Political Brand Equity of South African Political Parties on X during the 2021 Municipal Elections: A Political Discourse Analysis

Mopailo Thomas Thatelo

University of South Africa,
Pretoria, South Africa
Email: thatemt@unisa.ac.za
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5796-9611

Tshepang Molale

University of Witwatersrand.
Johannesburg, South Africa
Email: tshepang.molale@wits.ac.za
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0283-5605

Abstract

This paper explores the effect of political brand equity on South Africa's democracy, by analysing two South African prominent political parties, the African National Congress (ANC), and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) using Aaker's (1998) brand equity dimensions model. The paper explores the parties' political brand equity and the effects of political brand equity on South African democracy. This is achieved through a qualitative political discourse analysis of the written texts (tweets), images and videos posted by the two political parties over three months, from September to November 2021, during the run-up to South Africa's 2021 Local Government Elections. Findings suggest that political brand equity, although nascent, provides a toolkit for

understanding the extent to which political party behaviour and identity influence brand loyalty, reputation, and brand association in the eyes of the electorate. This paper makes an important contribution, considering that brand equity is commonly featured in marketing communication rather than political communication in the developing world.

Keywords: *Political Brand Equity, Political Brand, Reputation, Brand Loyalty, Social Media, Local Government Elections*

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Democracies around the world are on a downward spiral because of several factors, including increasing inequality and a rising apathy among the electorate due to their increasing sense of powerlessness, signalling their lack of trust in political leaders (Mutuku, Owuoche, & Jonyo, 2023). Of great concern are issues of voter manipulation, polarisation, and the use of social media in an age of fake news and/or political disinformation, alternative facts, and post-truth towards targeting voters and swaying their votes/choices in a particular direction (Azzimonti & Fernandes, 2023; Rhodes, 2022). The banning and suspension of Donald J. Trump from leading social media platforms following the hotly contested 2020 U.S. presidential elections and the resultant Capitol Hill riots in January 2021 are indicative of how political actors and their parties can often use social media as part of a "war chest" aimed at influencing what voters think and how they may ultimately act (Kasirye, 2021; Tshuma, Tshuma & Ndlovu, 2022).

Moreover, Bots and fake social media accounts are used as tools to enhance cyber-propaganda by political parties, which polarises citizens and manipulates behaviour (Ndlela, 2020). In South Africa and Africa (cf. Asak & Molale, 2020; Mare, Mabweanzara & Moyo, 2019), political actors manipulate citizens via social media. For instance, the Gupta family's business ties with former South African President Jacob Zuma secured billions in state contracts (see Molale & Asak, 2024). Additionally, in the 2017 Kenyan election, Cambridge Analytica was involved in spreading fake news to influence outcomes between Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga (Ndlela, 2020: 23-24).

To understand how political brand equity is crucial for evaluating voter decisions and political actors' behaviour. Most research on this topic is based on Western experiences, not from the developing global South (Street, 2012).

The paper addresses the lack of political brand equity among South African parties through qualitative discourse analysis. It examines brand association, reputation, loyalty, and awareness in the ANC and EFF, chosen for their influence in the 2021 local elections. The ANC is rooted in liberation struggle legacy, while the EFF uses a populist, youthful, and radical approach to mobilize people.

In November 2021, South Africans voted in municipal elections for a five-year term. Despite COVID-19 challenges and the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) failed attempt to delay the elections, around 12 million participated, marking a low turnout of about 48%, down from 58% in 2016 (Koko, 2021). Political parties and candidates campaigned on various platforms.

Political parties such as the ANC and EFF mounted election campaigns and developed election manifestos that were aimed at explaining political party policies and promises to the electorate, on social media platforms, including, traditional media such as newspapers, radio and television. These parties galvanise support from the electorates and at the same time, dissuade the masses from voting for the opposition parties. Political actors have over 40 days (which is the number of days it took for the IEC to organise the 2021 Local Government Elections) to campaign for elections. Globally, social media, especially X, has become a standard tool for political parties to canvass for election support and as such, research interest in this subject is steadily growing (Daniel and Oberholzer, 2019).

Over 60 of the 213 municipal councils were "hung", meaning no party had a majority to govern alone. This required parties to form coalitions, influencing South Africa's democracy and offering insights into party and voter behaviour, and brand loyalty.

We have identified two main gaps to address: a lack of research on social media's role in political brand equity, particularly in terms of brand loyalty, association, and reputation; and insufficient studies from a global south perspective, especially concerning countries like South Africa.

This paper presents the following sections: an overview of the literature on political brand equity, the theoretical framework, the research method, data presentation and analysis, and the conclusion.

STUDYING POLITICAL BRAND EQUITY IN SOUTH AFRICA AND BEYOND

Empirical studies (Algharabal, Rana, Alalwan, Baobdllah & Gupta, 2020; Ahn, Park, & Hyun, 2018; Heinberg, Ozkaya & Taube, 2018; Heitmann, Landwehr & Schreiner, 2020) focus more on brand equity for consumer goods than for political brands. Ranmat and Parnomo (2020) examined political brand equity strategies on X during the Indonesian elections. Ahmed, Lodhi, and Ahmad (2017) discussed political brand equity, noting significant links between political and commercial brands in Pakistani voter choices, as individuals form impressions of both similarly.

Similarly, Kaur and Sohal (2022) identify a causal link between political brand equity, endorsers, brand personality, and preference. The study shows that influential figures affect political brand personality, which in turn influences brand preference. It suggests using endorsers in campaigns can enhance success (Kaur & Sohal, 2022).

Biswas's (2022) study shows that celebrities as political brand endorsers influence voter behaviour in West Bengal. Neto and Chaves (2020) examined brand equity in Brazilian politics using Aaker's (1998) dimensions: loyalty, knowledge qualities, brand association equity, and perceived brand quality. French and Smith (2010) highlighted credibility, safety, communication, and competence as key factors in electoral choices regarding political brand equity. These dimensions are supported by Yoo and Denthu (2001) and Torres, Augusto, and Lisboa (2015) but were only applied in marketing communication.

In Spain, a study conducted by Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, Villarreal, Cuesta-Valiño, and Blozis (2023) focused on how political actors can leverage their brand equity so that they can influence voter behaviour, looking at an emotional dimension consisting of the consumer-voter commitment and emotional involvement. However, like with previous studies, the study also found that the individual candidate brands cannot be dissociated from the political brand equity that their parties have amassed over time. They assert that "the influence of party-based brand equity implies the presence of a partisan bias in the formation of candidate brands" (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez *et al.,* 2023:7).

However, there is an existence of cases where principles of political branding are not responsibly and ethically employed to influence voter behaviour. For example, a study conducted on the 2019 Nigerian elections found that some political campaigns are still clouded by

strategies that are antithetical to the practice of political marketing, such as non-voter-centric methods that include electoral misconduct, fraud, and violence.

Perhaps a similar study that this paper draws on is Reddy and Naidoo's (2022) work, focusing on how political parties in South Africa use social media to gain voter confidence. Insights from this study applied Uses and Gratification theory as well as a two-way communication model to explore communication strategies by leaders of political parties as they try to reach out to their target audience and how they use social media for brand awareness purposes. Insights from this study helped with gauging how political parties use social media during their campaigns, while the study was limited in that it did not focus on the dimension of political brand equity.

In essence, it can be argued that, except for French and Smith's (2010) as well as Reddy and Naidoo's (2022) efforts, there is a paucity of research interest within a political marketing and communication context, which seeks to advance knowledge and inquiry into perceptions, views, and values that voters use and ascribe to political brands, especially in developing countries such as South Africa.

Furthermore, it is also worth pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of the above studies, although only a few focus on political brand equity. One notable point of interest is that none of the studies contextualises political brand equity from a social media point of view. This is notwithstanding the strong presence of social media when political actors engage with their voters in aggressive electioneering campaigns (Daniel & Obholzer, 2019; Mare, Mabweanzara & Moyo, 2019; Ndlela, 2020).

This paper argues that despite evidence of social media's prominence in communication studies, political brand equity studies have overlooked voter narratives and perceptions linked to social media interactions with political brands.

A literature review reveals social media's role in forming virtual social structures, enabling virtual public sphere interactions, and creating global/"glocal" villages. Research spans fields such as social media marketing (cf. Appel, Grewal, Hadi, & Stephen, 2019; Algaharabla *et al.*, 2020; Domenico *et al.*, 2021), public sphere (Mpofu, Asak, & Salawu, 2022), consumer research and advertising (Kizgin, Jamal, Dey & Rana, 2018), and sharing political content online (Hossain *et al.*, 2018). Platforms like WhatsApp, X, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have revolutionized communication. Lomborg (2017) noted social media is

dynamic, often causing interest and change. The study's main objective is:

To explore the political brand equity of the ANC and the EFF through a critical/political discourse analysis of texts (i.e., tweets), images and videos posted by the two political parties.

THEORISING POLITICAL BRAND EQUITY

Political brand equity

Brand equity is defined as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and symbols, which add or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or firm's customers" (Aaker,1998: 178). The significance of the definition of brand equity is mainly to create and sustain the competitive advantage of the brand, and its established strategies that differentiate the brand from competitors. The problem with this definition it focuses mainly on commercial brand equity rather than political brand equity.

However, the work of Kavanagh (1995), Lock and Harries (1996), Kotler and Kotler (1999), Schneider and Ferie (2015), and Scammell (2007) increasingly recognised that political actors employ commercial behaviours and strategies to the political marketing environment aimed at achieving brand objectives. Lock and Harries (1996:25) added that commercial "marketing behaviour and strategies" facilitate communication between political actors and the electorate, the media, donors, and other political constituencies. While Ahmed et al (2017) point out that political brand equity is an adoption of commercial brand equity, which exposes the choice of an electorate remarkably like the choice of a consumer product, causing political actors to adopt managers' strategies and making political brands more attractive, reliable, and differentiable.

Political branding is "the psychological representation" of the political actor (the political party and/or political candidates) (Scammell, 2007:177). Psychological representation means that political brands are symbolic of what the political actors stand for, rather than tangible values. Political branding is significant, in that, (1) it is concerned with how political actors are perceived by the overall voter constituencies, (2) they create a political image, political identity, and personality of the political actors that can be managed and supported (Marland & Flanagan, 2013), (3) they establish relationships between the political

actors and the electorate, and (4) lastly, they present the electorate with the ability to compare, recognise and familiarise between competing political brands (Milewicz & Milewicz, 2014).

Thus, for this paper, we focus specifically on political brand equity rather than on commercial brand equity. Since there is a paucity of literature that specifically defines brand equity as political brand equity, this paper presents the following definitions of political brand equity from the work of Scammell (2007), Yoo and Donthu (2001), and French and Smith (2010). Scammell (2007:179) views political brand equity as "a gift that" the electorate bestows on or withholds from the political actor, their ability to measure the strength and weakness of a political brand. While Yoo and Donthu (2001) point out that political brand equity emphasises the difference between the two competing political brands and their underlying representation. In addition, French and Smith (2010) define political brand equity as the different effects caused by the associations of a brand.

The above definitions highlights the core aspects of political brand equity: the role of the electorate as independent entities influencing the political brand's success, their ability to distinguish between political brands based on unique perceptions, and the association of political brands with individual experiences and knowledge. Political brand equity is perceived as intangible assets linked to political actors.

However, critiques of branding in the context of political communication, such as O'Shaughnessy and Hennesberg (2007), argue that political actors as brands are not universal, instead, they are localised. While Lilleker and Negrine (2003:23) point out that branding of politics is problematic in that "it narrows down the political agenda", "increases confrontation and demand conformity" as well as increases "a possible disengagement at the local level". Moreover, Equity and Almohammad (2014) argues that branding in politics is not a mature field of study and is limited to the voter's decisions regarding the political band.

Now that the foregone discussion has located the definition of political brand equity, the next section identifies key components of political brand equity.

Components of political brand equity

There are over three hundred different models of brand equity (Cunningham, 2021), however, many of these models have focused

largely on consumer brands (Keller, 1993). This paper focuses primarily on the components of Aaker's model, namely, brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, brand reputation, and brand loyalty. Since the Aaker model is rooted in commercial brands, this paper adapts Aaker's model to political brand equity.

Aaker (1998) outlines five key aspects of political branding: (1) Awareness provides political actors with electorates' familiarity. (2) Association refers to the connections electorates make with the political actor and brand. (3) Perceived quality is the value electors give to the political actor, influencing election outcomes. (4) Reputation is built through political performance. (5) Loyalty involves enduring support, offering political actors a competitive edge due to loyal electorates.

Studies by French and Smith (2010), Ahmed *et al* (2017), Neto and Chaves (2020), identified additional key components of brand equity, namely, knowledge, associations (the perceived strength or weakness that come to the voter's mind about the political actor), and loyalty (people who do not change their vote for the same political actor during the elections), The above-mentioned components of political brand equity are significant to this study, in that they are interlinked to each other.

METHOD

This paper follows a qualitative research design, it is critical, explorative, and interpretative. The paper deploys Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) as an analysis method of critical discourse analysis (CDA), primarily concerned with scrutinising how political texts such as speeches are produced, reproduced, and abused by political actors and media personnel (Van Dijk, 1998:11-15). Moreover, PDA interpretation is geared towards analysing political texts in the media. According to Van Dijk (1998) and Chilton (2004), political discourse occurs at the micro and macro levels of society. At the micro level, political discourse occurs between individuals through, among others, arguments, persuasion, and threats. At the macro level, politics occurs between political actors.

Thus, for this study, analysis is at the micro level, essentially among X users, who constitute electorates, political party supporters, and critics of the political actors. Wang (2016:277), argues, that PDA needs to move beyond a mere analysis of linguistic features such as the grammar of a political speech to a more critical analysis approach, where the

process of discourse production, distribution, and consumption is analysed.

This contextually implies that our analysis of political brand equity on social media is also imbued with a critical-analytic paradigm of PDA that focuses on the whole communicative and discursive relationship between the political actors and/or communication artifacts (texts, videos, memes, and texts), the domain within which they interact (the chosen social media platform, X), and the responses (tweets, retweets, memes, videos, texts, likes) that demonstrate the perceptions by voters to reflect brand loyalty, association, reputation, and equity.

That is, the paper explains, critiques and interprets underlying discursive, political, and social discursive practices of the selected texts. The study used purposive sampling to collect 20 artifacts (texts in the form of written tweets, images, and video): ten (10) for #ANC110@MYANC and another ten (10) for @EFFSouthAfrica. As indicated in the introduction of this paper, these two political parties were selected based on their influence and popularity in South Africa's local government politics in the run-up to the 2021 municipal elections. As part of an exploratory research design, this sampling technique is linked to the study's fundamental interpretive paradigm, of which the interest lies in exploring multiple constructions of reality.

The unit of analysis was out of a pool of over 200 tweets for each X account during the period from 20 September to 1 November 2021. The main research question focuses on the underlying political brand equity of South Africa's main political parties on X. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, and in a deductive sense, themes derived from the above theoretical framework were identified in the analysis stage. Thematic analysis was chosen based on its potency in enabling us to analyse, classify, and categorise recurring patterns of information that emerge either deductively or inductively in the dataset as a way of crystallising important themes to use in our analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The @MYANC X profile was activated in January 2009, while the @EFFSouthAfrica X profile was established in November 2012. At the time of drafting this paper, the @MYANC profile had a following of 1.1 million people, while at the same time, the @EFFSouthAfrica profile showed a following of 1.9 million people.

The following discussion of results and analysis focuses on the above-mentioned underlying components of Aaker's (1998) model:

Brand Association

In assessing the brand association of the ANC, attributes such as *"ANC is one big mistake!", "lie(s)", "stealing", "cheating", "crooks", "load shedding", "corruption", "a failure", and "building of communities of thieves"* were discovered. The selected tweets from members of the public were highly negative and unfavourable, and suggested a weaker ANC rather than a robust political party. Arguably, these negative attributes were unavoidable since the ANC has experienced declining support during elections since 2009 (Booysen, 2011).

This might be attributed to the ANC's internal political party squabbles that started at the party's 2007 national elective conference held in Polokwane (Limpopo Province), which saw the former President Jacob Zuma ascending to power as the president of the ANC (Southall, 2009). This paved the way for Zuma's later election as South Africa's president despite facing corruption scandals against him (Wolmarans & Burbidge, 2007). Since then, several party leaders have been embroiled in scandal after scandal, involving corruption, graft, state capture, and generally poor service delivery in many of South Africa's municipalities (Dumay, Carstens & Bradpiece, 2021). It could be argued that the above attributes delegitimise the significance of the ANC-led government in post-1994 South Africa.

Moreover, in other tweets, we found the existence of comments/replies that are critical of the ANC. For instance, in the build-up to the elections, @MYANC's X profile posted a series of the political party's manifesto promises as a way of courting the voters and persuading them to vote for the party. In one tweet from 2 October 2021, the party tweeted:

> "#ANCManifesto The ANC affirms its commitment to fighting corruption. *We will deal decisively with corrupt leaders and officials, mismanagement, waste and underperformance.* Find out more: http://anc1912.org.za #VoteANC #ANCLGE2021" (@MYANC, 2021)

The above tweet generated about 77 comments with different people, most critical of the ANC and not believing the campaign promise. For example, in one comment, a respondent posted a looped

5-seconds-long video of himself uttering the following words: *"wow…what a scam"*. The video was simply captioned: *"end corruption…."*.

There were even more extreme responses to the ANC's tweet about ending corruption, ranging from the one that controversially relates to Ramaphosa's CR17 case about how his election campaign in the political party was financed by those seeking government kickbacks should he ascend to power during his leadership contest in 2017. The response read: *"starting with the unsealing of #CR17BankStatements"*. Other tweets bordered on satire, for example, one tweet simply replied with a meme that said: *"pulling down my mask so I can hear properly"*.

However, several positive tweets were identified from the @MYANC X profile. These included a tweet posted by the political party on 18 October 2021, with a short video clip, showing a large crowd of people dancing to the ANC's campaign song with the party's top leadership, led by Cyril Ramaphosa, at a campaign rally in the Free State. The tweet is captioned: "#ANCinFreeState ANC President Cde @CyrilRamaphosa now in Ward 16 in Thabang (sic), Matjhabeng for his last community meeting. #BuildingBetterCommunities" (ANC, 2021). What is interesting about this tweet is the seemingly positive comments that are made in the comment section of the tweet. These include:

> Comment 1: *"people still love MyANC and support the leader and also the top six decisions"*, and *"the President of the ANC is running these shows (sic)"*.

> Comment 2: *"Thank Zuma who encouraged South Africans to vote for ANC, Amandla kulondawo"* (English trans: Power to the people in that area).

In essence, the ANC's brand is mostly associated with negative perceptions around corrupt leaders as well as empty and unfulfilled promises, looking at its interactions with citizens on the X social networking site. It is worth pointing out, although the brand association of the ANC is negative, weak, and unfavourable, the party's support in urban metros continues to decline (Savide, 2021) compared to, rural provinces across South Africa, where the party is popular, and it enjoys much support (Rakabe, 2019; Shilowa, 2021).

For the EFF, we identified several tweets that are mostly negative as well, looking at the negative publicity they generated over the years. The following tweets can be cited as notable examples: *"your foreigners"*, *"how to raid pensioners' hard-earned savings"*, *"your pies in the sky"*, and *"share VBS money please"*. Like the ANC, the EFF's brand association is mostly negative and unfavourable owing to several factors, including negative

publicity generated around, amongst others, its leaders being associated with the financial plunder of VBS Mutual Bank (Marrian, 2021; Van Wyk, 2018). In addition, the party's brand was also associated with defying government immigration laws and encouraging immigrants from neighbouring Southern African countries to enter South Africa, whether legally or illegally (Feketha, 2021).

The party further denounced the overall concerns held by many South Africans about the influx of illegal immigrants (Launspach, 2021) who are involved in 60% of violent crime at least in Gauteng province (Newham, 2017), destruction of economic infrastructure by Mozambicans and Zimbabweans (Molosankwe, 2021; Pretorius, 2012), and human trafficking by Nigerian nationals (Francke, 2021). Another point that makes the EFF receive such negative publicity is its rhetoric of the "expropriation of land without compensation", a policy that demonstrates the EFF's support for land grabs, particularly commercial farms that are in private hands, mostly those that are owned by white South Africans.

However, despite having generated such negative publicity, there are instances where the EFF's brand is somewhat positive, judging by some favourable responses to its tweets from the general public. For instance, a tweet posted by the @EFFSouthAfrica profile on 28 September 2021 attracted 316 retweets, 24 quotes (these are mentions of the tweet in other X profiles), 1 380 likes and 104 comments, arguably due to the tagged pictures of a significant large crowd of people wearing EFF's red T-shirts, gathered to attend the political party's manifesto launch. The party's tweet read:

> "[In Pictures]: *People flooded the Winnie Madikizela-Mandela Square on Sunday, to listen to CIC @Julius_S_Malema deliver the people's manifesto at the #EFFManifestoLaunch. As we journey towards the 1st of November, our demands are clear #LandAndJobsManje. We want them NAMHLANJE."*

The following are examples of responses to this tweet by the EFF:
Comment 1: *"If these numbers translate into votes in the next General Election, we will have the CiC in the highest office in the land sooner than anticipated."*
Comment 2: *"People will say rent a crowd, but the manifesto was interesting to hear is not about we will we know the challenges of the masses ward to ward unlike admitting your mistakes that are building up every day because of poor governance"*
The above responses show that people were critical of the EFF, some were lamenting the fact that such a large crowd was allowed to attend an

EFF rally – this was in contravention of COVID-19-related restrictions. The following are examples of such tweets:

Comment 3: *"Manifesto of Covid?"*

Comment 4: *"Hopefully we won't experience super-spreading. You know EFF is famous for THAT. Even its leader once mentioned that."*

Another respondent bemoaned the fact that large gatherings are allowed for political party events while churches, at the time, were not allowed to organise larger gatherings as per the country's COVID-19 rules: *"If they can do it publicly so and no one is arrested why are churches not allowed to go back to normal. We say no to church closure #OpentheChurches"*

While other respondents reacted to this by indicating that the EFF is using a rent-a-crowd tactic to create an impression that it has many supporters:

Comment 5: *"You will grab no municipality yet again; I know your crowd is consisting of foreigners who you represent using the locals' vote. I regret voting for you in the past, now I will vote for those who want to improve the lives of South Africans"*

Comment 6: *"Foreigners can't vote"*

Although the above political brand association of the EFF is negative, the party has experienced a net growth of 10% from 8% of votes in the 2016 local government elections. The party's performance was patchy, with high performance in some areas, with new gains and low performance in other provinces such as Limpopo and Gauteng (Sussman, 2021).

Perceived quality

Some tweets were directed to the ANC and EFF, which reveal that the two political parties present South Africa with some risks of perceived quality. For example, one person tweeted in response to the ANC's manifesto promises that *"Voting for the ANC is voting for poverty"*, *"…state resources are abused by your spineless party (ANC)"*, while another one expressed displeasure at perceived failures by the ANC to fulfil its campaign promises, given its track record in government: *"Nothing is going to change if they continue to vote for the ANC"*. The tweets reveal inherent concerns among South Africans about the ANC remaining in power, its failures to address corruption within its ranks (Haffajee, 2021), high and persistent poverty levels among black people (Mdluli & Dunga, 2021) and lack of socio-economic transformation among black South Africans (Koelble, 2021).

Similarly, it can be argued that negative responses to the EFF's tweets demonstrate how the party is perceived as having double standards, failing to lead by example while it accuses leaders of other political parties, such as the ANC, for indiscretions that its (the EFF's) leaders also commit.

Brand reputation

Some tweets revealed that the ANC and the EFF political parties experienced brand reputation crises. Reputationally, it is concerned with the ANC's political image, these include: *"black unemployment …creating poverty, enriching yourselves and destruction of South Africa"*; *"stealing"*; *"MASS LOOTING@THE POOR and…CORRUPT@MYANC"*; *"ANC=corruption, the ANC harbours and protects criminals"*, *"You (ANC) failed to deliver services for 27 years…"*; *"Keep lying …nothing will change and the 'mistakes' will grow…"*; *"R3bn corruption 63 officials 0 consequences"*; *"The ANC has stolen R2 Trillion from SA fiscus, that equates to 215 MILLION RAND per day for 26 years #RiseUP#ANCMustFall"*; *"ANC WALL OF SHAME"*; *"ANC Cadre No1 world champion for job destruction 7.8 million unemployed!"*; and *"ANC is dead"*.

The above-selected tweets use different discursive practices of language, such as metaphors, numbers, uppercase, and hashtags, to construct a negative image for the ANC. Moreover, the above discursive practices reveal the underlying reputation of the ANC political party as a corrupt political organisation which fails to grow and create economic opportunities for South Africans.

Like the ANC, the EFF's brand has also attracted negative and unfavourable tweets. These include: *"EFF has failed to make an impact"*; *"u can steal pensioners money, what can one expect from you!"*; *"…EFF failed people of Tshwane for the past five years!"*; *"…EFF…Liars and looters!"*; and *"You are masters in destroying wherever you go"*.

The foregone tweets use linguistic discursive practices such as *"failed"*, *"steal"*, *"Liars and looters"*, political metaphor of "masters", including exclamation marks mainly to legitimise shortcomings of the brand reputation of the EFF regardless of its success since its formation in 2014.

Similar to the ANC, the EFF reputation seems to be negative as some people on X have accused it of pretending to rally behind the "oppressed black nationalism" yet its leaders stole money from VBS Mutual Bank to gratify their taste for high luxury life and personal

political ambition. The political audiences seemingly view the EFF as using deception and dishonesty to court electoral support. Typically, the use of metaphors such as *"…masters in destroying whatever…"* suggests that the EFF's leaders, including its president, Julius Malema, are destructive populists that seek to expropriate land without compensation essentially to discourage commercial farming, destroy food security, and to destabilise the overall South African economy (Felix, 2021). However, despite such views, the EFF continues to gain popular support among most black South Africans across the country.

Brand loyalty

The selected tweets about the ANC and EFF political brands reveal both political parties enjoy favourable brand loyalty among the supporters and/or electorates. The selected tweets use different linguistic discursive practices such as *"We are ANC!", "Voter Now! A vote for the ANC is a pledge to start #RebuildingTogether #VoteANC", "Let us rebuild and renew effective local government", "We voted ANC, the people's movement #VoteANC", "The ANC lives, the ANC leads".* Linguistic discursive practices used in the above tweets ideologically construct a heroic appeal of the ANC as "the people's movement" since its formation in 1912, mainly to unite African people, to mobilise people, and to resist colonialism and apartheid (Mashele & Qobo, 2014:34).

It is for this reason that the ANC remains "the people's movement", mainly to centre African people in the fight against forms of social and economic injustices in post-1994 South Africa. Moreover, the tweets use pronouns such as *"we"* to ideologically suggest unity and loyalty within the ANC. The problem with the discursive practice of the pronoun, *"we"* and *"together",* is that these words try to downplay and overlook the underlying factional battles within the party, that could potentially destroy the ANC and undermine the political and economic stability of South Africa under the ANC leadership (Tau, 2020; Jika, 2019).

Lastly, the tweets use political metaphors of *"rebuilding"* and *"renew"* to suggest the transformational ideology that some regard as a myth, essentially to clean up corruption within the ranks of the ANC and in government. However, it remains to be seen whether the ANC will succeed in *"rebuilding"* and *"renewing"* itself while cadre deployment remains the lifeblood of the ANC-led government.

On the other hand, tweets such as "*We don't care and we will not vote for the corrupt (ANC)", "Don't vote ANC*", and "*Ayisafani*",[1] They are used to present a counter-narrative to the established narrative of heroic ANC loyalty. The discursive practice of "*we*" is used ideologically to suggest a collective group of South Africans who are tired of the ANC's corruption and inefficient service delivery (Khoza, 2021). The discursive practice "*Ayisafani*" is used ideologically to suggest that the ANC has changed, and it has become a monster to its people by looting from the poor and their inability to grow the economy that essentially keeps its electorate in the chains of poverty and underdevelopment.

Like the ANC, the EFF tweets "*The only party (EFF) that could save South Africa…", "EFF is indeed hoping for many black people", "EFF have a vision for South Africa", "EFF South Africa is the only relevant political party in SA*" reveal underlying brand loyalty to the political party. However, it is worth pointing out that the populist EFF lacks an ideological anchor and is most likely to maintain the status quo of inequality, corruption, poverty, and underdevelopment among black people (Zulu, 2021).

Moreover, the above tweets construct a heroic narrative to brand loyalty that views the EFF political party as the only alternative to the ANC and a future to South Africa's political and economic woes.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Aaker's (1998) model is useful in that although it is purely based on branding within a business communication context, we can use its concepts within a political brand equity context to unearth how social media users are able to use the dimensions of brand equity to measure the political parties' brands, thereby informing brand association, loyalty, and reputation as well as perceived quality.

Based on the findings, both political parties have attracted a negative brand association and have generated poor perceptions about the quality of their brands. Conventionally, both political parties have extremely poor brand equity based on our interpretations of Aaker's (1998) brand equity dimensions. However, it is notable that in line with the conventional argument of perceived quality, both political parties are still able to command and enjoy the support of some social media users who tend to quell the criticism that they attract by countering the antagonistic

---

[1] isiZulu language for it has changed.

narratives/discourse against the political parties. Although it can be argued that the brand reputation of both parties is weak and low based on our reading of the selected tweets, they, however, demonstrate a degree of high brand loyalty and support from other social media users.

As a recommendation for further research, we call for more research to be conducted within the domain of political communication, where a holistic and suitable model/framework can be developed that can contextually analyse or explain political brand equity. We make this recommendation given the fact that Aaker's (1998) model is exclusively focused on brand management within a business communication sense, and thus, it does not account for the socio-political context of political branding in social media spaces. We also call for impact assessment studies on the effects of political brands among the electorate.

REFERENCES

Aaker, DA. (1998). *Building Strong Brands*. New York: The Free Press.

Ahmed, MA, Lodhi, SA. & Ahmad, Z. (2017). Political brand equity model: The Integration of a political brand in voter choice. *Journal of Political Marketing* 16(2): 147-179. DOI:10.1080/15377857.2015.1022629

Ahn J, Park JK & Hyun H (2018). Luxury product-to-service brand extension and brand equity transfer. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Service* 42(3): 22-28.

Algharabla R, Rana N, Alalwan AA, Baobdullah A & Gupta A (2020) Investigating the antecedents of consumer-based engagement and consumer-based brand equity in social media. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 53:1-13.

Appel G, Grewal, L, Hadi, R & Stephen, AT. (2019).The future of social media in marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 48:79-95. DOI: 10.1007/s11747-019-00695-1.

Asak, MO, & Molale, TB .(2020) Deconstructing De-legitimisation of Mainstream Media as Sources of Authentic News in the Post-Truth Era. *Communicatio* 46(4): 50-74. DOI: 10.1080/02500167.2020.1723664.

Azzimonti, M., & Fernandes, M. (2023). Social media networks, fake news, and polarization. *European Journal of Political Economy,* 76: 102256.

Biswas, F. (2022) Celebrity Brand Personality and Politics in West Bengal: An Explorative Study. *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096221130345.

Booysen, S. (2011) *The African National Congress and the regeneration of political power*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2): 77-101. DOI: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Cunningham, N. (2021) *Brand Management: A Southern African Perspective*. Cape Town: Van Schaik.

Daniel, WT, & Oberholzer, L. (2019) Reaching out to the voter? Campaigning on Twitter during the 2019 European elections. *Research and Politics* 7(2): 1-8. DOI: 10.1177/205316j8020917256.

Domenico GD, Sit J, Ishizaka, A & Nunan, D. (2021) Fake news, social media and marketing: A systematic review. *Journal of Business Research* 124:329-341.

Duma C, Carstens, S, & Bradpiece, S. (2021) Corruption is gnawing at the heart of South Africa's ruling ANC party. *France 24*. 06 January. Available at: https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/focus/20210106-corruption-gnawing-at-the-heart-of-south-africa-s-ruling-anc-party (accessed 20 January 2022).

Equity, B. & Almohammad, A.H.(2014). The Conceptualisation and Operationalisation of Emotion-based. *Political Journal of Marketing Management*, 2 (2): 165-194.

Felix, J. (2021) Parliament hears the pros and cons of land expropriation without compensation. *News24*. 24 March. Available at: https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/parliament-hears-the-pros-and-cons-of-land-expropriation-without-compensation-20210324 (accessed 21 January 2022).

Feketha, S. (2021) EFF calls on foreign nationals to find "creative" ways of entering the country. January 2021. *IOL*. Available at: https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/eff-calls-on-foreign-nationals-to-find-creative-ways-of-entering-country-3ad09be3-2e63-4b7d-9819-b8ecd5ffd5f8 (accessed 18 January 2022).

Francke. R.L. (2021). Nigerian national sentenced to five life terms for human trafficking and multiple rapes. *IOL*. 10 November. Available at: https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/gauteng/nigerian-national-sentenced-to-five-life-terms-for-human-trafficking-and-multiple-rapes-6c9cd826-3e72-4f66-9818-ac77a97ef9a4 (accessed 21 January 2022).

French, A.P & Smith, G (2010) Measuring political brand equity: A consumer-oriented approach. *European Journal of Marketing,* 44(3/4): 460-477. DOI:10.1108/03090561011020534.

Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, P., Villarreal, R., Cuesta-Valiño, P., & Blozis, S.A. (2023). Valuation of candidate brand equity dimensions and voting intention: alternative poling data in the Spanish presidential election. *Humanities & Social Sciences Communication.* 10(295): 1-10. DOI: 10.1057/s41599-023-01790-z

Haffajee, F. (2021) ANC fails to stop the corruption train – 32 major scandals, four is 2021 alone. *Daily Maverick.* 07 October. Available at: https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-10-07-anc-fails-to-stop-the-corruption-train-32-major-scandals-four-in-2021-alone/ (accessed 21 January 2022).

Heinberg, M, Ozakaya HE & Taube, M (2018) Do corporate image and reputation drive brand equity in India and China? – Similarities and differences. *Journal of Business Research* 86(4): 259-268.

Heitmann, M, Landwehr, JR, & Schreiner, JF. (2020) Leveraging brand equity for effective visual product design. *Journal of Marketing Research* 52(2):257-277.

Hossain MA, Dwivedi YK, Chan C, Standing C & Olanrewaju, AS (2018) Sharing Political Content in Online Social Media: A Planned and Unplanned behaviour Approach. *Information System frontiers* 20(3): 485-501. DOI: 10.1007/s10796-017-9820-9.

Jika T (2019) The ANC is at war with itself. *Mail & Guardian.* 07 June. Available at: https://mg.co.za/article/2019-06-07-00-the-anc-is-at-war-with-itself/ (accessed 21 January 2021).

Kasirye, F. (2021). Using Social Media for Political Campaign Communication and its impact on political polarization among youths in Uganda. *International Journal of Politics, Publics, Policy, and Social Works* 3(9): 17-43.

Kaur H & Sohal S (2022) Political brand endorsers, political brand preference, and political brand equity: A mediated moderated model. *Journal of Marketing Communications* 28(1): 3-37.

Kavanagh, D. (1995). *Election Campaigning: The New Marketing of Politics.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Keller, K.L .(1993). Conceptualizing, measuring and managing customer-based brand equity. *Journal of Marketing* 57(1):1-22.

Khoza, M. (2021) South African citizens are gatvol of ANC corruption and misrule. *Daily Maverick.* 07 July. Available at: https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2021-07-07-south-

african-citizens-are-gatvol-of-anc-corruption-and-misrule/ (accessed 21 January 2022).

Kizgin H, Jamal A, Dey, B.L & Rana, N.P.(2018) The impact of Social Media on Consumer's Acculturation and Purchase Intentions. *Information Systems Frontiers* 20(3): 503-514. DOI: 10.1007/s10796-017-9817-4.

Koelble, T. (2021). South Africa's lack of economic complexity is our real problem, and it's driven by cadre deployment and the unions. *Daily Maverick.* 25 July. Available at: https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-07-25-south-africas-lack-of-economic-complexity-is-our-real-problem-and-its-driven-by-cadre-deployment-and-the-unions/ (accessed 21 January 2022).

Koko K (2021) LGE 2021: Thousands turned away, but IEC says it is not to blame. *Mail & Guardian,* 2 Nov. Available at:https://mg.co.za/politics/2021-11-02-lge-2021-thousands-turned-away-but-iec-says-it-is-not-to-blame/ (accessed 3 November 2021).

Kotler, P. & Kotler, N. (1999). Generating effective candidates, campaigns, and causes. In B Newman (ed.) *Handbook of Political Marketing.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 3-18.

Launspach, M. (2021). SA battling with influx of illegal immigrants yet EFF is calling for open borders. IOL. 19 Jan. Available at: https://www.iol.co.za/the-star/opinion-analysis/sa-battling-with-influx-of-illegal-immigrants-yet-eff-is-calling-for-open-borders-49ee8c39-6a4e-43f8-a4e8-b5632ad16f5b (accessed 23 December 2021).

Lilleker, D & Negrine, R (2003) Not big brand names but corner shop: Marketing politics in political decision-making. *American Journal of Political Science* 45(9): 51-71.

Lomborg S (2017) A state of flux: Histories of social media research. *European Journal of Communication* 32(1): 6-15. DOI: 10.1177/0267323116682807.

Mare A, Mabweanzara HM & Moyo D (2019) "Fake News" and Cyber-Propaganda in Sub-Saharan Africa: Recentering the Research Agenda. *African Journalism Studies* 40(4): 1-12. DOI: 10.1080/23743670.2020.1788295.

Marland, A & Flanagan, T. (2013) Brand new party: Political branding and the Conservative Party of Canada. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 46(4): 951-972.

Marrian, N (2021) Red faces all around for the EFF. *Financial Mail.* 10 June. Available at: https://www.businesslive.co.za/fm/fm-fox/trending/2021-06-10-red-faces-all-around-for-the-eff/ (accessed 23 October 2022)

Mashele, P. & Qobo, M. (2014). *The fall of the ANC: What next?* Johannesburg: Picador Africa.

Mdluli, P & Dunga, S. (2021) Determinants of poverty in South Africa Using the 2018 General Household Survey Data. *Journal of Poverty* 26(3): 197-213. DOI: 10.1080/10875549.2021.1910100.

Milewicz, C.M & Milewicz, M.C. (2014) .The branding of candidates and parties: The U.S. news media and the legitimization of a new political term. *Journal of Political Marketing* 13(4): 233-263.

Molale, T.B., & Asak, M.O. 2024. Reliving the Gupta Imbrogilo in South Africa: A conspiracy Theory Perspective of Fake News on Social Media. In Salawu, A., Amenaghawon, F.O., Okudolo, I.T.P., & Hove, M.L (Eds.) *Social Media, Misinformation and Disinformation: Studies and Perspectives from Africa*. Ibadan, Nigeria: University Press Plc. pp. 286-304

Molosankwe, B. (2021). Zim national nabbed with suspected stolen copper cables. IOL, 9 July. Available at: https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/free-state/zim-national-nabbed-with-suspected-stolen-copper-cables-aa1f457a-761c-4f35-ae93-92d51e74cba1 (accessed 21 January 2022).

Mpofu P, Asak M.O & Salawu, A (2022) Facebook groups as transnational counter public sphere for diasporic communities. *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 9(1): 2027598. DOI: 10.1080/23311983.2022.2027598

Mutuku, R.K, Owuoche, S.O.,& Jonyo, F.O. 2023. The Vicious Relationship between Apathetic Political Behaviour and Citizen Quiescence in Nairobi County. *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences,* 6(2): 114-127. DIO: 10.37284/2707-4285

Ndlela, M.N.(2020). Social Media, Algorithms, Bots and Elections in Africa. In Ndlela, M.N. and Mano, W. eds. *Social Media and Elections in Africa, Volume 1: Theoretical Perspectives and Election Campaigns*. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland, p.p. 13-38.

Neto, M.A & Chaves, E.P.S.C. (2020) Political brand equity: An analysis on the construction of the political brand. *Magazine of Entrepreneurship and Management of Micro and Small Enterprises* 5(2): 117-146.

Newham, G. (2017). Do foreigners really commit SA's most violent crimes? Statements by Gauteng's police head promote xenophobia and could provoke violence against foreigners. *ISS Today.* 29 November. Available at: https://issafrica.org/iss-today/do-foreigners-really-commit-sas-most-violent-crimes (accessed 21 January 2022).

O'Shaughnessy, N.J & Henneberg, S.C. (2007).The selling of the president 2004: A marketing perspective. *Journal of Public Affairs* 7: 249-268.

Pretorius, W.L.(2012). *A criminological analysis of copper cable theft in Gauteng.* Unpublished Master's Thesis. University of South Africa, Pretoria.

Rakabe, E. (2019) Don't dismiss ANC's rural voters as ignorant. *Mail & Guardian.* 29 May. Available at: https://mg.co.za/article/2019-05-29-00-I-dismiss-ancs-rural-voters-as-ignorant/ (accessed 21 January 2021).

Rahmat, A.F. & Purnomo, E.P. (2020). Twitter Media Platform to Set-Up Political Branding: Analyzing @Kiyai Marufamin in 2019 Presidential Election Campaign. In *Nyimak: Journal of Communication* 04 (1):73. https://doi.org/10.31000/nyimak.v4i1.2268

Reddy, M.M., & Naidoo, G.M. (2022). The Effective use of Social Media by South African Political Organisations to gain Voters' Confidence. *Journal of African films and Diaspora Studies (JAFDIS),* 5(4): 123-144. DOI:10.31920/2516-2713/2022/5n4a6

Rhodes, S.C. (2022). Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Fake News: How Social Media Conditions Individuals to Be Less Critical of Political Misinformation. *Political Communication,* 39(1): 1-22. DOI: 10.1080/10584609.2021.1910887.

Scammell, M. (2007) Political brands and consumer citizens: The rebranding of Tony Blair. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 611(1): 176-192.

Schneider, H & Ferie, F.(2015) How to manage a party brand: Empirical perspectives on electoral probability and internal conflict. *Journal of Political Marketing* 14(1-2): 64-95.

Shilowa, M (2021). The numbers don't lie, the ANC is now a rural party. *News24.* 04 November. Available at: https://www.news24.com/news24/columnists/mbhazima_shilowa/mbhazima-shilowa-the-numbIdont-lie-the-anc-is-now-a-rural-party-20211104 (accessed 21 January 2021).

Southall, R. (2009). Understanding the 'Zuma Tsunami'. *Review of African Political Economy,* 36(121): 317-333. DOI: 10.1080/0305624090310739

Sussman, W. (2021). Road to 2024: EFF makes a splash in local poll, but no red wave. *Daily Maverick.* 10 November. Available at: https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-11-10-road-to-2024-eff-makes-a-splash-in-local-poll-but-no-red-wave/ (accessed 21 January 2021).

Street, J. (2012). Do Celebrity Politics and Celebrity Politicians Matter? *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 14(3): 346-356. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-856X.2011.00480.x.

Tau, R. (2020). ANC factional battles are deepening while its leadership is crumbling. *Daily Maverick.* 12 October. Available at: https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2020-10-12-anc-factional-battles-are-deepening-while-its-leadership-is-crumbling/ (accessed 21 January 2022).

Torres, P M, Augusto MG & Lisboa, JV.(2015) Determining the causal relationship that affect consumer-based brand equity: The mediating effect of brand loyalty. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning* 33(6): 944-956.

Tshuma, B.B, Tshuma, LA & Ndlovu, M .(2022) Twitter and political discourses: How supporters of Zimbabwe's ruling ZANU PF use Twitter for political engagement. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/17531055.2022.2076385.

Wang J .(2016). A New Political and Communication Agenda for Political Discourse Analysis: Critical Reflections on Critical Discourse Analysis and Political Discourse Analysis. *International Journal of Communication* 10: 2766-2784. Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3847/1679> (accessed: 21 October 2022)

Wolmarans, R & Burbidge, M. (2007) Zuma is new ANC president. *Mail & Guardian.* 18 December. Available at: https://mg.co.za/article/2007-12-18-zuma-is-new-anc-president/ (accessed 20 January 2022).

Van Wyk, P. (2018). VBS bank heist: EFF's family ties and money connections. *Daily Maverick.* 21 November. Available at: https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-11-21-vbs-bank-heist-effs-family-ties-and-moneyed-connections/ (accessed 21 January 2022).

Yoo, B & Donthu, N. (2001) Developing and validating a multidimensional consumer- based brand equity scale. *Journal of Business Research* 52(1): 1-14.

Zulu, A. (2021) The EFF cannot deliver radical change in South Africa. *Jacobin.* 07 December. Available at: https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/07/economic-freedom-fighters-eff-julius-malema-identity-class-south-african-politics (accessed 22 January 2022).