

Evaluating the Influence of Political Branding During the 2021 Zambia General Elections: A Case of University of Zambia Students

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Abstract

The rise of competitive multiparty politics in Zambia, particularly after the return to democracy in the 1990s, has made strategic political branding essential for parties to distinguish themselves and appeal to voters. This study evaluates the influence of political branding during the 2021 Zambia General Elections, focusing on student voters at the University of Zambia. A simple random sample of 100 respondents was surveyed using self-administered questionnaires. Data were analysed descriptively using SPSS and Microsoft Excel. The findings reveal that political branding significantly impacted the 2021 elections, with 55% of respondents paying considerable attention to branding during campaigns. A majority (85.1%) agreed that branding influences electoral success. Campaign slogans (67.5%) and logos (47.5%) were identified as the most influential branding elements, while social media presence (25%) had a lesser impact. Additionally, respondents considered a candidate's policies (42.5%), character (53.8%), political affiliation (40%), and past performance (38.8%) as key factors in their voting decisions. The branding environment in the 2021 elections was generally perceived positively by 62.5% of respondents, though 7.5% had a negative perception. Trust in campaign branding information was mixed: 46.3% trusted it to some extent, while 10% expressed complete distrust. Traditional media was deemed reliable by 73.8% of respondents, whereas only 38.8% trusted social media. Other influential sources of information included debates and public forums (33.8%) and personal interactions with candidates (32.5%). The study concludes that political parties must develop robust branding strategies with clear messaging, effective use of both traditional and digital media, and efforts to build credibility to enhance voter trust and engagement. The study's implications highlight the importance for political parties, policymakers, and media organizations to adopt clear messaging and credibility-building measures to improve voter trust, promote transparency, and ensure electoral integrity.

Keywords: Political Branding, 2021 General Elections, University of Zambia, Elections.

Introduction

The increasing competition, both locally and globally, has compelled organisations to adopt various strategies to maintain relevance. For securing a larger market share, effective

brand management—characterized by fostering customer loyalty, meeting customer needs, and distinguishing a brand from competitors is essential (Rane et al., 2023). Branding, a strategy long used in the commercial sector, builds awareness and helps consumers make informed purchasing decisions (Kotler & Keller, 2012). In political settings, branding serves a similar purpose, enabling political parties to distinguish themselves from rivals and resonate with voters. This study evaluates the influence of political branding campaigns during Zambia's 2021 general election, specifically examining how political branding shapes public perception and election outcomes among University of Zambia (UNZA) students.

According to Cosgrove (2017), political branding entails helping political parties and candidates establish strong identities in the highly competitive political arena by utilizing conventional marketing strategies. This process is profoundly influenced by voters' perceptions, which are shaped by communications from political leaders and parties. Effective political branding builds brand equity, fostering deeper connections, trust, and credibility with voters (Craig, 2017), all of which significantly impact electoral success. These branding efforts, which include campaign materials, logos, slogans, and other elements, play a crucial role in shaping voters' perceptions. Political branding has emerged as a distinct area of study, encompassing corporate, candidate, and local political branding (Falkowski, 2019). However, research on political brands, especially in non-Western contexts like Zambia, remains limited. This study aims to contribute to the growing body of political branding literature by exploring its influence on political campaigns during Zambia's 2021 general elections. It also examines the strategies employed by major political parties, such as the United Party for National Development (UPND) and the Patriotic Front (PF), to cultivate distinct political brands that resonate with voters.

The importance of branding in elections is evident from studies showing that political parties with strong, recognisable brands are more likely to secure voter support. A key aspect of political branding involves creating a lasting impression through consistent messages and visual cues, ensuring voters remember a candidate or party on Election Day (Craig, 2017). In Zambia, where over 30 political parties are registered, effective branding is crucial for a party to stand out and gain a competitive edge. This study focuses on the 2021 elections, where the UPND ultimately defeated the PF, forming the new government. The University of Zambia (UNZA), as the country's largest and oldest public university, provides the setting for this research. Due to the rising level of political engagement among young people, the primary population of the study is UNZA students. Students at UNZA offer valuable insights into how political branding influenced the 2021 elections. This research critically analyses how these students, as potential voters, were affected by the political branding strategies of leading political parties, thus exploring branding's impact on youth voter perceptions and engagement.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing prevalence of political branding campaigns in contemporary elections, comprehensive research on their effectiveness and impact within African democracies, particularly Zambia, remains limited. Scholars like Smith (2018) and Johnson (2020) have identified this significant gap, underscoring the need for further investigation into the specific branding strategies political parties used during Zambia's 2021 general elections. This research deficit hinders a thorough understanding of political branding's role and influence on voter behaviour, public perception, and electoral outcomes in African democracies. Therefore, an in-depth evaluation of the political branding campaigns deployed in the 2021 Zambian general elections is essential to bridge this gap and provide crucial insights into their effectiveness.

Political branding campaigns are pivotal in shaping election outcomes globally. In Zambia, prominent political parties, including the Patriotic Front (PF), the United Party for National Development (UPND), the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD), and the Socialist Party (SP), actively used branding strategies in the 2021 general elections. Understanding how these strategies influenced voter perception and decision-making is critical. While scholars such as Neo Simutanyi (2015) emphasise that political branding helps parties differentiate themselves and attract voter support, others like Cheeseman and Lynch (2020) contend that intense branding can also heighten electoral tensions and conflicts. Examining these varied perspectives underscores the importance of rigorously evaluating political branding within Zambia's electoral processes.

This study focuses on UNZA students as respondents because they represent a demographic of young, educated, and politically engaged voters. University students are often key targets for political parties' branding campaigns, making them a vital group for understanding the impact of such strategies (Mwiinga, 2021; Mwelwa, 2018; Banja & Walubita, 2016). Their extensive exposure to political messaging, both online and offline, enables them to critically assess branding techniques and their influence on voter perceptions. By analysing their perspectives, this study aims to determine how political branding affects young voters and its role in shaping their political participation and choices.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions, which helped address the research problem.

- i. How do political branding campaigns influence electoral success at the University of Zambia?
- ii. How do voters perceive political branding in Zambia and at the University of Zambia?
- iii. What factors influence voters' decision during elections at the University of Zambia?

Literature review

Theoretical Framework

Consumer-Based Brand Equity Theory (CBBE Theory, 1993)

Voter perceptions are shaped by various factors, such as party identification, candidate image, policy positions, media exposure, and personal experiences. Voters often make decisions based on emotional and psychological connections rather than purely rational evaluations. In this context, political branding plays a significant role in shaping voter attitudes through strategic communication. The Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Theory, developed by Keller (1993), originally for commercial branding, is applied to political branding to explain how political parties build strong voter connections. According to the CBBE model, brand equity is the “differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response,” meaning that voters are more likely to respond favourably to political parties with strong brand recognition and positive associations.

The CBBE model consists of four levels, shown as a pyramid:

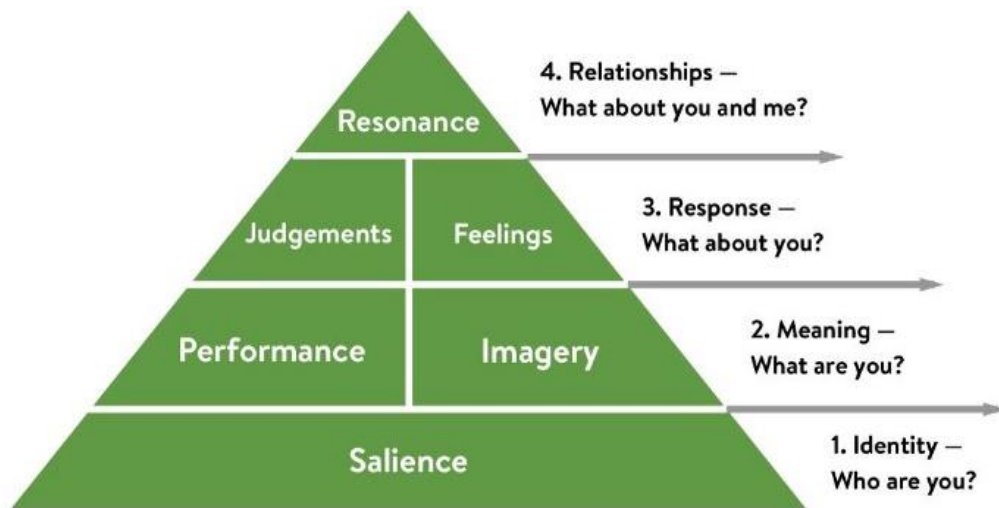


Figure 1: CBBE model

1. **Brand Identity (Who are you?)**

This level is about establishing brand identity, where political parties communicate their unique proposition and what they stand for. Market research can help identify voter needs and preferences.

2. **Brand Meaning (What are you?)**

Once awareness is created, voters want to know more about the party's values, policies, and performance. Brand meaning consists of rational aspects like reliability and quality (brand performance) and emotional connections (brand imagery) that meet voters' social and psychological needs.

3. **Brand Response (What are the feelings for the brand?)**

This level involves voters' judgments and feelings toward the party. It is crucial to track feedback and enhance emotional bonds through effective communication and offerings.

4. **Brand Resonance (A strong relationship)**

At this level, voters become loyal, viewing the party as unique and superior to others. Political parties must understand why voters reach this level of loyalty and continuously improve their experiences to maintain strong relationships.

Implications for the Study

The CBBE model implies that political parties can build voter loyalty by first establishing a clear identity and creating awareness. By meeting voter needs and addressing gaps, parties can develop a strong, meaningful brand that resonates with voters and enhances overall brand equity. This approach is crucial for political marketing strategies aimed at gaining voter trust and loyalty.

Empirical Review

Influence of Political Branding During Elections

Political branding involves using marketing techniques to create a specific image or identity for political parties, candidates, or organizations. This approach aims to distinguish the party and its candidate from competitors by highlighting their values and policies. According to Kiran (2020), successful political branding showcases the candidate's values while ensuring the party stands out in a crowded electoral field. This branding process is critical during elections, helping the electorate quickly identify candidates or parties and their key messages. The concept of political branding draws from consumer branding strategies, applying marketing techniques to build a political identity (Nielsen, 2016). Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy (2007) suggest that politics can be viewed as a service with three main components: the party's policy, the candidate as the tangible service, and the party itself as the brand. This branding strategy emphasizes the party's values and policies, which must resonate with voters to create lasting impressions. Political branding extends beyond merely communicating policies; it involves presenting the candidate in a way that aligns with voters' aspirations.

Political parties' branding strategies, particularly in market-oriented contexts, can lead to customized public services designed to meet voters' needs (Reeves et al., 2006). For example, the New Labour Party in Britain used a market-driven policy approach, integrating public and private sector solutions to appeal to voters. While such strategies may initially attract voters, they are susceptible to imitation by competing parties. Reeves et al. (2006) propose that successful political branding requires balancing ideological and market-driven approaches, creating a distinctive message that fosters voter trust over time.

Political branding is often discussed within campaign strategies, with research frequently focusing on how candidates build their image (Guzmán et al., 2014). Studies on Obama's communication strategy (Miller, 2014) have demonstrated that a strong political brand can

significantly influence voter behaviour. This branding process uses symbols, shared values, and other identifiers to forge a lasting connection with voters (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2012). A political brand must align with voter expectations to ensure authenticity and resonance with the electorate, making it crucial for parties to understand voter needs and craft a compelling narrative.

Benefits of Political Branding

Political branding offers numerous advantages that influence voter behaviour and electoral outcomes. A primary benefit is its ability to help voters quickly identify a party or candidate, especially in elections with many contenders. This clear identification enables voters to make more informed decisions, which is particularly important in crowded races where differentiating candidates is challenging. Voters who can easily identify a candidate's key messages are more likely to make quick, confident choices at the ballot box (Kiran, 2020). Another significant benefit is its role in building voter trust. According to Citrin and Stoker (2018), consistent, positive branding establishes credibility and trust between voters and political entities. A trusted candidate or party can foster loyalty among the electorate, encouraging repeated support in future elections. This trust is crucial not only for securing votes but also for motivating individuals to participate, particularly where voter apathy might be an issue. Furthermore, political branding can enhance a candidate's or party's visibility and recognition. As Harrison et al. (2023) note, a strong political brand leads to greater name recognition, making it easier for candidates to garner support. This visibility is vital when competing against similar candidates with less distinction. A well-crafted brand allows a politician or party to stand out, making them a more appealing option compared to undifferentiated or generic rivals.

Political branding also has the potential to increase voter engagement and loyalty. Once voters feel connected to a brand, they are more likely to remain loyal and supportive in future campaigns. This loyalty translates into sustained support for a candidate or party over time, as voters perceive them as a reliable and consistent option. A successful brand fosters a sense of community and shared values, critical for building long-term voter relationships and enhancing overall campaign effectiveness (Atzger et al., 2020).

Voters' Perceptions of Political Branding

Research by Pistolas (2009) on political marketing and voter segments in Greece revealed a limited influence of campaign strategies on voting behaviour, with 60% of voters deciding on their preferred candidate before the election period and 40% reporting never changing their vote. Additionally, 30% habitually voted for the same party, while another 30% changed their vote based on the political situation. Although many voters acknowledged that political marketing influenced the electorate generally, they simultaneously believed it had little effect on their own decisions, reflecting a paradox in voter self-perception versus perceived group influence.

De Chernatony and White (2002) conducted a case study on the British Labour Party's transformation into 'New Labour,' concluding that branding efforts contributed to its electoral success. The rebranding aimed to align the party's values with the electorate, focusing on principles like modernity, openness, economic orthodoxy, and social equity. The study emphasized that political brands must fulfill their promises to maintain public trust. However, it also recognized that external factors could have significantly contributed to the party's victory, implying that branding alone may not fully account for electoral outcomes. Needham (2006) further suggested that voters use political brands as heuristic tools to simplify complex political choices. Her analysis indicated that successful political leaders often distinguish themselves through personal branding, setting themselves apart from both opponents and their own parties. This brand identity is built on attributes such as leadership style, communication, and core values. The study also highlighted that for incumbent parties, branding functions similarly to relationship marketing in business, aiming to encourage voter loyalty and repeat support.

Recent studies have expanded the scope of political branding beyond Western contexts. For instance, Alam and Riva (2020) explored voter perceptions in Bangladesh, arguing that political parties must continuously adapt their branding strategies to evolving voter behaviour and expectations. They found that brand repositioning was essential to reflect changing dynamics in public policy and social engagement. However, their study's findings were limited by its demographic sample, urban university students, which restricted generalizability. Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of the study limited insights into how voter perceptions change over time. To further strengthen this section, future research should integrate more recent African-focused studies (post-2020) to provide a more comprehensive and regionally relevant perspective on political branding.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research paradigm, grounded in positivism, which emphasizes objectivity, measurement, and statistical analysis. Quantitative methods, including the use of structured tools like questionnaires, enable hypothesis testing, exploration of variable relationships, and generalization of findings (Ali, 2024; Nardi, 2018; Mohajan, 2020). A non-intervention descriptive quantitative research design was used to observe and describe phenomena without manipulating variables. This approach ensures an accurate representation of existing conditions and maintains the natural state of the subject under investigation (Fischer et al., 2023).

Population and Sample size

The study targeted all enrolled students at the UNZA who were eligible to vote in the 2021 general election. This group was chosen for their active participation in academic and campus life, and their relevance to the study's focus on political branding and voter behaviour.

The population excluded:

- Students below voting age during the 2021 elections,
- International students without Zambian citizenship, and
- Students not enrolled during the election period.

A simple random sampling method was employed to select participants from the eligible student population across all UNZA schools. This technique ensured that every eligible student had an equal chance of selection, promoting fairness and representativeness. The goal was to capture diverse perspectives on political branding from a broad academic and social spectrum.

A sample is a subset of a population selected for analysis to generalize findings (Lakens, 2022). The sample size was calculated using the following formula:

$$n = \frac{z^2 \times p \times (1 - p)}{e^2}$$

Where:

- $Z = 1.96$ (for 95% confidence level)
- $p = 0.5$ (used when the true proportion is unknown)
- $e = 0.10$ (margin of error)

$$n = \frac{z^2 \times p \times (1 - p)}{e^2}$$

$$n = \frac{(1.96)^2 \times 0.5 \times (1 - 0.5)}{(0.1)^2}$$

$$n \approx 97$$

The computed sample size was approximately 97, and it was rounded to 100 for ease and to ensure robust representation.

Ethical Considerations

Before data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university research ethics committee. All participants provided informed consent prior to completing the questionnaires. They were fully apprised of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the measures taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. This adherence to ethical guidelines was paramount, especially given the use of student respondents.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study utilized structured questionnaires to collect quantitative data from students at UNZA. The questionnaire, written in English, was designed based on the study's objectives and consisted of closed-ended and multiple-choice questions to ensure consistency and ease of statistical analysis. It aimed to capture student perceptions of political branding during the 2021 Zambia General Elections. Questionnaires were administered both

physically in selected campus locations and electronically via Google Forms, shared through institutional email and social media.

For analysis, the study employed SPSS (version 26) and Microsoft Excel 2016. SPSS was used for data cleaning, coding, and performing both descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and means). Excel complemented this process by supporting data organization and visualization through tables and graphs.

Results

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1: Demographic characteristic

Variable		Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Gender	Female	42	52.5
	Male	38	47.5
Age	18-24 years	21	26.3
	25-30 years	20	25
	31-40 years	27	33.8
	41-50 years	11	13.8
	Above 50 years	1	1.3
Year of study	1 year	6	7.5
	2 years	15	18.8
	3 years	11	13.8
	4 years	11	13.8
	5 years	3	3.8
	6 years	1	1.3
	Postgraduate	33	41.3
School	Education	20	25
	Engineering	6	7.5
	HSS	26	32.5
	Medicine	5	6.25
	Natural Science	9	11.3
	Business	14	17.5

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The majority were female (52.5%), followed by male respondents (47.5%). The largest age group was 31-40 years (33.8%), with 18-24 years forming the next significant group (26.3%). Most respondents were postgraduates (41.3%), and the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) contributed the largest proportion of students (32.5%).

Branding in Electoral Success

Respondents were asked a series of questions about political branding's role in electoral success.

Figure 2: Have you participated in an election before?

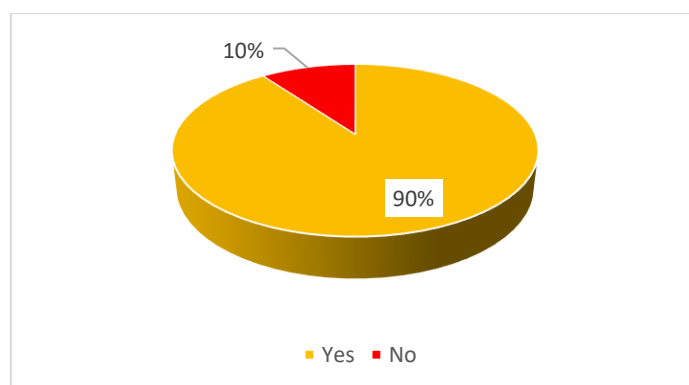


Figure 2: Have you participated in an election before?

Figure 2 shows that 9 out of 10 students (90%) had participated in an election before, while 1 out of 10 (10%) had not.

Figure 3: Attention to Political Branding

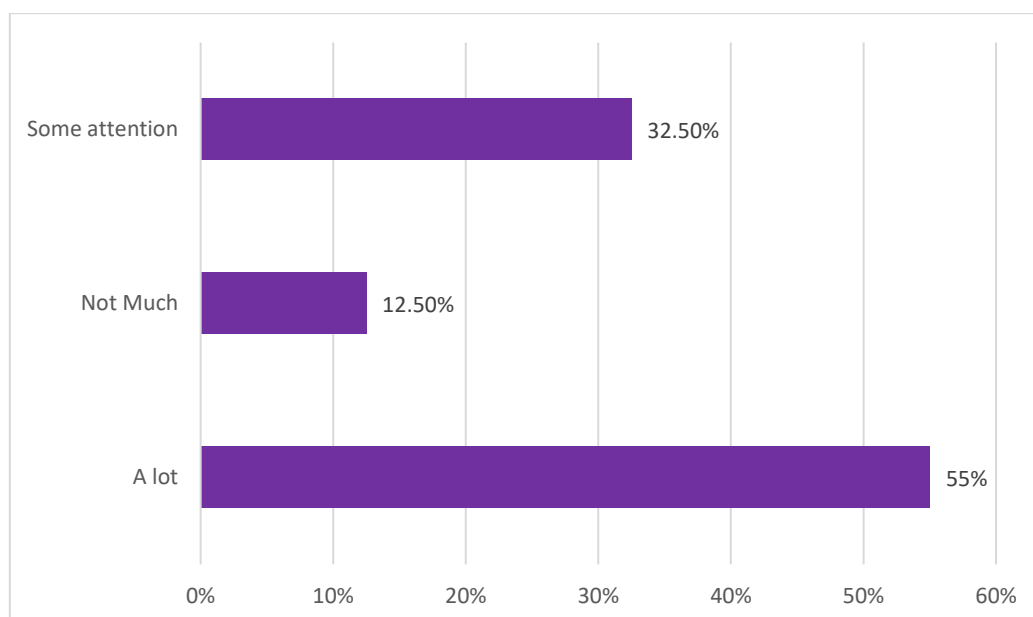


Figure 3: Attention to political branding

Figure 3 indicates that 55% of respondents paid a lot of attention to political branding during elections, while approximately 12.5% paid less attention.

Table 2: Influence of Political Branding

The respondents were then asked if they believed that political branding of a candidate influences their chances of electoral success.

	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Strongly Agree	21	26.3
Agree	27	33.8
Neutral	4	5.0

	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Disagree	26	32.5
Strongly disagree	2	2.5

Table 2: Influence of political branding

Table 2 reveals that the majority of respondents either Strongly Agreed (26.3%) or Agreed (33.8%) that political branding influences a candidate's chances of electoral success, with a minority strongly disagreeing

Figure 4: Changed Voting Preferences Because of Political Branding

Respondents were then asked to indicate if they have ever changed their voting preference based on a candidate's political branding

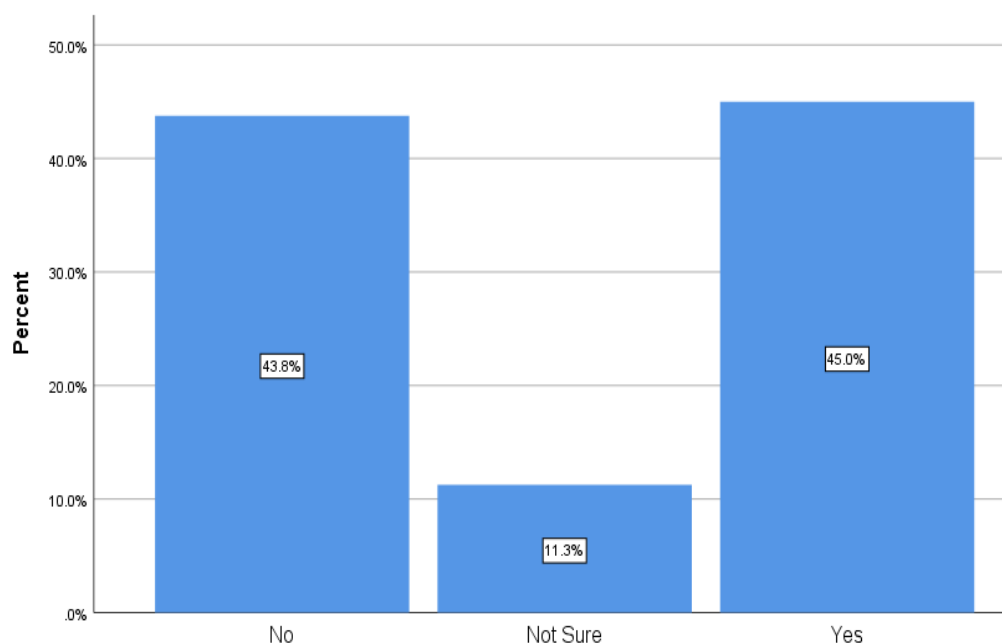


Figure 4: Changed voting preferences because of political branding

Figure 4 shows that 45% of respondents had changed their voting preference based on a candidate's political branding, while 43.8% had not. Notably, about 1 in 10 students (11.2%) were unsure.

Figure 5: Campaign Tools - Most Influential Branding Elements

Respondents were then asked what elements of political branding were the most influential in shaping voters' decision during voting.

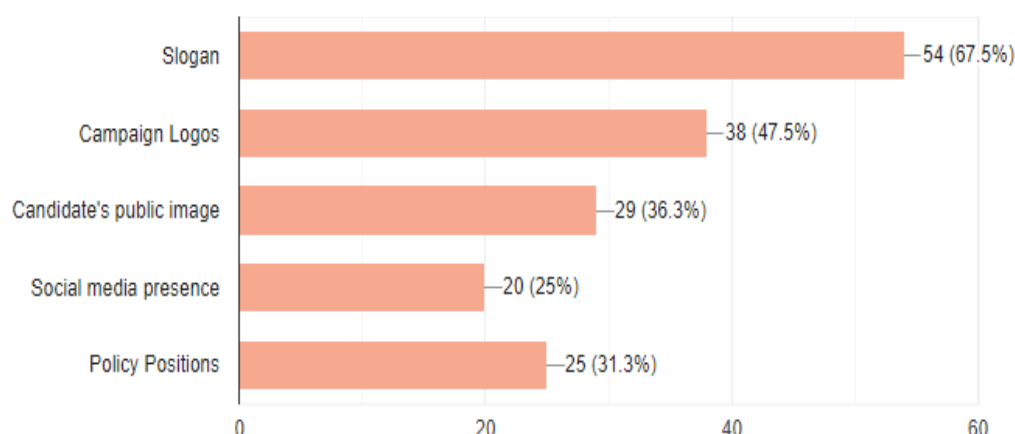


Figure 5: Campaign tools

Figure 5 illustrates that slogans (67.5%) were perceived as the most influential branding element in shaping voters' decisions, followed by campaign logos (47.5%). Social media presence was considered a less influential element, with a response rate of 25%. About one-third of respondents believed a candidate's public image influenced electoral presence

Effectiveness of Branding in Political Campaigns

Figure 6: Effectiveness of Branding in Political Campaigns (Overall Perception)

On the effectiveness of branding in political campaigns, the researcher first asked respondents to describe the overall political branding environment in Zambia during the 2021 general elections.

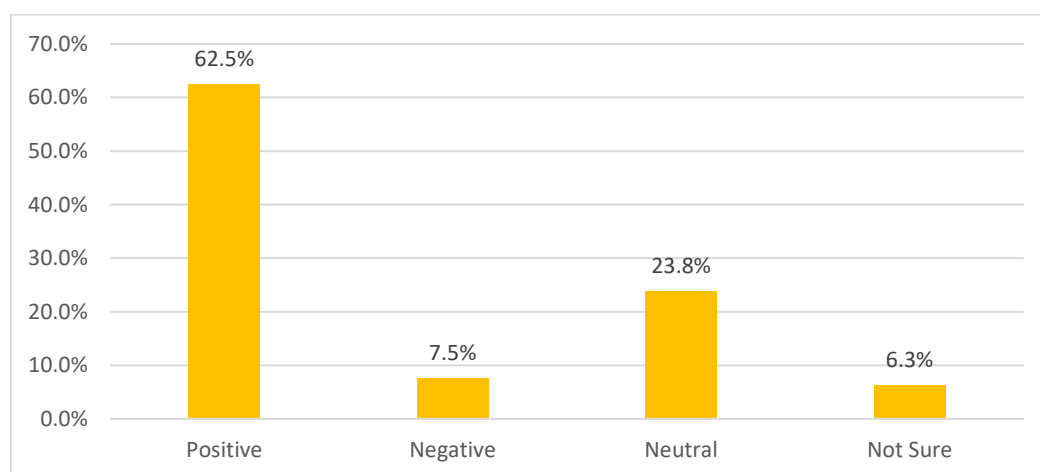


Figure 6: effectiveness of branding in political campaigns

Figure 6 demonstrates that the majority of respondents (62.5%) described the overall political branding environment in Zambia during the 2021 general elections as positive. In contrast, 7.5% described it as negative, and 6.3% were unsure.

Figure 7: Political Branding Helps Voters Make Informed Decisions

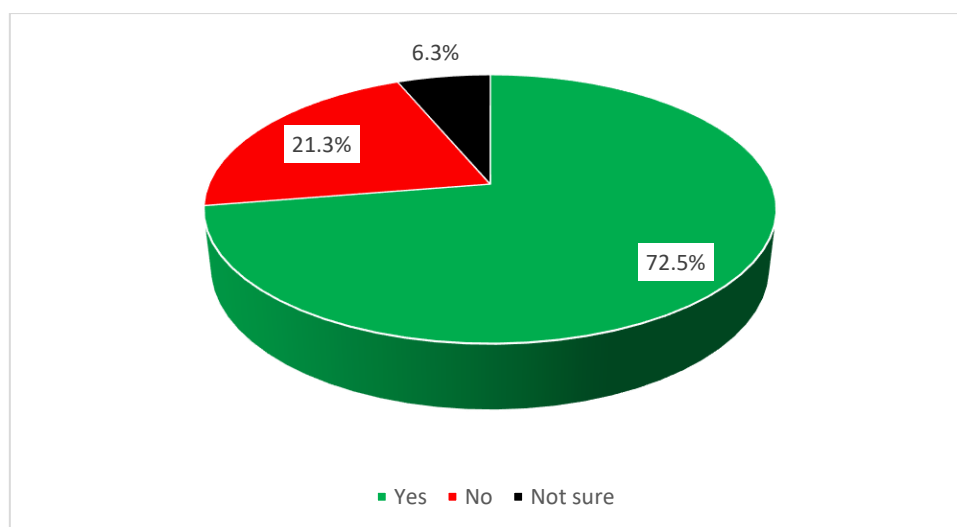


Figure 7: political branding helps voters make informed decisions

Figure 7 shows that over two-thirds (67.5%) of respondents believed political branding helps voters make informed decisions. About one-fifth (20%) indicated it does not help, and less than one-tenth (5%) were unsure.

Table 3: Political Branding Contributes to Transparency

The next question asked respondents to what extent they believe political branding contributes to the transparency of a candidate's agenda.

	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
A great deal	33	41.3
Somewhat	24	30.0
Not much	16	20.0
Not at all	7	8.8

Table 3: political branding contributes to the transparency

Table 3 reveals varying perceptions regarding political branding's contribution to a candidate's agenda transparency. 41.3% of respondents indicated it contributes a great deal, 30% somewhat, 20% not much, and 8.8% believed it does not contribute at all.

Figure 8: Reliance on Information Presented in Political Branding Campaigns

The researcher then asked respondents if they trust the information presented in political branding campaigns.

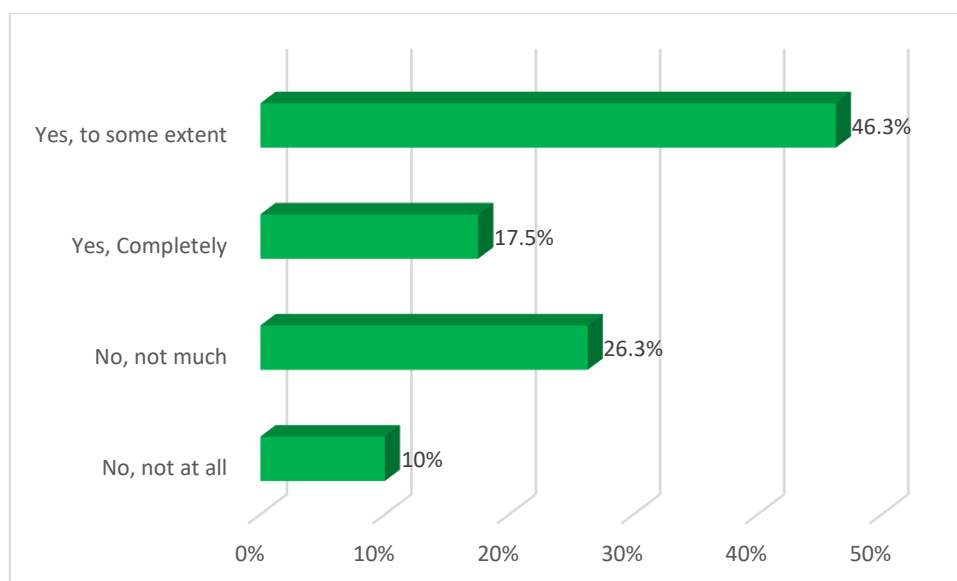


Figure 8: Reliance of information presented in political branding campaigns

Figure 8 indicates that 46.3% of respondents trusted the information presented in political branding campaigns to some extent, while 10% expressed complete distrust.

Branding in political campaigns influence voters' decision

Respondents were asked about factors they consider important when deciding whom to vote for.

Table 4: Important Factors Under Consideration When Voting

Variable		Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Candidates Policies?	Most Important	34	42.5
	Important	34	42.5
	Neutral	3	3.8
	Not important	7	8.8
	Not very important	2	2.5
Candidate's Character?	Most Important	27	33.8
	Important	43	53.8
	Neutral	1	1.3
	Not important	6	7.5
	Not very important	3	3.7
Political affiliation?	Most Important	25	31.3
	Important	32	40
	Neutral	11	13.8
	Not important	10	12.5
	Not very important	2	2.5
	Most Important	25	31.3
	Important	41	51.2

Variable		Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Personal values?	Neutral	2	2.5
	Not important	8	10
	Not very important	4	5
Past performance in public service?	Most Important	31	38.8
	Important	27	33.8
	Neutral	3	3.8
	Not important	14	17.5
	Not very important	5	6.3

Table 4: Important factor under consideration when voting

Table 4 summarises the factors respondents consider when deciding whom to vote for. Overall, respondents considered a candidate's character (53.8% important), personal values (51.2% important), policies (42.5% most important and 42.5% important), political affiliation (40% important), and past performance in public services (38.8% most important and 33.8% important).

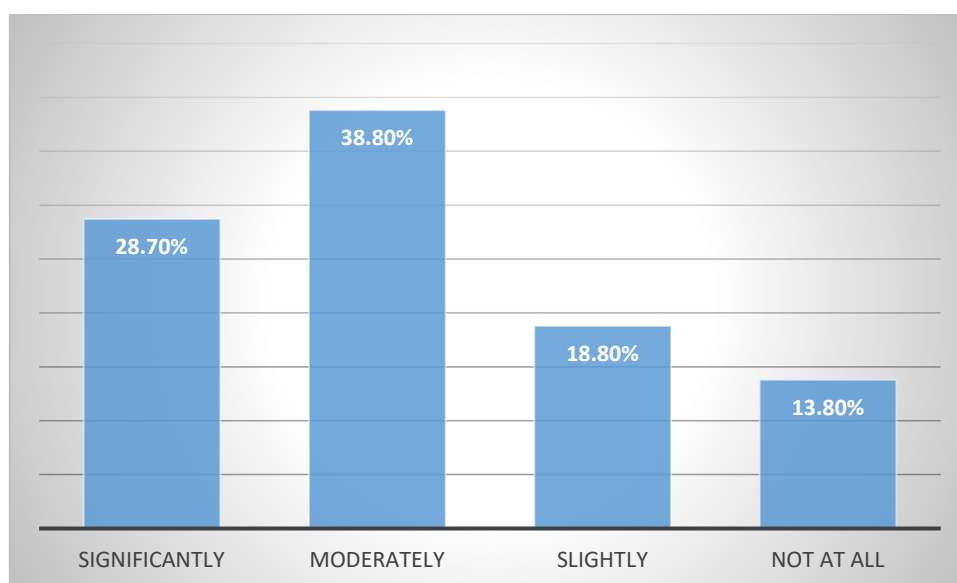


Figure 9: endorsement by public figures

Figure 9 indicates that endorsements by public figures moderately influenced 38.8% of respondents, while 28.7% reported a significant effect. A minority of respondents indicated that such endorsements did not influence their voting decisions.

Figure 10: Traditional Media Reliance

Respondents were then asked how much they rely on information from the traditional media such as Television, radio and newspapers when during the branding process.

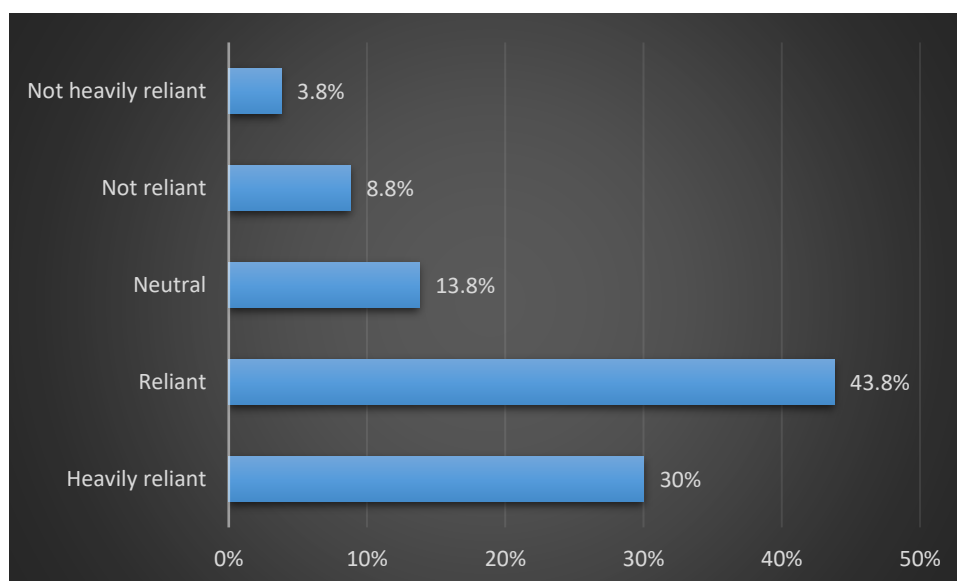


Figure 10: Traditional media reliance

Figure 10 shows that most respondents found information from traditional media (television, radio, newspapers) either reliant (43.8%) or heavily reliant (30%) during the branding process.

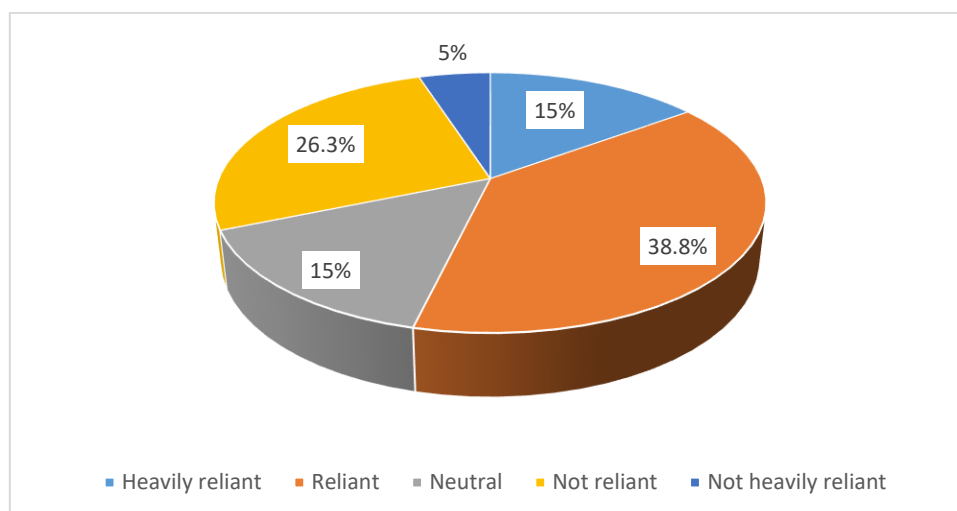


Figure 11: social media reliance

However, Figure 11 indicates that while 38.8% of respondents considered information from social media reliant, a quarter (25%) viewed it as not reliant.

Figure 12: Debates and Public Forums

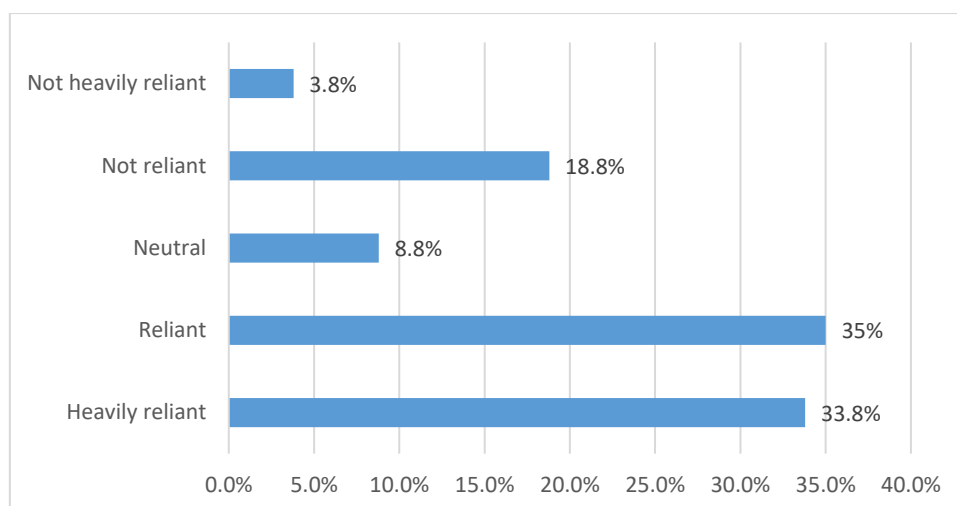


Figure 12: Debates and public forums

Figure 12 shows that 33.8% of respondents found information from debates and public forums reliant when making voting decisions, while 18.8% indicated the information was not reliant

Table 5: Reliance on Personal Interactions with Candidates

Lastly, the research asked how reliant of information from political parties regarding rebranding obtained from personal interactions with candidates.

	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Very reliant	26	32.5
Reliant	26	32.5
Neutral	8	10
Not reliant	15	18.8
Not reliant	26	32.5

Table 2: Reliance on personal interactions with candidates

Table 5 reveals that the majority of respondents (32.5% very reliant, 32.5% reliant) considered information from personal interactions with candidates to be reliable, with a minority (10%) remaining neutral.

Discussion of Findings

Political branding during 2021 campaigns on election campaigns in Zambia

The study's findings offer valuable insights into how political branding campaigns influenced the 2021 elections. A significant majority of respondents had prior election experience, suggesting high political engagement among the surveyed students. This aligns with the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA) report, which noted Zambia's 70.9% voter turnout in 2021, a considerable increase from 57.7% in 2016 (Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa, 2021). Increased online voter education, a competitive presidential race, and peaceful polling likely contributed to this

high participation. The attention paid to political branding is a crucial study aspect. It is evident that political branding has a significant impact on how people perceive elections, as 55% of respondents place a significant emphasis on it. On the other hand, the 12.5% of respondents who paid less attention draw attention to the distinct influences of campaigns on various populations. This finding generally supports Brand Equity Theory, which suggests strong political brands can enhance voter loyalty and influence outcomes. However, it also contrasts with the theory by showing that not all voters are equally swayed, as some may prioritize other factors. Similar evidence of political branding's effectiveness was observed in the 2016 U.S. general election, where Donald Trump leveraged his celebrity and business brand to create a political brand that mobilized core supporters (Kim & Kim, 2021; Yuran & Sheinheit, 2020).

The study also looked into the changing preferences of voters. The fact that 45% of respondents changed their voting preferences based on a candidate's political branding indicates the malleability of voter opinions. This suggests that strategic branding efforts can influence public perception during political campaigns. Candidates who effectively communicate their message and create a positive, relatable brand are more likely to win over voters, even if those voters initially supported another candidate. This dynamic nature of voter preferences underscores the importance of political communication and branding strategies in shaping public opinion and election outcomes (Krosnick et al., 2020; Burkell & Regan, 2019). This is in line with Political Marketing Theory, which describes political campaigns as a marketplace in which voters are sold "products." Just as consumer preferences shift with commercial branding, voter preferences are influenced by a candidate's brand presentation, reflecting the theory's emphasis on segmentation, targeting, and positioning within the political market.

The identification of slogans (67.5%) and campaign logos (47.5%) as the most influential elements offers practical insights for political strategists. These visual and verbal components are powerful communication tools. This finding implies that political strategists should prioritize developing compelling and memorable slogans and visually appealing logos, as these contribute significantly to shaping public perception (Rojas-Méndez & Khoshnevis, 2023). The likelihood of establishing a lasting, positive connection with the electorate through strategic investment in these aspects rises, potentially influencing voting outcomes. This information is valuable for optimizing communication strategies and enhancing candidates' ability to connect with and sway voter opinions.

The finding that social media presence was not a major influencing element for 75% of respondents challenges the conventional wisdom about digital platforms' impact on modern political campaigns. This highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of how political branding reaches voters, suggesting that traditional elements like slogans and logos remain crucial despite digital media's rise. This contrasts with some findings, such as Harrison et al. (2023). The fact that approximately one third of respondents considered a candidate's public image is intriguing. Political candidates who want to build personal connections with voters might find it helpful to investigate specific traits that contribute to

a positive public image. This suggests that voters evaluate candidates not just on policy or party affiliation, but also on their overall public image.

Overall, the study's findings illuminate the multifaceted relationship between political branding campaigns and electoral success. From the attention paid to branding to the specific elements that influence voters, the results underscore the need for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play in the political landscape. These insights can inform future political strategies and deepen the understanding of the intersection between political communication and electoral outcomes.

Voters' Perceptions of Political Branding in Zambia

A majority of respondents (62.5%) perceived the overall political branding environment in Zambia as positive. This is in line with Political Marketing Theory, which holds that strong branding is a crucial tool for engaging voters and influencing how they view candidates and parties. This suggests that political branding efforts are generally viewed favorably, indicating that many voters viewed these campaigns as useful tools for delivering messages and influencing opinions. The 7.5% who described the environment as negative and the 6.3% who were unsure highlight opinion diversity and the need for further exploration into factors contributing to such perceptions.

Over two-thirds of respondents, or 67.5 percent, were of the opinion that political branding aids in the decision-making process of voters. Scholars like Lees-Marshment (2014) contend that branding can make complex political issues more approachable to voters by simplifying them. Branding campaigns' potential to provide voters with necessary information is emphasized by this positive perception. However, the one-fifth (20%) who disagreed and the small fraction (5%) who were unsure warrant exploration into factors influencing their skepticism, which might stem from concerns about authenticity or perceived manipulation of voter opinions (Harris & Lock, 2010).

Diverse perceptions emerged from the investigation into the role that political branding plays in the transparency of a candidate's agenda. While 41.3% believed it had a great deal of impact, 30% thought it had a somewhat positive effect. In contrast, 20% believed it made no significant contribution, and 8.8% believed it had no effect. This diversity emphasizes the need to explore specific branding aspects voters associate with transparency and how these perceptions influence their attitudes. This complexity is echoed by Scammell (2015), who noted that while branding can enhance message visibility, it can also obscure deeper policy issues, leading to a perception of lacking substantive transparency.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is supported by the finding that 46.3% of respondents have some level of trust in information from political branding campaigns. ELM posits that information trust influences whether voters process messages via the central route (thorough content evaluation) or the peripheral route (superficial cues). This is supported by recent research: Smith et al. (2020) found that voters engage in central route processing and make better decisions when political messages are perceived as

credible. Understanding factors influencing trust or distrust in political branding messages is crucial for strategists to enhance campaign credibility.

Collectively, the findings underscore the complex nature of voters' perceptions of political branding in Zambia. While a majority view the environment positively and believe it aids informed decision-making, notable pockets of skepticism and uncertainty exist. Varying opinions on transparency and trustworthiness emphasize the need for nuanced branding strategies. Krosnick et al. (2020) found that in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, strong branding correlated with better-informed voters who felt more confident about their choices. Factors like content, tone, and consistency of branding messages, along with perceived alignment with actual agendas, could influence voters' perceptions. The study highlights both the strengths and potential pitfalls of political branding campaigns in Zambia's 2021 general elections. Acknowledging diverse perceptions is essential for political campaigns to tailor strategies effectively and build voter trust.

Factors that Influence Voters' Decisions during Elections

When deciding who to vote for, voters consider a candidate's policies (42.5 percent), character (53.8 percent), political affiliation (40%), personal values (51.2 percent), and previous performance in public service. This nuanced approach aligns with Social Judgment Theory (SJT), which suggests individuals' judgments about political candidates are influenced by pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. According to SJT, voters evaluate candidates based on their perceived similarity to their own values and attitudes.

Among these factors, character emerges as a paramount concern, with an overwhelming 53.8% of respondents highlighting its significance. This underscores voters' emphasis on qualities like honesty, integrity, and trustworthiness when evaluating candidates, suggesting a keen interest in personal attributes. Moreover, personal values play a pivotal role (51.2% of respondents). This finding suggests voters not only assess proposed policies but also seek alignment with a candidate's underlying values and principles, indicating a desire for representation by candidates who share a common ethical and moral framework. Despite the fact that a sizable 42.5 percent of respondents consider policies to be important, the slightly lower percentage when compared to character and personal values suggests that voters take into account policy substance but do not solely rely on policy positions. This implies voters likely assess the broader context of a candidacy, combining policy proposals with an evaluation of character and values. Political affiliation remains a key consideration for 40% of respondents, reflecting the enduring influence of party loyalty or ideological alignment. This underscores the continued significance of political parties as guiding frameworks, indicating that many individuals still rely on party affiliations as a heuristic for candidate evaluation. This is in line with the findings of Peterson et al. (2018), who found that voters place a higher value on policies that align with their personal beliefs and core values than on specific policy proposals. Lastly, considering a candidate's past performance in public services highlights a preference among voters for candidates with a proven track record. Although the specific percentage is not explicitly stated in the

narrative, its inclusion suggests voter's value tangible evidence of effective and competent governance. This reinforces the idea that past accomplishments contribute to the overall decision-making calculus, supported by Kim and Lee (2020), who found that political party identification significantly influences voters' perceptions and evaluations of candidates.

The peripheral route of processing outlined by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is reflected in the significant impact of endorsements from public figures, with 28.7% indicating a major influence and 38.8% indicating a moderate influence. This suggests that public figures like celebrities or political leaders can considerably sway voter opinions. It is essential for political campaigns to comprehend this impact. Endorsements can bring credibility, visibility, and an aura of approval to a candidate. Johnson and Smith (2021) corroborate this, observing that endorsements enhance appeal but are perceived differently based on existing voter attitudes. These findings underscore the potential effectiveness of strategic collaborations with influential figures in shaping public perception and voting decisions.

The reliance on information from traditional media channels (television, radio, newspapers) is notable, with 43.8% reliant and an additional 30% heavily reliant. This underscores the enduring influence of established communication channels. Nelson and Cahill (2022) highlight that traditional media continues to play a significant role in shaping voter perceptions, although social media's influence is growing inconsistently across voter segments. This finding emphasizes the continued relevance and impact of traditional media outlets in the political landscape. For branding strategies, neglecting traditional channels is ill-advised. Incorporating effective branding messages in television, radio, and newspapers remains a strategic approach to reach a substantial portion of the electorate, optimizing media outreach with a mix of traditional and modern channels. Peterson et al. (2019) found that direct interactions and public forums help candidates present platforms effectively, allowing voters to evaluate based on real-time engagement, which can shift acceptance.

Social media, on the other hand, clearly influences voters. While 38.8% of respondents considered information from social media reliant, a quarter (25%) viewed it as not reliant. This duality highlights the evolving landscape of political communication, with social media playing a substantial role for some voters but perceived as less credible by others. Recognizing the diverse ways in which social media influences voter decision-making, political campaigns must navigate this divide. The study also delves into the influence of debates and public forums, revealing that 33.8% of respondents find information from such events reliant. This indicates that voters value direct interactions and the exchange of ideas in shaping their electoral choices. To connect with voters and effectively present their platforms, political candidates may benefit from participating in debates and engaging with the public through forums. Lastly, another important aspect is relying on information from political parties obtained through personal interactions with candidates. The majority (32.5% very reliant, 32.5% reliant) indicated such information was reliable, suggesting that direct engagement with voters significantly contributes to their decision-making. To

effectively convey messages and build trust, political candidates should prioritize meaningful interactions with the electorate.

Conclusion

This study on the influence of political branding campaigns during the 2021 Zambia General Election reveals that political branding significantly impacts voter perceptions and decisions, with many respondents acknowledging its role in shaping electoral outcomes. While most participants viewed political branding positively and recognized its contribution to informed decision-making, some expressed skepticism, particularly regarding trust in campaign information. Voter decisions were found to be influenced by a combination of factors, including candidate attributes, media presence, public endorsements, and personal interactions. These findings underscore the importance of adopting holistic and credible political communication strategies that resonate with a diverse electorate and provide a valuable basis for future political campaign planning and research.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that political campaigns:

1. **Diversify Branding Strategies:** Adopt strategies that cater to different voter demographics, leveraging both traditional and digital media effectively.
2. **Enhance Transparency and Credibility:** To address partial trust in political messaging, campaigns should prioritise transparency and communicate policies and values clearly and consistently.
3. **Strategic Endorsements:** Utilise strategic endorsements by credible public figures, particularly those who resonate with youth demographics, as these can significantly boost appeal.
4. **Optimise Social Media Engagement:** Improve the reliability and engagement on social media platforms to address voter skepticism and better reach digitally-native audiences.
5. **Prioritise Personal Interactions:** Emphasise and prioritize personal interactions through formats like debates, community forums, and direct candidate engagements to strengthen voter trust and reinforce a candidate's public image and past performance. Specifically, consider youth-focused town halls or online Q&A sessions to foster direct engagement.

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