Political Party Brand and Consumer Choice in Ghana

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This study aims at ascertaining the extent to which political parties are managed as brands and the perceptions of political party brands amongst Ghanaians. The research design is qualitative employing focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. We sought to unearth comprehensive understanding of voter brand choice in Ghana. Findings indicate that the major political parties are not managed properly as brands. The political parties studied also do not invoke salient mental associations nor intense emotional effects with voters as power brands do with consumers. This paper presents a modest contribution to the political brand management literature, from a developing economy context.

INTRODUCTION

Political parties, as organizations that mobilize voters on behalf of a common set of interests, concerns and goals, are now employing professional branding practice all over the world. When confronted with overwhelming muddle of communication, consumers pick and choose what gets their attention (Jackson, 2006). When a party accepts and understands that their critical objective is to sell, or persuade voters to contribute and vote for them they become much more effective (Jackson, 2006). Brands have now been recognized as the most stable and sustainable assets in businesses and communities, living long after management teams and technological break-through (Clifton, 2003). Brands do have political implications. International power brands' dominance and their role as political symbols continue to draw issue. Political brand choice has highlighted new possibilities for actively expressing fundamental differences of view, in terms of alternative statement brand. This contribution presents branding as the foundation of political marketing in the new millennium. The recognition of the relevance of branding political parties and candidates has led to recent interest about the conceptualization of political parties as brands (Harris & Lock, 2001; White & de Chernatony, 2002). However there has been limited consideration about the degree to which political choice by voters can be conceptualized in relation to consumer brand (Reeves & de Chernatony, 2003). The understanding of the relationship between

commercial brand and political parties needs to be thoroughly deepened and expanded, to provide meaning and theoretical context to employing brand expressions to describe and explain political activity.

The objective of this study is to contribute to the conceptualization of political brand choice through an exploratory study of opinions of voter political brand choices in Ghana. The overarching aim of this paper is therefore to analyze the extent to which political brand choices are formed and draw lessons for political party branding. The questions addressed by this article are therefore: What are the current voter perceptions of major political parties? To what extent are images of political party developments and imagery in Ghana analogous to the commercial brand typology? What branding opportunities exist for political parties in Ghana? This paper is significant at two levels. Firstly it makes an important contribution to the global academic discourse on political branding. Secondly it offers important insights into how political parties in Ghana, can better conceptualize their brand propositions from a consumer choice standpoint.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN GHANA

Political parties became important as instruments in Ghana's democratic practice as early as the 1950s when the country was in transition from colonial rule to an independent sovereign nation-state. As many as 8 political parties emerged between 1954 and 1957 to participate in the struggle for self-determination against British colonial rule. Between 1969 and 1972 up to 12 political parties were formed to join hands in the agitation to restore democratic rule in the country. In 1979 when the country had to reclaim her government from the military and place it on a democratic basis there was an explosion of political parties: 11 political parties mushroomed; by 1981 the scramble to form political parties had simmered down reducing the number to 6. These struggles resurged in 1986-1992 culminating in January 1993 when Ghana was ushered into constitutional rule with a democratic system of government. The 1992 Constitution guarantees various political and civil rights, including the right to form political associations, speak freely, choose who to govern the country, and the right to participate in the government of the country in other forms. Like their predecessors, the political parties that currently exist have been driven by the core values of democracy. The country's history of military dictatorship and abuse of human rights were compelling reasons for insisting on the freedom to form political parties. The language of the social movements that struggled against the PNDC affirmed the belief of the Ghanaian political class in these democratic principles, which ultimately formed the core of their demands for democracy.

Between May 1992, when the ban on political parties was lifted and November of the same year, 13 political parties were registered; namely, Democratic Peoples Party (DPP), New Generation Party(NGP), Ghana Democratic Republican Party(GDRP), National Independence Party(NIP), Peoples Heritage Party(PHP), Every Ghanaian Living Everywhere Party(EGLE), National Convention Party (NCP), National Democratic Congress (NDC), New Patriotic Party(NPP), People's National Convention(PNC), People's Party for Democracy and Development(PPDD), National Justice Party(NJP), and National Salvation Party(NSP). Some of the political parties – for example, NPP, had emerged from an old political tradition dating back to the 1950s and subscribing to conservative liberalism. Others like the NDC were entirely new political entities; they had no roots in Ghanaian politics and did not pronounce any explicit political ideology. A number of them did not survive the competitive as well as organizational and financial demands of electoral politics. The NDC won both the presidential and parliamentary elections held in November-December 1992. Four years into constitutional rule, eight of the political parties NPP, NDC, PNC, DPP, EGLE, NCP, People's Convention Party (PCP), and Great Consolidated People's Party (GCPP) had survived to contest the 1996 elections which NDC won again. At December 2000, 7 political parties: NPP, NDC, PNC, CPP, GCPP, National Reform Party (NRP), and United Ghana Movement (UGM), contested the election and NPP won. NPP won again at December 2004 elections. In December 2008 general election, NDC won with Prof. John Atta-Mills as the presidential candidate. Looking at the historical background, NPP and NDC have been the dominant parties since 1992. The study will therefore focus on NPP and NDC political parties.

POLITICAL BRAND CONCEPTUALISATION

The extent to which voter choice is similar to consumer brand choice was examined by Reeves and de Chernatony (2003). They concluded that while commercial brand theory is largely appropriate for analyzing the evolving entity, functional and self concept components of a political brand, consumer brand theory needs greater re-conception to effectively analyze the differentiation, social and relationship building properties of political brands. White and de Chernatony (2002) examined political party branding as a means of establishing party values and winning support through the study of the British Labor Party. White and de Chernatony concluded that the New Labor brand, with an explicit promise of desirable social change, was an essential element in the modernization of the Party and its successes at three different national elections. This study also pointed out the particular need for a political brand to espouse differentiated values, socialize its members to its brand values, and, ensure its performances and behaviors of party members support and reinforce communicated brand values and promises.

Conceptual/Commercial Brand Framework

A brand in commercial essence is a name that influences buyers. What really makes that name become a brand is the saliency, differentiability, and intensity attached to those associations (Kapferer, 2004). The role of the marketer is to create frames for the development of a brand in the minds of customers, by providing an appropriate physical product, service process and supportive communication (Gronroos, 2000). Several models (Urde, 1999; Lepla and Parker 2002; Kapferer, 1997; Kapferer, 2004) have been developed to describe and guide brand development. Hanby (1999) notes that the most complete exposition of the *holistic* view of the brand is recorded by Kapferer (1997, 2004).

The researchers now discuss the Kapferer brand model and discuss it as the main conceptual anchor for our study. The analysis replicates Kapferer,s brand model.

Kapferer (2004) Brand Identity Construct

Kapferer (2004) advanced a brand model, arguing that the brand's deepest values must be reflected in its external signs of recognition. Identity is what helps an organization feel that it truly exists and that it is a coherent and unique being, with a history and place of its own and different from others. Identity is on the senders' side, the rationale being to stipulate the brand's meaning, aim and self image. A brand identity therefore expresses the brand's characteristics, "drawing upon the brand's roots and heritage, to give the brand its unique authority within the confines of defined values and benefit" (p.102). Kapferer posited that a brand identity has six facets which define the identity of a brand as well as the boundaries within which it is free to change and develop. They are: Physique, Personality, Culture, Relationship, Reflection and Self-Image.

According to Kapferer, the brand physique, relationship and reflection, are the visible components of the brand identity prism and the *social* facets, which give the brand its *external* expression. Kapferer however states that brand personality, culture and self-image, are those that incorporate the brand itself, within its spirit. (p.111)

FIGURE 1:
BRAND IDENTITY PRISM

PICTURE OF SENDER
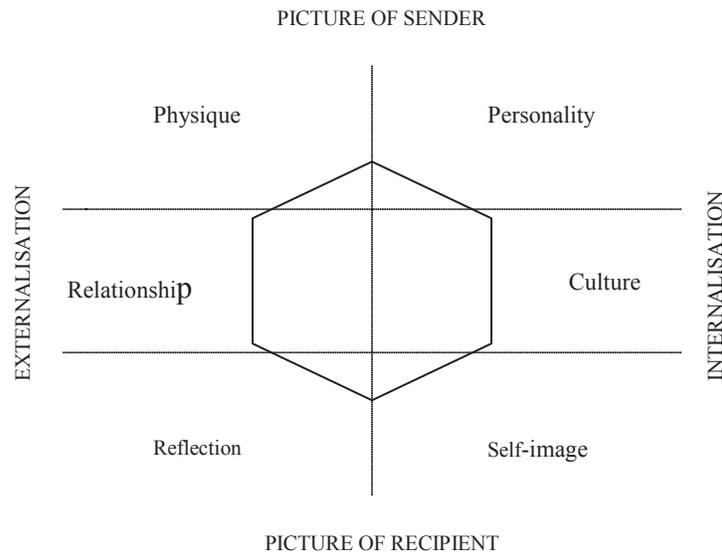
Source: Kapferer, 2004

THEORETICAL AND OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Brand Physique

A brand's physique represents its physical specificities and qualities. It is the physique that gives expression to a brand's functional added values (Kapferer, 2004). A political brand's functional benefits can be conceptualized as the policies and programs of a political party and promises to be acted upon if elected into government, and the overall voter evaluation of party performance (Reeves & de Chernatony, 2003).

The Brand as a Personality

Brand personality has to do with the distinctiveness of a brand itself, as perceived by consumers (de Chernatony et al., 1998). Brand personality may be measured by human personality traits (Kapferer, 2004). Political party brand consumers focusing on a brand's personality would describe a political party in human personality terms.

A Brand has Its Own Culture

The cultural dimension refers to their sources, their fundamental ideals and to their sets of values, basic principles governing the brand in its outward signs (Kapferer, 2004). Political brand culture would relate to community values most relevant to political voting electorate and a political party's values. Political brand culture would also relate to social pressure and the sources of voter political choices.

A Brand is a Relationship

A brand's relationship reflects the mode of conduct that most identifies the brand. Thus, this facet has several implications for the way the brand acts, delivers value, relates to its customers (Kapferer, 2004). Political brand relationships would relate to relationships existing between voters and specific political parties; how they will feel if a party was to win/lose elections.

The Brand is Also a Customer Reflection

A brand as customer reflection represents how the target wishes to be seen as a result of consuming the brand thus providing a model with which to build own identity (Kapferer, 2004). A brand tends to build a reflection or image of the buyer or user. Customer reflection relates to whom and what type of person is likely to vote for and/or be a member of this or that party.

A Brand Speaks to the Target's Self-Image

Through the consumer attitude towards a certain brand, a certain type of inner relationship is developed with the consumer (Kapferer, 2004). A political voter's self image would speak to the kinds of mental pictures evoked when a potential voter votes for or supports a particular party.

These brand descriptors form the conceptual anchor on which this study is hinged.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We adopt a qualitative research approach to this study because we were seeking deep and rich explanations for a phenomenon that had hitherto been under-researched from a developing country perspective. We were also seeking answers to political brand management questions by examining social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings (Berg 2007).

Fieldwork was carried out in 2007. A total of 82 focus groups discussions were conducted as part of a larger study of political opinions in eight regions (42 constituencies out of a total of 230) in Ghana. The main objective of the focus group was to enable deep insight to be gained through creating a forum where the respondents feel sufficiently relaxed to reflect and portray their feelings and behavior using their language and logic (Maholtra & Birks, 2003).

All participants in the study were registered voters in Ghana mainly in the politically active age, between 20 and 45 year range. Group numbers for each of the eight regions covered for this study reflected the region's share of the national voter register. Groups were composed of 8 – 12 respondents. To help with group dynamics the respondents were grouped 20 to 35 and 36 to 45 years of age. In addition to the focused groups, a total of 120 persons were interviewed via in-depth interviewing technique. Using purposive sampling, on the bases of those prepared to share their opinions and could avail them-selves for the interview for at least an hour, the samples for both focus group and in-depth interviews were constituted by those who could express themselves in English and/or the most widely spoken Ghanaian languages-Twi/Ewe/Hausa/Ga. Party activists were excluded from the groups, as experience has shown they take entrenched party positions that hamper the flow of the discussions. Ashanti and Volta regions were excluded from the fieldwork because they are NPP (government party) and NDC (main opposition party) strongholds, respectively. The in–depth interview on the other hand, aimed at collecting detailed qualitative information from opinion formers and leaders who for one reason or the other could not join the focus group discussions. Semi-structured discussion guide was employed and the recruitment of respondents was done through a recruitment guide that dropped party workers and those either below 18 or above 45 years old. All interviews ere audio recorded and transcribed. Data was analyzed through a thematic analysis, based on our conceptual framework. By ordering and integrating the codes the issues relating to our research questions and other relevant data were identified and reported. Where necessary, respondents are quoted verbatim, to underscore specific findings that differ, reinforce or moderate the strength of the general opinions.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Voter perceptions of the two leading political parties-New Patriotic Party (NPP) and National Democratic Congress (NDC) are presented in relation to the dimensions of Kapferer's Brand Identity construct. Other political parties in Ghana received insignificant respondents' attention even when prompted. The findings related to each construct are then discussed in the context of relevant literature. A

few Twi (the most widely spoken language in Ghana) expressions are supplied to amplify some responses.

Political Party Brand's Physique

When asked policies, programs, campaign promises and /or material benefits respondents would associate with NPP and NDC, less than half of the focus group respondents associated NPP with road construction, national health insurance, freedom of speech and human rights. "We still have economic hardships (Ahokyere), but there is serenity (asomdwe/ahotor) that we never enjoyed under NDC", seem to rationalize less than half of the focus group respondents' seemingly contradictory experiences about NPP. Across all groups, more than half of the focus group respondents associated NPP with clear messages and promises on free basic education, youth employment creation, human rights, national health insurance. Respondents recalled NPP's election 2004 campaign slogan "4 more years… so far so good", without prompting, with positive projects such as "Metro Mass Transit, Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE), National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS), Ghana Education Trust Fund (GETFUND), repeal of criminal libel law, HIPC and Capitation Grant". Significantly, more than half of respondents claimed that the NPP has failed to deliver the election promises made.

"To me NDC is the party of the moment," (Youth, Koforidua-Srodie), epitomizing the view of some respondents, who claimed they had voted previously for NPP but now were dissatisfied with NPP. Less than half of respondents strongly believe that NDC government performed better in terms of infrastructure development, sanitation, general economic well being and social inclusiveness. NDC was not associated by respondents with specific projects and programs. When NDC was associated with an achievement that achievement needed to be described or compared with a present development. "When NDC was in power there was more money than now…under NDC everyone could find some work to do but now…" are examples. The majority of respondents, including NDC sympathizers, credited NDC initiated projects such as GETFUND to NPP demonstrate the chaos in NDC communication. NDC was rather easily remembered for the negative: "lack of internal democracy and due process…the fights at party congresses…NDC belongs to Rawlings…atrocities committed by AFRC and PNDC…"

The functional or physical component of a brand must be made of a combination of salient objective attributes, which come to mind when the brand is cued (Kapferer, 2004). These must be perceived by voters to be relevant and must also be enacted in a reliable, consistent and responsible manner (Aaker, 1996). In terms of party communication effectiveness NPP was more effective, hence respondents top of mind recalls of NPP slogans and campaign promises. However, NPP could not be differentiated from NDC on the strength of actual performance delivered on the economy and job creation. NPP stands clearly above NDC on civil rights and liberties but as was claimed by more than half of respondents delivering jobs/economy is their most important current brand choice driver. NDC was positively discriminated on the bases of social inclusion which is desirable, but again, not the most salient. NDC's most critical drawback is its chaotic communication, as well as residual negative imagery continually reinforced by unplanned communication by its leadership.

A Brand as a Personality

When respondents were asked to describe the personality of NPP and NDC, more than half of respondents described NPP's personality as "betrayer, snake *under grass*, unfaithful, liar, boastful, arrogant, hypocritical, insensitive and crafty". The party is also associated with arrogance, self – centeredness, hypocrisy, inconsideration, and implementing policies in a rush.

On the positive note, NPP was perceived as "democratic, peaceful and upholding the rule of law". The party was again seen as "instilling peace among its members and preaching stability in the nation as against NDC that is preaching and practicing violence". For less than half of the focus group respondents, NPP was "good (*oye*)…as we dislike NDC". But here again more than half of respondents saw many of the claimed NPP strengths as façade. "NPP is doing massive road construction because this is where they line their pockets", (Youth, across groups). "Road for what? When you criticized NDC for road construction at the time the citizenry was hungry, you are doing worse" (Across groups).

NDC was associated with "violence, atrocities, corruption, coup mentality, dictatorship, lack of internal democracy and not learning from the past". Respondents see the founder of the party (J. J. Rawlings) to be autocratic and power-hungry.

NDC also was not associated with any philosophy, policies and programs as "NDC does not talk about issues…NPP is always setting the agenda and getting NDC derailed because NDC is happy to talk anyhow". NDC was claimed as disunited, lacking leadership, too radical, very impatient, confused, "too desperate and hungry for power as demonstrated by the frequency it embarks on demonstrations" (Across groups). NDC was perceived as having negative residual image. "Almost all our traders and industrialists, including my poor mother, suffered atrocities" (Business owner, Nkawkaw).

When asked about the key differences or similarities between NPP and NDC, both parties were claimed to be similarly "corrupt, greedy and immoral", pursuing the same political and economic agenda. The only difference however, centers on the ethnic sources of core voter support. Evidently both NDC and NPP political parties do not have differentiated *personalities*.

By communicating the brand clearly the brand builds up character gradually. Thus for a political party to become a brand the political party's name must evoke saliency, differentiability, intensity, certitude and trust (Kapferer, 2004). To more than half of respondents both political parties do not conjure any saliency or exclusivity. Trust is also missing among more than half of respondents for these parties. More than half of the focus group respondents regard both parties as similar as the parties are not ideologically differentiated. This finding is consistent with the general trend towards decline of the degree of political party differentiation (Reeves and de Chernatony, 2003).

A Brand as Culture

Explored here are the myriad of social factors that impact on voter brand choices. Less than half of respondents who perceived NPP as imbued with democratic values typified NPP as "democratic, peaceful and upholding the rule of law". The party was also perceived as "instilling peace among its members and preaching stability in the nation as against NDC that is preaching and practicing violence". However more than half of respondents claimed that under NPP there was "untold social and economic exclusion of the majority in the country...they preach peace and practice vice". Exploring respondents' party association with community *values for collective well being*, *values of relational well-being, values of personal well being* and moral values (Nelson and Prilleltensky, 2005), more than half of respondents claimed parties in Ghana could not be discriminated on these values. "The parties are similarly corrupt and greedy… pursuing the same economic and political policies…the difference being that NPP is more polished in pursuing its selfish agenda and more refined in lying than NDC…but has less tendency to walk the talk than NDC" (Legon student groups).

Even in the consideration of the impact of social pressures on voter political brand choice tangible differences were not revealed. Almost all respondents claimed they are aware of some form of social pressures, mostly from ethnic groups, families, community and religious leaders, being exercised to influence votes. The majority contention is that Asantes (for NPP) and Ewes (for NDC) were more likely to comply with ethnic pressures than other ethnic groups in Ghana. At a lower level Akyems and Kwahus (for NPP) and some northern ethnic groups (for NDC) were mentioned. The least likely to comply with ethnic pressures in political choices were mentioned as Fantes and Bonos. Almost all respondents claimed they have heard party campaign appeals based on ethnicity.

Another dimension of the impact of social pressures to voter political brand choice was the perceived role of Rawlings in galvanizing either Akan or Asante voter choices against NDC. To less than half of the focus group respondents (mostly voters in Kwahu and Akim constituencies) NDC is a party owned by Rawlings, an "Ewe". Meanwhile Rawlings' characterization by this minority as "violent…not democratic…always preaching violence" means "NDC cannot be appealing to us Akans/Asantes)". The claim also was that it was the "Akan group that bore the blunt of the violent Rawlings' led AFRC/PNDC governments". For those who hold this view, the more prominent Rawlings is as a leader of NDC, the more the Akan group is motivated to rally behind NPP.

A Brand as a Relationship

Voters long standing voluntary and committed relationship with identification to a political party were explored. In mainly Eastern Region's Akim and Kwahu constituencies, the claim was that of long standing UP/ NPP tradition. Less than half of the focus group respondents claimed they had committed relationships with NPP. "No matter how hard NDC tries I will not be attracted to NDC" was a popular minority view. In coastal Greater Accra, parts of Central, and the North it was adversarial relationship with NPP, on the bases of "NPP's unfulfilled promises and lies…lack of social inclusiveness…NPP's disrespect for minority non-Akan groups…the killing of Ya Na". In these areas respondents' dislike for NPP seemed to be the driver of NDC sympathies, and not loyalty towards NDC per se. Considerable minority across groups was found to be attracted to NDC because of the force of Rawlings persona (this view was strong among groups composed of "settlers" in southern Ghana, and in the North).

More than half of respondents claimed they did not have any committed relationship with any particularly party, even though they are likely to vote than not. No significant political party communities were identified and only insignificant minority of respondents ever attend political rallies. Almost all respondents have never contributed to party funding, although insignificant minority has ever received money "rewards" as incentive for activists roles during political party campaigns. Significantly, at least one out of four respondents in each group had switched between NDC and NPP at previous elections and as many as one out of four or five persons spoken to would either not vote at all, are undecided or would not be bothered about election results if elections were to be held today, "because all parties are the same." More than half of the focus group respondents, in response to whether they would consider or not a new political party, claimed they did not find it necessary for a new party to be formed again in Ghana, no matter how ideal it might be. "If NDC fails I will vote for NPP, to punish the offending NDC party, and vice versa" capped the argument for the majority and which reflects voter inertia, lack of loyalty and committed relationship with majority of voters.

A Brand is a Customer Reflection

The questions asked were: who was more likely to be a supporter/ member of NDC/NPP, who is more likely to be NPP/NDC party member/loyal follower? Less than half of the focus group respondents claimed someone from Ashanti Region and, or, the Akim and Kwahu constituencies of Eastern region was more likely to adopt NPP. Similarly, someone from the Volta Region or parts of the North was claimed to be more likely to adopt NDC. Again less than half of the focus group respondents claimed the "masses" across ethnicity were more likely to adopt NDC while the "elites" were more likely to vote NPP. To more than half of the focus group respondents, NDC followers could not be discriminated from NPP as same "masses or persons may vote today for this party and tomorrow for another" Brand will always tend to build a reflection or an image of the user which it seems to address. However, one cannot discriminate NDC party supporter from NPP on the bases of national issues, concerns or causes. This may be indicative of political parties in Ghana not differentiated on issues or concerns beyond ethnic affiliations of their leadership.

A Brand Speaks to the Voter Self Image

A political brand speaks to our self-image when the political brand aligns with the self concept of the individual voter, self image being the target's own mirror. More than half of respondents claimed that they are unhappy with the way political parties and government are being run in Ghana. More than half of the focus group respondents described NPP as "betrayer, poisonous snake, unfaithful, liar, boastful, arrogant, hypocrite, insensitive and crafty". NDC was perceived as having an image evolving from the AFRC/PNDC days, reinforced during NDC's two terms in office. Associating "NDC with dictatorship and violence" were common characterization. The party was not associated with any philosophy, policies and programs.

Less than half of the focus group respondents claimed that either NDC or NPP political parties fit their self concepts. Even then the degree of fit is not strong as almost all respondents reported a discrepancy between voter self concept and their perceptions of political brand. The degree of misfit was evident when

respondents were asked to compare the political party they would vote for today with their *ideal*. Significantly, almost all respondents claimed that political parties in Ghana are far from their *ideal*. This finding should be troubling to the major parties in Ghana. As parties are not meeting voting expectations, a threshold may be violated when voters, like all consumers, will clamor for changes they perceive are desirable, beyond their current evoked sets of major political parties.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study adds to the understanding in relation to consumer brands. Clearly, political branding can be conceptualized in terms of a "commercial" brand using Kapferer's Brand Identity prism. Based on this exploratory study a few conclusions can be drawn. First, brand analyses of political parties have demonstrated that political parties in Ghana are not managed as *brands*. Second, neither do they constitute mental nor the emotional effects akin to strong consumer brands. Third, having allowed political brands to develop negative reflections is a major challenge. Political brands, like other consumer brands, are not created overnight. They have to earn the respect of the voter overtime, on the basis of history of performance and heritage (Kapferer, 2004).

To start the process of branding political parties have to clarify their brand values, aims and ambitions as well as brand promises (or propositions). The brand is then internalized through the alignment of leadership, management systems and processes to the brand values and behaviors that will deliver value to voter. Party activists and members are then educated and socialized into the new values. The party can then expect to have brand supportive mind-set and behaviors from its internal customers. It is only then that the Party externalization through a series of party contacts and communication with its external customers, the voter, will become brand driven. Responsibility for brand development is likely to be leadership based, and led by leaders who have the vision and authority to engender shared brand support and commitment, and on brand behavior.

On the bases of this exploratory study, and from a brand *health* perspective, both NDC and NPP are acutely *sick*, needing revitalization to become relevant to voters. Failing, these parties will inadvertently be creating opportunity for the emergence of a *new* political brand. For, in the new economy, people want to give meaning to their choices. It is brands that add value to consumer choices and tell a story about buyers, that can provide this meaning and, in so doing, the durable competitive advantage political parties crave for.

An attempt to compare our findings with other African countries proved futile. The reason being that, there is little research (if any) on political Party Branding in African. It is therefore recommended that similar work be undertaken in other African countries. We propose the following research questions for future research:

1. What are the current voter perceptions of major political parties in Africa?
2. To what extent are images of political party developments and imagery in Africa analogous to the commercial brand typology?
3. What branding opportunities exist for political parties in Africa and how could this be realized?

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