



Are voters, consumers?

A qualitative exploration of the voter-consumer analogy in political marketing

Are voters,
consumers?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to deepen and add nuance to previous explorations of the voter-consumer analogy in order to generate new insights into wider applications of the marketing concept.

Design/methodology/approach – A conceptual analysis is supplemented and enriched with insights from a non-representative case of voter responses to political advertising.

Findings – Findings suggest that limitations to the voter-consumer analogy revolve around the differing contexts of marketing in each case and reflect differing audience responses at the micro-level.

Research limitations/implications – The empirical component of this study is not representative or generalizable. However, it is used not to verify generalizations but to add qualitative insights to the conceptual discussion. Findings suggest that research which applies the marketing concept to non-commercial settings, especially political marketing but also possibly extending to social marketing, non-profit and public sector marketing, should be cautious in assuming that consumers of non-commercial marketing respond in the same way to marketing initiatives as consumers of commercial marketing.

Practical implications – The research has implications for the application of the marketing concept in political and other non-commercial contexts.

Originality/value – The application of the marketing concept in non-commercial settings as well as commercial settings has become so common it is often taken for granted. Yet the behaviour, attitudes and responses of consumers in these different settings may diverge in important ways at the micro-level. Explorations of the applicability of the marketing concept in different settings are relatively rare and this paper adds a previously unpublished empirical aspect to an original conceptual analysis which aligns secondary research from disparate sources in political science and cultural studies as well as marketing.

Keywords Consumers, Politics, Marketing

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Scholars from a range of backgrounds have compared political and commercial marketing and advertising. Some have argued that the differences between these two spheres are relatively slight, others that they are fundamental. In this paper, we attempt to problematize, deepen and add nuance to the voting-consumption analogy drawing on a range of literature in the political marketing and brand marketing fields. In order to add an empirical perspective to the discussion we draw on tentative findings from a small-scale exploratory case study of voting attitudes. The responses of eight focus groups of British voters to two well-known Labour Party election broadcasts were interpreted using theoretical concepts from brand marketing and also from cultural studies of political marketing. In conclusion, we argue that there may be aspects of audience response to political advertising that are incompatible with brand



marketing theory. “Voters” and “consumers” do seem to share some resemblance in their affective, cognitive and behavioural responses to advertising, which is perhaps unsurprising, since political parties and commercial entities do sometimes employ similar marketing techniques. However, in this study these voters displayed certain responses that differentiated them strongly from consumers. This implies that the analogy between commercial and political marketing has its limitations. We conclude by suggesting that the voter-consumer analogy is highly plausible when viewed on a macro-level but, becomes weaker as research focuses in on a micro-level analysis of the individual within the voting context.

Research background and paper outline

Voters, and consumers, consumption of media messages has been studied by academics from various backgrounds, including political communication (Trent and Friedenber, 1995; Wheeler, 1997; Peng and Hackley, 2007), media studies (McNair, 1999; William, 2003), cultural studies (Lewis, 2002; Morley, 2002), and advertising studies (Messaris, 1997; O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy, 2003; Hackley, 2005). There is also important and well-respected work which has tried to bridge and compare different aspects of television and the surrounding issues, such as Professor Newman’s book on political advertising (Newman, 1999) and Professor O’Shaughnessy’s work on political marketing (O’Shaughnessy, 1990).

Some tentative conclusions emerge from this body work. On certain occasions, the roles of the voter and consumer can overlap each other, but there is clearly a contextual difference between an election and a consumption context (Lock and Harris, 1996) with attendant differences in attitude formation and decision-making. Nevertheless, key scholars in the area (Kotler and Kotler, 1999) maintain that brand marketing management conceptual frameworks can be applied seamlessly to understanding, and also to managing, voter attitudes and behaviour in the political context. Yet, relatively few studies have explored the voting-consuming analogy empirically by focusing in on a given segment of voters and their responses to specified political marketing stimuli.

The present study responds to this research gap by uses a selected sample of British voters and their responses to two well-known political election television broadcasts as background for the conceptual discussion. A television election broadcast was used because television advertising is, arguably, the area where political marketing most manifestly identifies with brand marketing. Political marketing campaigns do indeed deploy brand marketing techniques such as market and consumer research, strategic market planning, positioning, segmentation and targeting, but these techniques are largely invisible to the final consumer, the voter. Advertising and other marketing communication techniques represent the most visible attempt by political marketing practitioners to market political parties, ideologies, policies and personalities like brands. Consequently, a focus on a political advertisement might be most fruitful in exploring the voter-consumer analogy.

The paper begins with a critical review of research that explores, conceptualises and compares the audience response of voters, and of consumers, to media texts. In terms of the fieldwork, eight groups of voters are included, who identified themselves as either Conservative Party or Labour Party supporters. The decision was made not to include a control group of non-voters for two main reasons. One is the pragmatic difficulty of sampling. Research participants often identify themselves in terms of a party

affiliation regardless of whether they actually voted or not at the last general or regional election. Party affiliation in the UK is, for many people, a matter of class and mentality, even for voters who may vote against their instinct under certain political circumstances. There was no way of truly ascertaining the level of participants' voting activity. The second reason was that voters are also consumers of brands and of marketing. For individuals, there is no line dividing their subjective experience as consumers or as voters. They are exposed to marketing techniques in their daily consumption of media, and some of these techniques are designed to get votes rather than to raise revenue or trial or switch brands. Conversely, consumers who are non-voters are not isolated from political marketing activity or from political consciousness. Consequently, a "control" group of non-affiliated non-voters, if it were possible to obtain one, would not represent a true polarity with a group of self-declared politically affiliated voters.

The advertisements used in this research featured in the 1997 UK general election. We chose these ads because they are well-known and strongly linked with what remains, even in 2009, the most decisive shift in British politics since the Labour Party landslide victory in 1944. Contemporary political advertisements would not necessarily resonate as strongly with voters or generate lively discussion. These ads, discussed retrospectively, were examples of a political marketing campaign, which was not merely successful but hugely significant in British politics and remains so to this day (at the time of writing the Labour Party has remained in government over the intervening 12 years). They include one advertisement we categorize as an "image" and "brand-building" ad. It featured ex-British Prime Minister Tony Blair who, at that time, was the focal point of the Labour Party's attempt to end 18 years of conservative domination of government. Blair was positioned as a modernising party leader who enjoyed the dual virtues of being friendly to business as well as possessing a strong sense of ethics and social justice. The second political election broadcast was a negative ad of the kind pioneered in the USA political scene but still, at that time, very new in British politics. It was framed as a rejoinder to negative conservative advertising which was widely regarded as having lost labour the previous election under its then leader Neil Kinnock. The fieldwork explores the audience response to these two ads in the light of the kinds of audience response to brand marketing advertising which are represented in the brand marketing literature.

The voter-consumer analogy – literature perspectives

Since Kotler and Levy (1969) argued that political contests should be a key area of interests for marketing professionals (Wring, 2002, p. 171) academics with marketing or political science backgrounds have explored how the political and commercial marketing scenes have learned from each other. Researchers with a political science background, like Kavanagh (1995) and Norris *et al.* (1999) suggest that both businesses and political parties deploy the idea of the marketing "campaign" to achieve their ends.

Commercial campaigns are aimed at promoting certain products, ideas, or services to the consumers in order to increase their awareness and refine and reassert their distinctive competitive brand positioning, with the ultimate aim of maintaining market share and profit levels (Kotler *et al.*, 2005). Political campaigns, on the other hand, aim to promote candidates, parties, political causes or political agendas, and are targeted at

voters rather than commercial consumers, with the intention of increasing awareness, garnering votes and improving the chances of winning the election (Holbrook, 1996).

Branding is another concept that is widely used in marketing commercial goods and services to consumers and political parties, politicians and political agendas to voters. According to Hackley (2005), a brand can act as a reassurance of quality and a badge of origin with which consumers can identify (Feldwick, 2002). Needham (2005) mentions the advantages of applying branding techniques to politics. Conceiving of a political party as a brand may enhance party, i.e. "brand" loyalty during an election as well as non-election periods. There is a case for arguing that loyalty to a brand of product might be a less enduring and more superficial thing than loyalty to a political party for many individuals, but then again, for many other individuals the reverse might be the case. For example, an individual might buy one brand of car throughout his or her lifetime, yet vote for different political parties at different elections.

The idea of branding can be applied powerfully to the persona of political candidates as well as to political parties. This technique in particular has originated in American politics since the tired and drawn appearance of President Nixon in a televised debate lost him considerable political ground in his race with the relatively young and vibrant-looking John F. Kennedy. Since then, the televisual presence and aura of the candidate has been recognised as a key determinant of party success and the candidate is managed as a brand in order to help build a sense of reassurance and foster identification between the candidate and the potential voter. Party managers use branding techniques to focus on and reinforce certain key attributes of the candidate (Needham, 2005, p. 184).

In terms of function, commercial and political advertising also overlap each other. For example, Hackley (1998) argues that advertising often performs a reinforcing function rather than persuading (Ehrenberg *et al.*, 2002). Political advertising, like brand advertising, can seldom persuade a deeply brand-loyal individual to change affiliation. What it can do is to remind audiences that the brand remains current topical and active, preserving a sense of visibility and presence in the marketplace. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) suggest that this is often as true of political advertising as it is of commercial advertising. Hence, advertising in both the brand marketing and political marketing fields can often be used to reinforce the existing beliefs of audiences and to reassure them that they need not veer away from the path of loyalty since the values they associate with the brand remain steady and true.

Last but not least, scholars from the political field, like Maarek (1995), and the marketing field, such as Kotler *et al.* (2005), have tried to use a communication process model to understand how messages can be received and interpreted by voters and consumers. For them, the difference between voters and consumers is largely based on the contextual level rather than on procedures. They assume that voters and consumers (notwithstanding that the two are not different individuals but the same individual engaged with a different kind of message) process messages in essentially the same way. We explore this supposition in more detail later in the paper.

The voting-brand consumption analogy can, then, be seen to hold quite strongly in certain respects. In particular, there is significant cross-fertilization between the fields of political campaign management and marketing management so that techniques of brand marketing have transferred to the political marketing arena. This assumes that the similarities between voters and consumers are meaningful for purposes of demand

or vote management. On the other hand, there are those who advocate that, despite the similarities, voters and consumers can be quite different when their respective contexts are considered in detail.

Are voters,
consumers?

Voters are different from consumers!

Lock and Harris (1996) listed some key differences between political marketing and product or service marketing. This list was specifically designed for the UK electoral system; however, some have some degree of application to international contexts:

- All voters make their choices on the same day (with a few exceptions, such as postal and proxy voters) while consumers do not.
- There is no price directly or indirectly attached to voting or the choice of party, which sharply differentiates it from making a purchase.
- A voter has to live with the collective choice, even though it might not have been his or her own preference, but consumers can often get a refund on their purchase.
- Winner takes all in the UK – “first past the post” system not proportional representation.
- The political party or candidate is a complex, intangible product which voters cannot untangle.
- The possibility of introducing a new brand in the form of a new party is far more difficult and unusual than it is in the commercial arena.
- In most marketing situations, brand leaders tend to stay in front. In the UK, while governments may win successive elections, there seems to be an increasing trend for them to fall behind in opinion polls between elections (Lock and Harris, 1996, pp. 14-15).

Some of the differences are caused by regulation and some are more fundamental, being anchored in differences in political and consumer culture, but they all play some part in illustrating differences between political and commercial marketing.

Harris *et al.* (1999) draws attention to important differences between the marketing and political arenas, emphasizing the distinction between the ideological and propagandistic character of some political campaigning and the more instrumental and functional appeals common in brand marketing. O’Shaughnessy (2002, pp. 210-14) further amended the differences between political and commercial marketing at the macro and micro-levels including consideration of concepts of “embedded value”, “symbol” and “rhetoric”. The implication here is that political appeals are even more reliant on sub-text and symbolic connotation than brand marketing appeals. Symbolic values are embedded within the imagery and rhetoric of political marketing appeals so that attention is not solely placed on more concrete policy platforms, which may easily be discarded later on. According to O’Shaughnessy (2002) voters understand that political engagement has a different character to consumer engagement so they are looking for deeper symbols and shared values with which to relate to political parties and candidates. This is strikingly different to much brand advertising which must be factually correct and consistent, as in the specifications of a new brand of car. In politics, the precise policy specifics may be changed considerably between seeking and

gaining power, but voters understand that product consumption is ontologically different from the consumption of politics.

Second, O'Shaughnessy (2002) also contrasted the amount and depth of media coverage between the two. Typically, political contests will receive more free media coverage than commercial product or service marketing contests. Last but not least, the nature of the competition is different in the sense that a product or service is relatively constant while a political candidate or party is in a perpetual flux as regards ideas and policies.

According to Powell (1998), voters' political attitudes are primarily formed by family, media usage, peers and education. This may also be said of some consumer brands (Solomon, 1999) but O'Shaughnessy (1996) stressed that the relative weight of influence of factors such as family, religion, ethnicity and social class may be very different as regards attitudes toward political allegiance and commercial brands.

Some researchers advocate the view that political and commercial marketing are similar but only in certain areas. Dean and Croft (2001) proposed that political marketing is similar to relationship and internal marketing, where the party has to build a relationship with its supporters and internal staff through marketing concepts. Marland (2003) added a similar point by suggesting that political marketing is more similar to the real-estate industry, due to the heavy human interaction within the service industry in contrast with most other commercial sectors. These researchers did not compare how audiences consume political or commercial mediated messages, but in general they concluded that voters and consumers have more differences than similarities.

The literature review has, thus far, focused largely on the nature of the field and practice. The next part focuses more directly on voters and consumers themselves.

Commercial consumers and media audiences

Research studies in management have offered insights into the affective and cognitive processes and behaviour of media audiences and consumers (Solomon *et al.*, 1999; Peter and Olson, 2005). Marketers try to influence these variables through the use of different combinations of the 4Ps. As we have noted above, the effectiveness of these marketing activities can be influenced by a consumer's cultural, family and education background and their degree of involvement. The key issue is that brand consumption is not only a matter of fulfilling functional needs and instrumental desires but also a symbolic practice through which consumers can engage in identity construction projects (Levy, 1959; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998) and fulfil experiential desires of fantasies and fun (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Szmigin (2003, p. 40) suggested that consumers cannot only assign meanings to goods and services, but also "define their self-identity and indeed their social or group identities through their possessions, the meanings attached to them and their messaging roles". Moreover, both consumers and voters will tend to disregard media messages, whether political or commercial, if they do not find them personally relevant (Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999). However, there is also the view that attentional processes are not necessary to all media message processing: "low involvement processing" can occur when media messages are merely a peripheral part of consciousness (Heath and Feldwick, 2008). This view is consistent with the idea that brand advertising can act as publicity rather than simply as an analogy of a personal sales encounter (Ehrenberg *et al.*, 2002).

Media researchers have also sought to pick apart the qualitative nature of audience engagement with media messages, going beyond the attention-inattention dichotomy implied by cognitive information processing models to adapt concepts such as polysemy (multiple possible meanings in a single advertising text) and intertextuality (sub-textual reference to other non-advertising genres such as movies or current affairs in a single advertisement) (Hackley, 2005). In media and cultural studies research the term “audience” simply refers to anyone who can consume a text within the production and consumption continuum (Lewis, 2002; Strinati, 2004). “Polysemy” means that a text can have multiple meanings; thus, it can be decoded differently by different audiences and different individuals. As Moores (1993, p. 17) put it, media texts “are always open to more than one possible reading”. However, astute media practitioners try to understand the frame of reference, values and cultural milieu of particular audiences groups to try to delimit the meanings likely to be read into given messages or to persuasively suggest that particular meanings might be read into the ads (Lewis, 2002; Strinati, 2004). A key element of this process is intertextuality, the tendency for advertising messages to refer to events, ways of life or communication styles outside the advertising text (O’Donohoe, 1997). Intertextual references to, say, particular styles of dress, lifestyle values, historical events or cinematic styles can frame the likely message interpretation (Hackley, 2005). For example, one well-known political advertisement used by the Labour Party in, 1994 to try to package their then leader Neil Kinnock as a viable Prime Minister drew on cinematic styles of filming with carefully lit facial close-ups and a long shot of Mr Kinock and his wife walking hand-in-hand along a beach, evoking romantic movies. Memorably, and unfortunately for Mr Kinnock, he fell over trying to escape a wave and the footage of his fall became more famous than the ad.

In general, we can see from these studies that while there are commonalities between political campaign planning and brand marketing practice, there are unknown factors at the micro-level about the precise ways in which particular audiences might read specific media messages whether commercial or political. In order to try to generate insights into the kinds of engagement which occur between audience and message this paper now reports on a case example from fieldwork in the UK.

Case study fieldwork approach

As noted above, the research entailed a selective and non-representative sample of eight focus groups of British voters defined along party affiliation lines, Conservative or Labour. Among the 42 participants, aged from 25 to 35 years old, there were slightly more females than males and the majority of them were in higher education or had a degree.

The two Labour party election broadcasts (PEB) described above from the 1997 election were aired to the focus groups in turn. The first one was the Tony Blair brand advertisement showing a monologue, then footage of him in public and private settings interacting with voters and his family. Gould (1998) and Powell (1998) explain that this PEB was aiming at building the image of Tony Blair and, by association, the Labour Party. In particular, it was trying to cue perceptions of competence and ordinariness, to position labour effectively against the conservatives who had an image of administrative competence which mainly served the social elite. This type of

presentation clearly enjoys some commonality with brand advertisements, for example those that focus on family brands or corporate identity. The second PEB used was called "Hope and Glory" after the traditionally patriotic song which was used as its music score. It fell into the category of "negative advertising" because it questioned the opponent's suitability for office, based on his/her character or past performance (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1991). Negative advertising was unusual at that time in Britain and remains rare in Britain in both the political and commercial arenas.

The focus group transcripts were analysed using a discourse analytic theoretical perspective to interpret the various themes of talk and discussion (Morley, 2002; see also Hackley, 2000). Discourse analysis focuses not only on what was said but also on the possible motivations (action-orientation) of what is said (Hackley, 2003). The analysis employed the conventional qualitative approach of sorting and coding for key themes and issues while the thematic groupings were, in addition, theoretically informed drawing on discourse analytic principles.

The issue of image and brand in political advertising consumption

Brand and image advertising have played an increasing role in the commercial marketing communication mix (Hackley, 2005). In political competition, the party and politician's character and image also play a crucial role (Jamieson, 1996). During the fieldwork, this research observed that voters did give a large amount of attention to the politicians and political party's character and image. In particular, these voters placed considerable emphasis on the politician's appearance as they would when consuming commercial messages that featured celebrities:

He (referring to Tony Blair) has a lot more hair back then (Respondent 1).

He (referring to Tony Blair) surely is handsome (Respondent 1).

Oh, I don't remember he (referring to Tony Blair) used to look like that! (Respondent 9).

Some of the audience members were shocked when they realised how Tony Blair's appearance had changed since 1997. Despite the change in appearance, most of them still considered Tony Blair as above average looking, which seems to be a part of his political appeal. There may be some parallels here between this ad and the celebrity endorsement ads in general advertising practice. Celebrity endorsement in the commercial context is the use of "top athletes, well-known film stars, fashion models and even cartoon characters – to deliver their brand messages" (Kotler *et al.*, 2005, p. 738). The idea is that, in consuming the endorsed brand, some of the positive attributes of the celebrity might transfer symbolically to the consumer (Kotler *et al.*, 2005). The possibility of such transference depends to some extent on the establishment of trust in the values that the celebrity represents. While consumers will understand that the views expressed in a celebrity endorsement may not be sincere, they will need to believe that the characteristics of the celebrity are, to some extent, genuine. These political advertisements needed to put across his qualities of political sincerity and identification with the aspirations of the ordinary voter, and it appeared that, even in the light of his many perceived political failures in the intervening years (not least the widespread view in the British media that Mr Blair mislead Parliament over the invasion of Iraq) the integrity and attractiveness of his personal image remained largely intact:

Ya, I never hear anything about his parents. And that gives you a lot of rounded feeling about him rather than just a politician (Respondent 7).

I don't know, but I do get the feeling that he wants to make Britain better. A normal guy fighting for everyone. I think even [if] you can see it staged, but it worked (Respondent 11).

It is quite convincing, you see him interacting with people. He seems all normal and stuff. It is a very natural life kind of settings (collectively agreeing) (Respondent 26).

You certainly get to know him more as a person. And I think it worked, because we didn't know him at the time (Respondent 17).

This audience seemed to feel that they knew the politician through the image portrayed in the ads. Clearly, their understanding of the ads was filtered through countless other media exposures to Mr Blair. Nevertheless, the ads seemed to retain their power to evoke positive emotions and perceptions about Mr Blair and, by association, the Labour Party that he dominated at that time.

An analogy can be drawn with service marketing with regard to the intangibility and variability of the service offering (Booms and Bitner, 1981). Services, like political parties and politicians, are brands which are not defined by tangible characteristics such as engineering quality, aerodynamics or aesthetic features, but by largely intangible qualities such as trust, service, history and values. In addition, one crucial function of the brand is to act as a shorthand device to assist consumer to narrow their range of choice and to lower the uncertainty and risk associate with the product (Feldwick, 2002). Tony Blair, along with his appearance and image, in this study did act as a shorthand device for voters to evaluate an oppositional party who had suffered from a chronic lack of credibility for the preceding 18 years.

The perceptions of Blair's attractive persona can, though, be seen as relatively superficial aspects informing, but not determining, the consumer/voting decision. There were also negative perceptions expressed.

The voters' critical evaluation of the political election broadcasts

Some of these voters seemed to be able to separate their emotional responses to the PEB from their critical appraisal of the political issues involved. In commercial advertising, a similar phenomenon can be observed where creative skill and careful advertising design can elicit admiration even among non-consumers of the brand (Messaris, 1997; Kotler *et al.*, 2005; Hackley, 2005). The overall impression can also be seen as more important than the detail. Illustrating this, several audience members made some emotional remarks during the discussion:

It (the ad) is sickening, but it is exactly what people wanted at the time. But obvious, obvious propaganda (Respondent 14).

But I don't like they way the party just says these stupid generalisation. Are people stupid enough to believe that because you are quite conservative so you don't understand the NHS [...]. I don't (Respondent 14).

The working class always voted Labour anyway. So who cares who the leader is, I will always vote Labour (Respondent 3).

Why do you have to know every word he said? The important thing is the overall impression. Even if he was talking nonsense and you can't remember a thing he said, it is not a problem. He is just like you and me, a very ordinary kind of guy (Respondent 5).

From the above, it seems like there is a display of emotion in these voters' responses to the political messages. It may be relevant that in consumer decisions, cognitive dissonance can be resolved by taking the product back. Voting decisions in a general election, though, cannot be changed. The decision must be rationalized. Voters in an election all make their decisions on the same day and everybody has to live with the decision whether they like it or not (Lock and Harris, 1996). Therefore, there may be a bit more emotion and enthusiasm in politics compared to brand marketing. On the other hand, voters can also be very rational and critical, indicating possibly a deeper level of involvement than they typically experience with consumer goods and services marketing. For example, audiences often evade brand marketing commercials through zipping and zapping (Olney *et al.*, 1991) because they are bored with the incessant barrage of marketing on television. Some voters, of course, do exactly the same when it comes to political election broadcasts, but those who do engage with them tend to do so with some passion and conviction because whatever their affiliation they know that politics affects their interests. At the same time, audiences admired the way that the Blair PEB seemed to engage with them on a personal level:

He is portrayed as young [...] a young man with vision. [He] is really up to complete something [...] I feel it is a documentary. The approach is very personal. It is an informal approach. You see the living room setting, in a journey, in the plane, in the car; it feels like a chat. Chatting with you (Respondent 3).

[...] The cup of tea, is trying to drive out the hominess that you can trust. It is giving out these new messages, trying to appeal to the new voters [...] but it is also speaking to the core voters as well [...] (Respondent 22).

I think it is also quite clever in the video, because he is being self critical of the Labour Party. He is making it obvious that he is aware of how people see it (Respondent 11).

He is quite clever because he didn't say much about the Conservative Party. And he seemed quite frank about Labour's past mistakes and [...] that they need a big change (Respondent 27).

In these passages, the research participants do critically evaluate the ad by considering the larger context. They noticed that Blair uses the broadcast to carefully distance his personal political persona from the traditional Labour Party that had been unelectable for so long. They tried to decode the strategies employed by the politicians and advertising practitioners. On the one hand, this coincides with other media, advertising and communication studies' findings that the receiver of the message will interpret and evaluate the message based on their background and knowledge (Friestad and Wright, 1994; Messaris, 1997; Morley, 2002). On the other hand, there are also differences with brand advertising in terms of the typical length of a political election broadcast in the UK as compared to a typical brand advertisement (the PEB can be up to five minutes long) and there are different levels of emotional involvement in the two cases. Overall, voters' responses to the Blair PEB seemed to have some similarities with consumer responses to brand advertisements as assumed in the brand marketing literature. They were influenced by the persona of the celebrity presenter and conscious of the wider

associations and values of the brand in relation to their personal views and lifestyle. They were also critically engaged with the ad, and projected their own views and values on to the imagery they saw on the television screen. This accords with advertising research which shows that consumers faced with advertisements are not merely passive information processors but actively engage with ads through their own frame of reference (Ritson and Elliott, 1999). However, there seemed to be a greater divergence between the way voters and consumers think when it came to the negative political advertisement used in the study. There was a strong emotional charge to liking or disliking the approach of a particular party or candidate.

The consumption of negative political advertising

As we have indicated earlier, negative political advertising attempts to question one's opponent's suitability for office by attacking their image, position on issues or both (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1991). Negative advertising does exist in commercial marketing communication though usually the negative issues are implied rather than explicitly stated. Negative advertising is more strongly associated with the field of political marketing (Kinsey, 1999) though it is much more common, and more direct, in the USA than in Britain. It can be traced back to the 50s during Eisenhower's second term (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1991; Jamieson, 1996). The regulation of political advertising is different from its commercial counterpart (Richards and Caywood, 1991) and more explicit criticism is permitted of a political opponent than of a rival brand. Negative political advertisements are often highlighted and even magnified by the media if the campaign catches media's attention (O'Shaughnessy, 2002). Some of the British voters in this study exhibited their shock when exposed to negative political advertisements:

It is such a strong mixture of [...] I don't really know how to start, it is really bizarre [...] It is [...] I don't often have this kind of strange feeling about a text [...] very strange piece, the music, the patriotic sort of preaching [...] it is very strange [...] (Respondent 21).

It is pretty much saying "if you vote Tory, then you are stupid" (Respondent 25).

I think it is quite shocking since it didn't say anything. They just show you all these slightly lower or middle-class men and women under the Conservative government (Respondent 33).

Conservative voters were initially upset and puzzled by the Labour Party ad frankly criticising the Conservative party and its voters, then, quickly some of them wanted to issue a rebuttal. Labour voters also experienced a dilemma. Some of them did not agree with this type of advertising, but had difficulty in articulating whether they should endorse the ad or not. The ad reflected their prejudices but they were reluctant to see them expressed in such bigoted terms.

In order to be more precise, it is necessary to consider different genres of negative advertising. For Homer and Batra (1994) and Merritt (1984), negative advertising can be divided into two main categories: comparative and negative. The former aims to "describe a positive attribute of the sponsor and in doing so imply an absence of that attribute in the competitor" and the latter "focuses primarily on degrading perceptions of the rival, to the advantage of the sponsor" (Merritt, 1984, p. 27).

As we note above, comparative advertising with implied, not explicit criticism is relatively more common in commercial ads, especially in the United States and in some

parts of western European countries (Hackley, 2005). The British research participants in this study were relatively unfamiliar with advertising that directly criticises an opponent, like the “Hope and Glory” ad used in this study. Interestingly, the voters’ initial surprise did not last long before they switched to a more critical role. The last section will focus on some of their insights after they recovered from their anger and confusion.

Switching back to a critical audience

After the initial reaction described above, the audience in this research again switched to a critical role, as they did when viewing the image-building political ad. The following are some of their critical evaluations of the spot:

It is also trying to create a contrast, when the society is in downgrade, but they are still enjoying, happily applauding, celebrating their success. It is a hard feeling for ordinary people (Respondent 5).

I like the way the imagery connects to the topic. You see old people in the pension home are all depressed. Thinking of this is all the Tories do to them. You feel sympathy for them. But the imagery is really good and connects to the text (Respondent 7).

Even as a Labour supporter, you notice there is a bit of trickery in its statistics and you know statistics can be used in any way (Respondent 21).

Ya, it is far more a shock tactic [...] it constantly makes you think what would happen if the Tories got in power again [...] the way the camera was distorted and makes them inhuman, looking evil, you know? (Respondent 32).

It sort of drills into your head (Respondent 32).

From the above, the voters with different political affiliations all tried to decode the ad and analyse its intention, strategy and presentation style even though none of the voters in this study had any professional background in politics, advertising or media communication. This supports Friestad and Wright’s (1994) finding that individuals will utilise a diverse range of knowledge and previous experience to evaluate persuasion attempts.

Reflexive comments on the fieldwork

At this stage in the paper we would make some reflexive comments on the fieldwork regarding areas where voters appear differ from consumers. First, because of the UK’s unique PEB regulation, these “advertisements” are pre-scheduled with clear differentiation from other programmes. They are much lengthier than commercial spots and cannot be repeated (Wring, 2002). One significant observation from the fieldwork was that political audiences do not have to pay close attention to political spot in order to grasp the general theme and content. It is normal for our participants to turn to talk to their peers and look elsewhere while still able to provide a clear and correct description of the ad content. Second, although few participants labelled themselves as political enthusiasts, there was an emotional charge to their analysis of political ads as if they felt that they should care more about political information. Lastly, it is observed that it is important for these voters to be fair and judgmental. Perhaps, because of the sensitivity of discussing political affiliation and ideology,

individuals were, in general, cautious when expressing their view even it was an election from the past. The advantages of gathering data in an inter-active social setting are considerable, though we cannot discount a certain amount of self-censorship given the reluctance of respondents to appear to be disrespectful to the views of their peers.

During this part of the research, the format of the political spot, the narrative and audience's political awareness all seemed to play a part in distinguishing voters from consumers. Finally, to conclude the paper we will offer some summary comments.

Do voters think like consumers? A comparison of their consumption of media texts

From the observations and transcripts gathered from the fieldwork and literature on voters and consumers, there are several angles from which to compare and examine voters and consumers. In particular, there is a macro- and a micro-perspective. Broadly, on a macro-perspective, in a daily setting, voters can be consumers and vice versa. It is not unreasonable to assume that the basic processing of commercial and political media messages will be similar. The case study fieldwork deployed in this research offers some support for this view through observing the voters and assimilating literature on audiences and consumers, as discussed by Messaris (1997). For example, voters may be influenced by a politician's image and the brand image of the political party, just as they may be influenced by the brand image of a service or product. Also, they pay attention to a politician's appearance as they would to that of a celebrity in an endorsement appeal. They are moved by emotional appeals but will sometimes drift away and lose concentration or mentally or physically zip and zap through the commercial or political broadcast message. It would be easy to conclude that the practices in political communication and marketing communication are interchangeable. Moreover, it is also possible to imply that academics with a political, communication and marketing background could adopt a similar approach when researching their participants regardless of whether they are consumers or voters.

On the other hand, there is also a real danger of underestimating the importance of context. This is where the importance of the micro-level of analysis is evident. There are important contextual differences within the commercial and political arenas that can be difficult to transfer (Lock and Harris, 1996; O'Shaughnessy, 1990). For example, the voters evaluated the media text critically and tried to analyse the meanings behind the message through their knowledge and experience of politics and political communication. More importantly, the voters could identify and acknowledge the differences in the commercial and political arenas and make judgments about how these could influence them. The nature of engagement with political marketing seemed different at the micro level to engagement with brand marketing; there was more emotional charge and a deeper level of critical analysis of the advertising texts than one might expect from laypeople.

Last but not least, there are limitations in the approach that uses a case study example of fieldwork in UK as stimulus for a discussion on the voter-consumer analogy. The findings from a selective and non-representative sample cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, the findings do offer some particularized micro-level insights how these voters engage with PEB. Moreover, while there are no grounds for

generalization, there is also no reason why these voters might not share characteristics with others. We conclude by suggesting that this study opens up some grounds for suspecting that micro-level analyses of consumer engagement with political marketing, especially ethnographies and other qualitative approaches, reveal layers of complexity which may not typically obtain in a commercial brand marketing context. Further, studies could elaborate on the deepening differences in the nature of consumer engagement with political marketing and commercial brand marketing.

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