

Consumer Culture Theory, Nonverbal Communication, and Contemporary Politics: Considering Context and Embracing Complexity

Kristin J. Lieb · Dhavan V. Shah

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Abstract This commentary addresses Olivola and Todorov's "Elected in 100 ms: Appearance-Based Trait Inferences and Voting" and considers its valuable contribution to the field of nonverbal communication. This work suggests that contemporary politics and voting behavior are so complex that they can be better understood outside of laboratory settings where the vital elements on culture and context come into play. By using consumer culture theory and other cultural theories of branding, this commentary evaluates elements of Barack Obama's presidential run, and considers why his campaign resonated so well with voters in contemporary United States culture.

Keywords Brand · Brand management · Political communication · Consumer culture theory · Person brands · Nonverbal communication · Cultural branding · Context · Culture

Olivola and Todorov's (2010) "Elected in 100 ms: Appearance-Based Trait Inferences and Voting", offers a valuable contribution to the field of nonverbal communication by succinctly summarizing the work in this field to date, and advancing its application through new experiments using computer modeling. The findings in the works reinforce what political strategists have known for decades—arguably since the Kennedy/Nixon debate of 1960—that candidate appearance, visual cues, gestures, facial contortions, and speech patterns are all critical factors to be managed by professionals in campaigns (Cho et al. 2009). Since then, scholars have studied how political audiences make sense of candidates by attempting to measure the impact of specific factors (e.g., dimensions of appearance and voice) on estimations of likability and competence. But measuring said variables in lab experiments minimizes the vital effects of culture and context, which provide the less-objectively measurable but no-less-important reasons a specific political figure may

K. J. Lieb (✉)
Emerson College, Boston, MA, USA
e-mail: Kristin_Lieb@emerson.edu

D. V. Shah
University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI, USA

achieve resonance at a given point in time. As such, these de-contextualized variables tell only a small part of the story of how candidates are embraced by the public and later elected. Consumer culture theory (CCT), a form of brand theory that places culture at the center of inquiry, seeks to place such variables in a larger context, and help establish the role of culture in explaining phenomena—in this case, electing politicians. CCT researchers, though their efforts are often exploratory and qualitative, challenge the conventional models of brands and branding that came out of the cognitive psychology tradition. They encourage marketers to consider context and embrace complexity, rather than dismissing these factors as noise (Arnould and Thompson 2005). In general, CCT theorists are more concerned (than traditional brand theorists) with consumption than purchasing, and try to understand customer experiences and meaning-making processes rather than perceptions of utility (Arnould and Thompson 2005). CCT theorists would likely argue that candidates such as John Edwards or Mitt Romney could score well on the dimensions of likability, attractiveness, and competence, and yet *still* fail to connect effectively with the voting public. Without this type of cultural resonance, candidates are unlikely to be elected, however likable, attractive, or competent.

Academic findings do not tell the whole story of electability, but they provide important clues about how politicians and professional handlers should build a political character or brand. For example, it is useful to know that preferred candidates are generally perceived as more attractive and likable than their non-preferred opponents, and now that we know this, there is a class of professional handlers who work to manage the public impressions of their candidates in every way possible. In some cases, this manifests as expensive face and wardrobe makeovers. Sarah Palin's \$150,000 wardrobe makeover became a major news story during the 2008 election cycle (Cummings 2008), just as John Edwards' \$400 haircuts were an issue the previous year (Beam 2007). In other cases, we see the construction of personal narratives designed to cast the candidate in a particular light or role, e.g., John McCain's "Daniel Boone" or "rescue narrative", as described by Susan Faludi in *The Guardian* in early 2008. All of these steps are taken in the hopes of making a candidate appear to look and sound like he or she belongs in the position for which he or she is vying or currently holds (see Scammel 2007).

But becoming a successful political brand is not just about hiring good speech writers, buying a perfect wardrobe, or getting plastic surgery, voice lessons, a designer wardrobe, or a haircut to look or sound more competent. If it were that easy, we'd predict election outcomes with ease. Increasingly, it seems voters and media outlets are focused on candidate likability, which is further distilled into whom voters would most like to have a beer with. But even this measure has its limitations. As *Chicago Tribune* writer Julia Keller (2008) observes: "if the likability game were as simple as some pretend it is, the most likable candidate would always win. But check your history". Surely Richard Nixon was not elected on his winning personality. And certainly, there is a strong case made by Olivola and Todorov that at least some of our impressions of candidates' likability come directly from their appearance.

The current wave of political brand management does not rely exclusively or even mostly on manufactured affectations because they simply do not work. Today's successful political brand management starts with culture and backs into campaign planning. Rather than trying to make a cantankerous candidate likable, wise political handlers find a genuinely likable candidate and then mine for the source of that likability. In Holt's brand terms, these handlers would seek to determine what "cultural contradictions", or tensions exist within the culture, and what "myths" the candidate can represent or enact in order to repair them and lead culture (Holt 2003, 2004). Barack Obama addresses numerous

cultural tensions and myths, most powerfully, perhaps, leadership and race and the American Dream come to life. So, it was wise to make Obama's marketing campaign more about "those high potential brand meanings capable of transcending segments and types" (S. Fournier and K. Herman, unpublished manuscript, 2004, p. 33), and less about traditional targeting and segmentation. Some of the content of these "high potential brand meanings" included: having a white (American) mother and a black (Kenyan) father, growing up in Hawaii, having an exotic name, coming from a broken home, going to Harvard and excelling as a minority, building a strong nuclear family, keeping out of trouble in Chicago politics, and, most recently, espousing his commitment to health and health care...even though he is a smoker. Handlers take all of these contradictions and tensions and determine how they might be leveraged all the way to victory. So, in essence, "the strength of a celebrity brand is a function of the diversity of appeal that a person possesses" (Lieb 2007, p. 51).

Stories that grow out of a candidate's diverse appeal can be mined for and refined into subsequent niche marketing efforts. Handlers leverage the right dimension for the right audience, carefully keeping said contradictions in balance for fear of disrupting the complex and integrated whole campaign apart. Success depends upon how well a candidate can integrate all of these factors into an authentic package that is not only accepted by the public, but also extended by it. Then it is a function of the brand's potential lifecycle. By definition, presidential brands can only last for a maximum of 8 years (at least as presidents), which makes this particular branding challenge relatively short-term, and therefore extremely sensitive to cultural factors.

In our visually oriented, 24-hour news cycle, which comes at us through our televisions, monitors, billboards, bus sidings and handheld devices, increasingly it is not about what a candidate does, it is about what the audience does with what the candidate has presented or represented (Grant 2001), and how this becomes part of their social interactions, online and face-to-face (Shah et al. 2007). If we look at Barack Obama's presidential run, we see ample evidence of this. Brand managers could have told countless heroic stories about Barack Obama, but if they registered as false, the message would have been doubted or ignored. But Obama played the game a bit differently, accentuating his outsider status—but not too much—in powerful speeches that apparently moved millions of people. For this, and his comprehensive, coordinated, and effective presidential campaign, Barack Obama won *Advertising Age's* 2008 Marketer of the Year distinction (Creamer 2008), demonstrating that politicians are now rightfully and openly regarded as both marketers and brands.

Obama's handlers and followers seized on pivotal moments in the campaign, even when things looked bleak for Obama. Will.i.am of the Black Eyed Peas was apparently so moved by Obama's speech after Hillary Clinton won the New Hampshire Primary that a week later he set Obama's words to music and made a documentary-style, black-and-white video featuring appearances by such Obama supporters as John Legend, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Herbie Hancock, and Scarlet Johansson, among others. In the video, these celebrities solemnly recite Obama's words as his speech runs in a split screen beside them. Here Obama's speech exhibits multivocality (Elliott 1994; Elliott and Wattansuwan 1998; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Schmitt and Rogers 2008) or a brand's ability to appeal to many different types of people at the same time. Multivocal brands can be so rich in meaning that they speak to people across a range of demographic and other identity factors, leaving each individual to extract his or her own unique meanings from it. In this case, the words in Obama's speech are *literally* spoken by multiple voices as beloved music, sports, and film entertainers reinterpret the words from Obama's speech as poetic, dramatic,

musical, contemporary, and resonant. Does this resonance and acceptance have to do with Obama's voice? His appearance? His age? His race? His rhetoric? Certainly, but one can not reasonably unbundle the characteristics that sum to Obama's appeal—it is a total package deal. The grass roots efforts the Obama campaign has spawned are proof positive of the authenticity and reach of that appeal.

Will.i.am (2008) explained on *The Huffington Post*: “I just wanted to add a melody to those words...I wanted the inspiration that was bubbling inside me to take over...so I let it...So I called my friends...and they called their friends in a matter of 2 days...we made the song and video”. The credits of the song, simply titled “Yes We Can”, list Obama as “CEO of Inspiration”. By April 2008, the sharing of this video through social networks had yielded more than 17,000,000 views, a testament to its power (Stelter 2008).

Increasingly, it is this type of living, breathing, cultural branding established by those outside of the candidate's payroll that makes for a successful political campaign. This type of branding is often called brand co-creation (Fournier 1998; Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004) in that brand authors no longer tell audiences how to make sense of candidates, but rather design a rich, strategic starting point that can be modified, sometimes to even better effect, by the audience. Brand authors present the candidate, and then the audience responds to the candidate, generally isolating some of the most important brand meanings for the candidate. This makes the handlers' job extremely difficult, as they are always scanning the landscape for the brand meanings in circulation, and trying to determine how to present the candidate on the basis of these unintended or unmanaged meanings. This form of branding is unconventional and deeply complex, but also highly effective. Fournier et al. (2008, p. 46) declared that “brands whose meaning portfolios contain co-created meanings are stronger than brands whose meaning do not contain evidence of cultural co-creation”.

How then, should marketers manage the process of understanding audiences and building rich and effective cultural brands? Holt (2003) explained:

Such knowledge doesn't come from focus groups or ethnography or trend reports—the marketer's usual means for ‘getting close to the customer’. Rather, it comes from a cultural historian's understanding of ideology as it waxes and wanes, a sociologist's charting of the topography of contradictions the ideology produces, and a literary critic's expedition into the culture that engages these contradictions. (p. 8)

In other words, it may take a village of experts to contextualize a candidate successfully for the voters in the culture in which he or she is operating.

Scholars in mass communication are fond of saying “the medium is the message”, (McLuhan 1964) but in a constantly changing media world, with different distribution systems emerging every day, the medium can only claim a fragment of the message. In politics, we might revise this saying, claiming that “the candidate is the message”. In other words, when a candidate gives a televised speech, it is critical that he or she acts and projects accordingly. Likewise, when she is addressing the nation via radio, her strategy should be adapted for the medium. The same rules apply to messaging with publics via Myspace and Facebook posts, Twitter updates, and text messages. By incorporating the latter distribution channels into his campaign strategy, Obama did more than *tell* young voters he was cutting edge and contemporary, he *showed* them he was by allowing them to get personalized messages from him in their preferred fashion. In other words, Obama's audience did not share mass-consumed moments—they had personal moments, and thus different experiences with his messages. The Obama campaign also adapted to and understood how younger voters consume messages. In other words, Obama's messages

were designed for modern distribution systems, so that each person could get his or her information in a personal way. This further fed his authentic brand image, which, in turn, made followers more likely to talk about him, blog about him, seek out information about him, and vote for him.

S. Fournier and K. Herman (unpublished manuscript, 2006) extend the emergent cultural paradigm for managing brands (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Holt 2004; McCracken 2005) by proposing a brand development arc for person brands, which was initially developed to explain Martha Stewart's brand trajectory, but can be adapted here to succinctly explain Obama's success. They propose that as a cultural brand is born, it achieves resonance through relevance, differentiation, and a "random collision of cultural hungers and meanings made" in creating the brand (Fournier and Herman, p. 52). At the end of George W. Bush's two terms, U.S. voters were looking for something different. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama both had difference on their side—Clinton with gender, Obama with race, and both with party affiliation, so their competition came down to nuance and execution. Both were political insiders, Clinton more so than Obama, so she claimed the experience platform while Obama adopted the change platform. Both were perceived as relevant, but Obama differentiated with his youthful appeal and use of social media to build a dynamic brand, a broad base of support, and young core of activists. As the brands developed, managers carefully selected brand meanings to accentuate the most viable meanings for him. Over time, Obama became the brand, such that "all brand meanings resonate(d) through the person" (Fournier and Herman, p. 52). In other words, the brand became consistent and integrated, and at some point, the person could no longer be separated from the brand. In the third phase of this form of cultural branding, the person becomes greater than the brand, meaning that he or she achieves "icon status in the culture", is embedded "in the cultural moment", and is involved in "buzz creating cultural productions" (Fournier and Herman, p. 52). Influential street artist, Shepard Fairey, picked up on Obama's potential as an iconic celebrity, and advanced the cause tremendously by co-opting a 2006 newspaper photo of Obama shot by Associated Press freelance

Fig. 1 AP images/Mannie Garcia. Senator Barack Obama attends a press conference about Darfur



Fig. 2 Shepard Fairey’s iconic “Hope” poster, courtesy of the artist’s business manager



photographer Mannie Garcia (see Fig. 1) and turning it into one of his signature street-art posters (see Fig. 2). But unlike many of Fairey’s most popular works, executed in red, white, and black, the “Hope” poster substituted blue for black, making it more visually distinctive and subtly patriotic. This “Hope” poster image became ubiquitous as media organizations celebrated it, political organizations perpetuated it, and fans created their own art from it. Fairey (2009) encouraged the viral movement by donating limited edition stickers and posters to pro-Obama organizations and encouraging fans to download the image from his website. Once Fairey, whose designs generally feature iconic entertainment figures or political messages, co-opted Obama as a subject, his work immediately became interpreted as high art—to the extent that one of his portraits of Obama was purchased by the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC and placed in its permanent collection (Kennedy 2009). Works from Fairey’s extensive collection were also put on display at Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA 2009). These events had the mutual effect of strengthening Fairey’s brand at the same time they re-inscribed Obama’s.

The next and final phase of the cultural/person brand arc involves the brand becoming larger than the person, as evidenced by brand extensions and the “sustainability of the brand as a separable independent asset”, (S. Fournier and K. Herman, unpublished manuscript, 2006, p. 52). Clearly, the Obama brand “tipped” (Gladwell 2000) since the 2008 election, the Obama presidency has followed this trajectory perfectly. The Obama brand is now arguably in the final phase, as brand extensions (into everything from breath mints to hand soap, as seen in Fig. 3) are rampant and no longer under the control of the Obama campaign. In other words, the Barack Obama brand is now too much of a cultural phenomenon to reasonably manage using conventional methods. We may see the Obama brand split into two separately managed brands over time—one managed by political experts and the other managed by person- or celebrity-brand experts—so that its meanings may be monitored as effectively and professionally as possible.

So how did a young, black senator named Barack Hussein Obama become the President of the United States? Obama’s verbal competence and charisma placed him in the right cultural context at the right time. George W. Bush, who was notoriously less competent as



Fig. 3 The Audacity of Soap, courtesy of the product's manufacturer, Soaphope. Obama Mints, courtesy of the product's manufacturer, The Unemployed Philosophers Guild

a public speaker, and vice-presidential hopeful Sarah Palin, whose verbal gaffes were literally the stuff of Saturday Night Live parodies, set the stage for a charismatic leader such as Obama to step up and resonate correctly with middle America despite his apparent intellectualism, and by extension, inaccessibility.

Holt (2003, 2004) has argued persuasively that brands must change over time to remain relevant, always exhibiting a strong historical fit. As such, the stories told about these brands must speak to active tensions in society, create myths that have the potential to lead culture, and be told in a rebel's voice. All of these requirements are visible in the Obama campaign's approach to winning the election. His race and upbringing speak to racial and class tensions; his success given these circumstances means that he embodies the myth of the American Dream; his charisma and cultural resonance make people want to work on his behalf and fight for his causes; and as a relative newcomer in the political arena and as one who looks little like his predecessors in American presidential politics, he most definitely speaks with the fire and conviction of a rebel.

Obama's strategists also used non-verbal cues expertly to send messages about his competence without words. In his *Newsweek* campaign blog, Stumper, columnist Andrew Romano (2008) suggests that while policy positions may have played a role in developing Obama's momentum, he found "something more subtle at work, too...It is the way the campaign has folded the man and the message and the speeches into a systematic branding effort. Reinforced with a coherent, comprehensive program of fonts, logos, slogans, and web design, Obama is the first presidential candidate to be marketed like a high-end consumer brand". By all measures, this was a risky choice in that politicians from both parties tended to downplay dimensions of wealth and elitism to appeal to the everyman (e.g., Joe the Plumber), in the hopes of winning the 2008 election. But with Obama, this was an effective strategy because it balanced the other risks (associated with perceptions of his race and upbringing) inherent in his campaign.

As open to interpretation as the Obama brand is, there were elements of the campaign that were tightly controlled, such as the signage. Graphic designers noted the Obama campaign's love of certain fonts and colors through pictures on their blogs (see Fig. 4). This contrasted sharply with signage at Clinton rallies, which featured mixed colors and fonts (see Fig. 5), rather than the consistent and professionally managed Obama events.

Michael Bierut deconstructed the Obama's campaign team's design choices, particularly the font choice, as follows: "Gotham was a typeface designed originally for *GQ*



Fig. 4 Scott Olson/Getty images. Obama holds a final primary night event in St. Paul



Fig. 5 Win McNamee/Getty images. Hillary Clinton holds a Pennsylvania Primary Night rally

magazine, so it is a sleek, purposefully not fancy, very straightforward, plainspoken font, but done with a great deal of elegance and taste—and drawn from very American sources, by the way...It looks very conversational as opposed to strident and yelling...he is actually using the seamlessness of this branding to convey a candidacy that is not a dangerous, revolutionary, risk-everything proposition—but as something that is well-managed and has everything under control” (Romano 2008). This was important in this campaign, so that potential voters would not be turned off by Obama’s relative inexperience or race. In other words, Obama was effectively deviant, that is: not *too* deviant.

All of this goes to show that while the effects of isolated variables may matter, it is how they interact that really matters. As a candidate, Obama offers numerous nonverbal cues that make him safe and accessible, despite his outsider positioning. But it is the coordination of those nonverbal cues into the greater context of a coordinated campaign that makes the Obama brand work in contemporary culture.

Olivola and Todorov argue that potential voters may be less inclined to make snap judgments about candidates based on appearance and other nonverbal cues if (1) they

consume less media or (2) they learn how to decode such messages differently through some sort of media literacy campaign. It seems unlikely that people will consume less media as their choice of communication outlets and channels continue to grow over time. What is interesting about the second perspective is its implications for how citizen-consumers gain sophistication in the contemporary media environment. Political campaigns are an integral part of life in the United States, and they reflect a great deal about what is happening culturally as they are revealed. As cultural anthropologist-turned-management-scholar, Grant McCracken (1986) wrote:

Cultural meaning in a consumer society moves ceaselessly from one location to another. In the usual trajectory, cultural meaning moves first from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods and then from these goods to the individual consumer. (p. 1)

Although these words were originally intended to explain how consumer goods come to have meaning, they apply to politicians and political campaigns as well. Politicians are products of our culture. As they become candidates, public figures, and arguably, “consumer goods”, we support or reject them based on what they reflect back at us. They learn from our responses and draw again on culture to recast their images in the hope of becoming more compelling. So there is really no separating ourselves from them—or the media system that carries their messages. Future research on nonverbal communication must consider this alongside the micro-psychological work of Olivola and Todorov. Both can help inform scholarship concerned with the nuanced fashion in which modern elections are waged and won, and contemporary politics is conducted.

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