Communication Strategies Adopted during 2014 Lok Sabha Elections: A Study of Major Political Party Communications

Ruchita Deshpande
Dr. Munmun Ghosh
Symbiosis Institute of Media and Communication

Abstract
Mass media is the major information source for any type of engagement. In present times, the form and presence of media across various platforms has changed. Deeper penetration of internet and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has transformed the world of communication. People are more inclined and interested towards different forms of new media. The platform of sharing and exchanging views and opinions has also changed from conventional to digital. This change in platform for exchanging and sharing opinions is optimally utilized by political parties across the globe. Due to huge internet penetration and presence of diverse people across various social media platforms, especially youth, exchange of views and opinions are now more prolific in these mediums. Thus, new media platforms became a mode of communication in our life for business, for providing services, for promotional activities, for interacting and expanding networks and also in politics. Digital media has proved to be an effective channel for change in the history of politics in India. The present paper is an attempt by the researcher to study the communication strategies adopted by leaders of major political parties during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. Hence the study is going to explore the birth and growth of political brands like Narendra Modi (NaMo), Rahul Gandhi (RaGa) and Arvind Kejriwal, and their major contribution in the digital revolution era of political communication. The study will be an exploratory research which will try to explore various platforms of new media and communication patterns across each medium by these three leaders and their respective parties. This will be followed by qualitative content analyses of political brands, and also in-depth interviews were embarked to understand the effects of various communication strategies on the outcome of the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. The study reinforces the belief that in political communication, appropriate adoption of strategies for branding and marketing an individual or party does facilitate favorable opinion about the candidate. Also, the in-depth interviews provide an insight on other external and internal factors that also played a far greater role in its outcome. Keywords: Political Communication, Branding, Communication Strategies, New Media

Introduction
In May 2014, Gujarat chief Minister Mr. Narendra Modi lead the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to a historic majority win in the 16th general election—the first time in 30 years that a single party has emerged with enough numbers in the Lok Sabha to form a government on its own. To lead a nation, the man who led the phenomenal success of Gujarat needed to be more than an authoritative leader. He needed to be someone who embodies the belief of the nation and can be a representative of the new age India. In a bid to be the leader the nation looks up to, he became a huge political human brand.

In contrast to classical marketing, research on political marketing has very recently given importance to and considered the branding aspect. Branding is about getting your prospects to see you as the only reasonable solution to the problem. In Branding, the level of success in ‘what you sell and how’ greatly depends on a strong brand positioning. This is surprising knowing that political brands are of considerable significance for voting decisions. In essence, the importance of brands in voting decisions derives from their branding functions of information and risk-reduction to inspire confidence.

Political branding helps the society and helps build a trusting relationship between political elites and the common public. It helps the consumers understand what a party or candidate is about; and distinguishes a candidate or party from the competition. Political parties also acquire and use names and symbols, to reinforce their own positions, to gather their supporters, to garner further support and, perhaps, to intimidate their opponents.

In recent times, political parties have turned to techniques of marketing to manage their affairs and further their interests. We are looking at how political branding was developed and used to generate political support and the effect of these strategies on the voting decisions.

The concept of branding is not new to political communication. As can be seen by the US President Barrack Obama’s re-election campaign or the more recent presidential elections in India between Narendra Modi, Rahul Gandhi and Arvind Kejriwal, over the last two decades politicians and political parties have come to rely heavily on the insights of brand consultants to improve their external presentation which translates into a deliberate strategy built to respond to the political environment.

Theory, Prior Research and Background
Review of literature available for research on politics and branding give us different perspectives about the concept of brand,
branding and brand communities, political marketing – structure, process and evolution, with an emphasis on the future of political marketing and discusses the effect of different strategies in political advertising.

Marketing models traditionally hold needs of consumers of primary concern and as they are identified, attempts are made to satisfy the identified needs. When a political party or candidate applies this concept to the political process, they need to have the ability to alter according to voters’ needs and satisfy them (O’Cass, 1996, pp. 37-53). This paper helps in examining the political processes and voter behavior from a marketing angles so that it may offer new insights into the behavior and performance of political parties. Empirical research is needed to determine the extent to which the marketing concept has been embraced by political parties and whether they can be said to be marketing oriented.

Politics falls within the extended domain of marketing because an exchange takes place when a voter casts his or her vote for a particular candidate. Voters exchange time and support (their vote) for the services the elected candidate offers after election through better governance. The aim of political marketing is to influence people's votes in elections. The article maintains that general concepts of marketing require adaptation to suit these different situations. The underlying traits of the political product have marketing undercurrents. These are considered in three parts: the multi-component (person/party/ideology) nature of the offer; the degree of loyalty involved; and the fact that it is mutable, i.e. it can be changed or transformed in the post-election setting. One marketing implication of this multi-component offer is that the components cannot be offered separately. Political parties and candidates command an extraordinary level of loyalty. Voter loyalty is especially marked in first-order elections, for example, national parliamentary elections. In second-order elections, such as those to local councils, a greater degree of volatility exists. Similarly, by-election votes are often protest votes, rejecting in part or full of one party’s record more willingly than stating loyalty to another (Butler and Collins, 1994, pp. 19-34). This is the general aspect that was characteristic of the 2014 elections in India and on the basis of this article we hope to validate this sentiment. The loyalty factor here underlines the importance of winning first-time voters because the first electoral choices are believed to be more enduring and less liable to change. Furthermore, loyalty promotes strategies that follow a “brand extension” approach, such as coat-tailing in multi-member constituencies (Butler and Collins, 1994, pp. 19-34).

It can be seen that the structural elements and the process involved in political marketing are significantly different from most businesses, and their particular implications for marketing management have been addressed (Butler and Collins, 1994, pp. 19-34). However, political marketing must be seen in the context of the wider political process where the media plays a participatory role, the elite influences, and the electorate makes a decision. The paper concludes by saying that the effect of marketing strategies on voting on most occasions is marginal and marketing effort is wasted. Though the recipients of the message are well targeted, they are far from neutral or easily influenced (Butler and Collins, 1994, pp. 19-34). This statement is contradicted by a paper published merely two years after by O’Cass (1996, pp. 37-53). Political marketing cannot guarantee winning at every election, however it does offer improved performance and more pertinent ways of making decisions and managing campaigns (O’Cass, 1996, pp. 37-53).

Political marketing can offer no guarantee of winning at the election; however it does offer improved performance and more appropriate ways of making decisions and managing campaigns (O’Cass, 1996, pp. 37-53). The same is reiterated in another paper by him, which considers the Australian politics. Both politics and marketing have a pervasive influence on society's everyday activity. Political parties operate in intensely competitive environment that change continuously. That a connection between society, political parties and individual voters may be achieved through marketing is an area that needs extensive research. Understanding such connections is vitally important for effective and efficient use of marketing and also for enhancing in the delivery of the political offering to society (O’Cass, 2001, pp. 1003-1025). The results of the survey and in-depth interviews highlight unique dimensions and relationships of marketing in politics and concludes that political parties will achieve its objectives more efficiently if it understands the needs and wants of the target voter.

In the past 2 decades, there has been a rising influence of the marketing concepts as they apply to Politics (Harris and Lock, 2010, pp. 297-307). While political marketing majorly depends on communications throughout electoral campaigns, it has become critical in the development of long term strategies and positioning for parties. Marketers’ understanding of consumer behavior has provided particularly valuable insights into voter behavior which is an important element in the success of political marketing. It is a frequently neglected fact by political commentators and academics that the majority of voters do not share their fascination for politics. In the last few years, political marketing has become instrumental in policy development, delivery, engagement and targeting of the citizen and voters in politics. Due to the increased sophistication of the concepts, theories and analytical methods
being deployed, we need more work that incorporates culture and electoral systems and develop conceptual framework to deal with virtual communities, advocacy and communications (Harris and Lock, 2010, pp. 297-307).

Political party as brand is no longer a novelty and part of a general dispersion of branding from its original, consumer marketing origins. Branding has received limited academic attention in political science and public policy, although it is being increasingly utilized in politics, particularly in the political marketing field. Political parties have gradually increased the use of marketing techniques with a particular focus on branding (Marsh and Fawcett, 2011, pp. 515-530). The purpose of this paper is to develop an understanding of how voters view the political brand by analyzing the mental maps that voters create when asked to think about a political party. The research uses the four components of consumer based brand equity, namely, brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty to measure equity. The paper opens possibilities of its wider application which will lead to a greater awareness of how voters understand and react to political parties (French and Smith, 2010, pp. 460-477).

In most political campaigns, interests of the target audience are hardly taken into consideration. A brand name gives a good first impression and elicits positive associations. Owing to this, branding is about getting your prospective consumer to perceive you as the only logical solution to the problem. In political marketing, it is about knowing how to powerfully leverage what is unique about the candidate that differentiates him from the others. The audience mindsets form the force that drives a customer to buy or not to buy. The mindset of an audience should be studied or researched into and clearly understood with regards to political branding. The most easily discernible mindset of the political audience is that which centers on need. The paper concludes that with a thorough research into the attitudes of the people, politicians stand a better chance of appropriate brand management (Omojola, 2008, pp. 127-134).

A paper on consumer contribution to political branding helps us understand the influence that consumers who are actively involved in politics have on the development of a local politician’s brand. It has conceptualized a mental model of a politician’s personal brand in relation to the party’s corporate brand. The role of highly involved political consumers in constituency politics has a marked effect on the politician’s brand equity. This leads to a re-conceptualization of the politician’s brand in comparison with the political party brand (Phipps, Brace-Govan, & Jevons, 2010, pp. 496–514). High involvement consumers from different community groups participated in brand advocacy and facilitated development of community brand equity for politicians. These consumers were vital in building a politician’s local, or community brand equity. This research states that corporate brand equity and community brand equity as two interacting and competing brand equities in turn influence political brand equity (Phipps et al., 2010, pp. 496–514). Political branding can be seen as expanding democracy because it draws more people into the political process. Emphasis is given on the branding of public policy because of a number of developments that are taking place in this field (Marsh and Fawcett, 2011, pp. 515-530). The paper concludes that branding is likely to lead to a more ‘managed’ government rather than a more ‘responsive’ one.

In addition to branding, it is also imperative to assess the effect of various stimuli in political campaigns in order to ascertain their impact on the behavioral decisions of the voters. A lot of parameters are studied; but it was also observed that there is so much happening simultaneously in a campaign it is difficult to isolate the impact of political advertising (Thorson and Christ, 1991, pp. 465-486). It was also proposed that image ads were less complicated than issue ads and that this lack of complexity leads to better processing of image commercial information. Image-oriented ads evoke more attention than issue ads and their verbal message was also better remembered. The paper opens up goals for future research in the commercial triggers for cognitive time-sharing (Schleuder, 1990, pp. 159-168).

Most of the referred papers have reached a near-consensus the effect of marketing strategies on candidate voting. Others hasten to add that though it cannot guarantee winning at every election, it does offer improved performance and decision making. Another point of consensus is that the political party will be able to achieve its objectives more efficiently if it understands the needs and wants of the target voter. Thorough research into the attitudes of the people, politicians stand a better chance of appropriate brand management and branding is likely to lead to more managed government. Also, the strength of a brand’s associations, its favorability and uniqueness are a few of measures of brand equity that are also considered but it is not enough to regard them in isolation from other internal and external influences.

Methods and Procedures

A elaborate qualitative research was conducted which was a mixture of secondary data research in the form of Content analysis of various political parties followed by Depth Interviews to find the factors responsible for positive attitude and the effect of the strategies on the outcome of the assembly elections.
Part A – Content Analysis: The primary source of information for this research is secondary data available online. Journals, Research papers and credible internet sources were referenced for secondary research on various political parties, their brand and different communication strategies employed. Various blogs, articles, and case studies were also analyzed.

- The 2014 Election
- Political Parties/Brands
- Role of Media
- Campaign Analysis
  - Different Communication Strategies across the country
  - The various platforms used: Traditional media, Digital channels and On-ground promotional and engagement activities
  - Analyzing the different messages across all the branding campaign
  - Analyzing the different activities conducted under each campaign

Part B – Depth Interviews: Based on the variables derived out of the content analysis, a discussion guide was created for the depth interviews. The participants of the research were divided into groups based on the age range defined in sampling (below). The motive of the depth interviews was to gain an insight into individual motivations and reasoning for popularity of politicians/political parties. Various branding and communication messages were analyzed and to get a broad overview of the attitudes and reasons of voters and its combined effect on the outcome of the 2014 elections.

Sample Size

The overall number of respondents is 30 (10 in each age bracket) for Depth Interviews. Non probability, convenience sampling was adopted for this research to select the respondents. These were taken across varied age brackets:

1. 18 to 25 years of age
2. 25 to 40 years of age
3. 40 years of age and above

The group was a mixture of male and female respondents from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities. The diverse age groups helped gain different perspectives about the communication strategies as well as the different ways in which the messages reached the voters. We tabulated the different reactions the messages elicited from the voters and how these reactions affected the outcome of the assembly elections.

Content Analysis

The Election scene in 2014

The 2014 general election is taking place in nine phases in India, the longest election in the country's history, from 7 April, 2014 to 12 May, 2014 to form the 16th Lok Sabha. According to the Election Commission of India, the electoral population in 2014 is 814.5 million, the largest in the world. There was a need to connect with the youth considering that this election had almost 150 million first-time voters.

Salient Points:

- Total Seats: 543
- Number of Registered Voters: 814.5 million
- Newly registered voters: 150 million
- Money at stake: INR 18,000 Crore
- Number of parties registered with the Election Commission: 1616
- National Parties: 6
- State Parties: 47
- Number of candidates: 8000+
- Major parties battling it out and their PM Candidates:
  - Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) – Arvind Kejriwal
  - Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – Narendra Modi
  - Indian National Congress (INC) – Rahul Gandhi

Innovative Campaigning with a mix of big money, high-end technology and traditional political messaging was the key for this election campaign. It was the first election campaign in India to use the multiple digital platforms and information technology and to listen and respond to the voters in real time. This fostered involvement and engagement in the minds of the voters which made the election campaign participative politics rather than passive voting.

Finally, 2014 was predicted to be an election that would be fought on 5 Ps – past performance record, policies initiated and implemented by the party, force of public sentiment, people’s perception of the candidate/party and a undying perseverance for a cleaner, smarter governance that the young and old aspire for – the need for CHANGE will drive the elections.

Political Parties/Brands – The coverage of 2014 poll is all about personalities

BJP was the first party to recognize and adapt to the fundamental change in the composition and aspirations of voters. It capitalized on the opportunity to cast a new face to address voters' aspirations by declaring Narendra Modi’s candidature. Digital crowd sourcing contributed significantly in shaping his speeches - used Facebook to crowd source ideas for his speech at Pune’s Fergusson College immediately after being declared as BJP’s Campaign Committee Chairman for the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. The party has launched some exceptional campaigns and
participatory initiatives like Mere Sapnon Ka Bharat, NaMo Number, and Chai Pe Charcha, etc. to register a presence that will be synonymous with development, growth and good governance. Their campaign messages – Aab ki baar, Modi sarkar, Saugandh is mitti ki, Desh Ko Update Karo, Janta maaf nahi karegi, Achchhe din aane wale hain, Modi ji Aa Rahe Hai, Har Har Modi Ghar Ghar Modi – were brilliantly executed and disseminated to reach the intended audience.

Congress on the other hand, relied heavily on traditional channels of communication like TV, Radio, hoardings, newspapers etc. But, their communication was characterized by illogic messaging and did not adapt as per the change in tide. Considering the number of first-time voters, congress failed to engage them on the platforms this demographic is active on. Congress did not have any major initiatives on the digital platform apart from the party’s presence on Twitter and Facebook. A majority of their campaign focus was attacking Narendra Modi rather than showcasing their own (party’s) ability to lead the nation and engage with their loyalists.

The campaign messages were as follows: Main Nahi Hum, Har Hath Shakti Har Hath Tarakki, Face of the Congress – Kattar Sooch Nahin, Yuva Josh, Bharat Nirman, Bharat Ke Mazboot Haath AAP followed Obama’s campaign strategy for Delhi polls. The party used Google+ Hangouts to touch base with each election booth and to reach out to the voters. After the success of India Against Corruption campaign of 2011, AAP used this missed call database to spread its ideology amongst its supporters with the hope of creating advocates for their party. Also, AAP maintained the connectivity between offline and online campaigns, thus reinforcing inclusiveness and transparency in operations.

Findings
A period of four months, starting from 1st January, 2014 to 30th April, 2014 was considered for content analysis. The study considers communication strategies of three major political parties (BJP, AAP and Congress) and their respective Prime Ministerial candidates to make the observations regarding the respondents’ opinions.

Results and interpretations
Using the above keywords the following interpretations of the data can be done:

- All the respondents agreed that the 2014 elections were different by virtue of the innovative and optimum use of media; especially the digital media used by BJP and the popularity of their PM candidate which was referred to as a ‘Modi Wave’
- 18 respondents believe that the Media – Social Media in particular – is responsible for Modi’s success whereas 10 respondents believe that it’s this brand image that is responsible for Modi’s win. 11 respondents believe that the cultivated brand image creates a trust in their mind for Mr. Modi. 12 respondents believe that the Gujarat model of success will be implemented on the nation and so his success at the elections is their reason for his win.
- Internet/Digital Media, TV, Newspapers and Rallies were some of the most effective mediums used for communicating the strategies
- Between the campaign messages by BJP, Abki Baar Modi Sarkar is the most memorable message followed by Acche Din Aane wale Hai and Make in India. Only six respondents knew about Congress’ campaign line. It can be interpreted that the message was lost in the clutter and only people who were consciously seeking the message were aware about the same.

Role of Media
The role of media is not limited as a source of information, but it influences opinions and political agenda. It also has an extremely significant impact on the public’s views and influencing their way of thinking. Collectively, media performs a number of roles right like an educator, a mediator, a platform for campaigning, opinion and debate. Though it should primarily act for the public as its voice, now-a-days, it is the primary means through which public opinion is shaped and manipulated to suit the agenda of their ‘powerful’ allies.

Since the last few years, digital platforms have played a large role in sharing and exchanging information. These platforms are especially important for engagement based communication. Social media has also been used as a tool in building and maintaining relationships between the brand and the people. It acts as a source of information and helps in creating, disseminating and monitoring opinions. These platforms are revolutionizing the way people connect and communicate by keeping them abreast of current events and raising awareness of various issues in any society.

Politics and Mass Communication have always shared a symbiotic relationship. During the last elections Indian political parties used every available media tool – be it the traditional mediums like Public meetings, Newspapers, Magazines, Radio, Television, Hoardings, Flyers or new media technologies like Websites, E-mails, IVRS, SMSs, Internet-Banners, Online Advertising, Blogs, Mobile Phones, Social media etc. among the new media tools. These tools are used on the basis of infrastructure availability, convenience and reach. With the advent of the digital age, the political campaign has gained a new dimension.
Need for a change was a huge motivator for the respondents – 20 respondents believed the new party could bring about socio-political and economic change in the country; whereas 10 respondents professed anti-incumbency as the reason for voting in favor of BJP and 11 respondents believed BJP’s claims for Development

Corruption was a huge factor for Congress failure along with low reach, lack of consistency and inability to deliver on their promises

AAP was unable to generate any trust in the minds of the people due to their lack of experience and an inability to stick

Respondents majorly voted for the policies and values of the party in question, closely followed by the candidate and party image. Few voted according to the work done in the constituency and 4 respondents felt they had no other choice so they voted in favor of BJP/Modi

Emerging themes as per the Age groups

In the 18-25 years age group,

- Social media is communication channel & technology are the sources of information
- Maximum number of exposed media – TV, Internet, Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, Rallies, Analytics, Mobile, Newspaper, Outdoor. Surprisingly none of the respondents referred to Radio as a medium of communication as their exposure and interaction is more on the above-mentioned media
- Acknowledge that they were the intended audience, demonstrate a higher recall and respond favorably to the communication messages
- They talk about the individual making the change and decision making is a result of the messages that are dispensed through the different media
- Work done previously features highly in their requirements to vote for the individual. Individual oriented choice of candidate. Only 1 out of 6 respondents voted according to the work done by the individual

In the 26-40 years age group,

- Refer to use of technology in the election campaign
- Exposed to higher number of media including Email and Radio in addition to the above-mentioned media
- Talks about youth-centric orientation of the messages
- Change and Anti-incumbency are the biggest motivators for voting

In the 41-60 years age group,

- Most respondents voted for the individual and not the party
- Corruption was a huge factor for Congress failure along with low reach, lack of consistency and inability to deliver on their promises
- The respondents in this age group believe that Narendra Modi was the only candidate available for choice
- Change and Anti-incumbency are the biggest motivators for voting along with the party’s manifesto / vision document. This age group took a long term view of the election process and would like to be a part of the change
- Most respondents voted for the policies and in turn for the party not the individual

Findings

The findings of this study can be categorized further as follows:

- Owing to the huge media spends, for the 2014 elections, the image projected during the campaigns was a huge motivator
- Political brandings play a huge role in the way the voters perceive the candidates and also impacts their choice
- Communication strategies by BJP had a huge impact in terms of recall and thus had a favorable impact on the outcome of assembly elections
- Though political branding is capable of creating a positive attitude towards the individual and party but the voting decision depends on other factors like competition, socio-economic condition, past work of the candidate, mindset of the voter and future plans of the ruling party to name a few

Conclusion

The content sourced reinforces the belief that in political communication, image, exposure, visibility, reach and opinions can be seeded in traditional mainstream media as well as the new emerging media, though the latter is preferred as it is more conducive to engagement and works in real-time.

Also, the in-depth interviews provide an insight on other external and internal factors that played a far greater role in its outcome. Though, appropriate adoption of strategies for branding and marketing an individual or party does facilitate favorable opinion about the candidate; but it will not be a standalone factor contributing towards the success of the party/candidate. Opinions and interpretations of the voters regarding the adopted communication strategies coupled with various motivation factors
and a unique mindset of each voter have resulted in rationalizations that have contributed to the success of BJP in the 2014 elections.

Political communication has continued to evolve for the past two and a half decades but never as rapidly as it has since the 2008 US Presidential Elections. New media plays a pivotal role in the reach of the messages to the intended audience. Irrespective of individual inclination towards politics or technology, voters found themselves dragged into the vortex of political communication which spanned more than 20 different platforms. Leading by example, BJP has acknowledged that digital is here to stay and political communication is evolving with this trend.

References


