non-political newsmagazines. A new haircut in March 2013 was deemed to warrant a Canadian Press story. His public status is exemplified by the April 29, 2013 edition of celebrity newsmagazine *Hello! Canada*, whose cover featured a photo of him with his wife and children, which was positioned above photos of Princess Kate and Angelina Jolie. An interior photo essay traced his life as a public figure and included recent photos of Justin and his offspring outdoors that mirrored accompanying photos of PET and his children outdoors.

The problem with such publicity is that ascribed celebrities are subject to ridicule and charges of elitism. In the case of Justin Trudeau there have been indications that his wealth and acceptance of speaking fees, including from charities, will be a subject of discussion. That Trudeau seeks to position himself as an alternative to the alleged anti-democratic nature of the Harper administration could be painted as duplicity given that political dynasties signal weaknesses about a democratic system. Instead, on their anti-Trudeau website the Conservatives have chosen to target Ottawa media elites: "Get ready. Trudeaumania is here. It's spreading from journalist to journalist, especially around Ottawa. Breathless reporting. Tired cliches. Overwrought prose. The free mixing of metaphors...Ottawa journalists fawning over Justin Trudeau" (Justinoverhishead 2013). While this was designed to motivate donations from supporters it also belies that the target of much political communication is the journalists whose choice of images and words contribute to the framing of a politician's brand image.

Justin Trudeau acknowledges his famous last name and that fame must be earned. In 2008 he remarked that "I want to demonstrate that it's all about what I bring, not the name and not the past" (Solway 2008) and on his website he wrote, "I was born into a unique circumstance...I've been given a lot. But I don't expect anybody to support me because of who my father was. I intend to earn it. The way to earn it is to work hard, day after day, month after month, year after year" (JustinTrudeau 2013c). Justin counters complaints about his privilege by pointing out that he represents an underprivileged electoral district and his advocacy for the middle class. For years has been seeking to turn his fame into achieved political celebrity by touring Canada to deliver speeches and mingle with citizens.⁷ He argues that his public speaking skills have overcome "the novelty" of public fascination with his fame (Berthiaume 2013) and on his way to winning the leadership his team mobilized 150,000 Canadians to sign up as supporters. His image handlers have sought to promote transparency by disclosing his past public speaking fees and yet have sought to control impressions by making little mention of Justin's life before he became an MP in 2008 (JustinTrudeau 2013b). His new career as a party leader will prove his mettle.

⁷ Including the author's Canadian political science class at Memorial University in October 2006.

WHAT THIS MEANS

The purpose of this essay was to add to a limited literature on political branding using an interesting Canadian case. It offers a synthesis of the Trudeau brand as of mid-2013 which will be of interest to observers of Canadian politics. The application of marketing concepts to politics should indicate to Canadian scholars that a branding way of thinking can increase our ability to analyze political phenomena. More broadly, this paper has developed the theoretical concept of a political brand line extension, which can help us understand the marketing of candidates from political families. We can draw the following conclusions.

Describing a political brand is a subjective exercise; moreover there is a temporal dimension. When a politician leaves office, various strengths and weaknesses are inflated or forgotten, and the leadership traits that electors rate as most important vary over time (Brown et al. 1988). As Justin Trudeau said in his father's eulogy, his father's name conveyed "so many things to so many people," while PET's biographer noted that "different observers have focussed on different aspects" and arrived at "wildly disparate conclusions" (Radwanski 1978: 25). Because academics have not settled on a common way to measure personal brands or leadership there is a need for further concept development and qualitative research. In the case of the Trudeau brand, to confirm some of these theories we would need to speak with party insiders to understand how the Trudeau image is managed, what their brand research has uncovered and to what extent attempts are made to treat a politician as a commodity.

We can also see that celebrity treatment of a politician with a charismatic personality and idealized public image can increase public interest in politics, particularly among disenfranchised and non-voters. Among young Canadians, Pierre Trudeau's youthful image encouraged greater interest in the 1968 election campaign, while also making his opponents appear more staid (Winham and Cunningham 1970). In subsequent elections his media presence appears to have stimulated greater political interest among Canadians, especially those who had attained higher levels of education (Brown et al. 1988). This appears to be continuing with Justin Trudeau. Not only is he leveraging attachments to his father but by engaging with citizens he is fostering emotional loyalties among a variety of elector segments. As with all public figures his image is an imagined reality based on some truths. For supporters, he is a combination of the mythical constructs of historical figures Pierre Trudeau, Wilfrid Laurier, Jack Layton, JFK Jr. and Barack Obama. Opponents will likely attempt to frame his brand image as exhibiting the policy weaknesses of his father and the whimsy of his mother; the elitism of his Liberal predecessors; the ascribed and attributed celebrity of socialite Paris Hilton; and the amateurism of a *Canadian Idol* contestant. However this is temporal and assumes contrast with the current public images of Stephen Harper and Thomas Mulcair.

Finally, the concept of a political brand extension seems plausible, and is a useful marketing lens through which to analyze Justin Trudeau. It can help explain the ease with which a legion of supporters will gravitate towards a rookie candidate and express their loyalty. It can also identify the limitations of ascribed political celebrity. However further research that applies these concepts to other celebrity heirs of political dynasties, such as the Kennedys, is needed.

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