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PERSONAL BRAND OF A POLITICIAN IN AN ELECTION CAMPAIGN – POLITICAL PERSONAS ON FACEBOOK

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A politician's persona is negotiated on multiple platforms in various ways. Some maintain a strategic, carefully negotiated self, while others reveal more and blur lines between professional and private dimensions of their persona (Street 2004). Together with constituents – who discuss them widely on different platforms – politicians build personal brands which construct their lives as performances and products to be sold (van Dijck 2013; Enli 2015a). Persona representations provoke feelings and politicians are expected to effectively manage scrutiny of both private and professional elements of their public selves.

In Finland the personalization of politics has grown (Van Aelst et al. 2012; Isotalus & Almonkari 2014), and candidates increasingly aim to gather votes often through innovative self-displays. Some use controversy as a tool, are less worried about distinguishing between private and public, and have skills to strategically negotiate their brand in an influential manner. Such complex political personas are becoming more popular, with more politicians embracing dynamics of personal branding and self-representation using both professional and personal life together (Frame & Brachotte 2015). Marshall et al. (2015) describe how “persona as a meanings system is dependent on what could be called the prosopographic relations”. Prosopography studies how biography is constructed from the lives and careers of the person (Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2020, p. 7). Facebook shows this as a timeline, a constantly developing biography where all aspects of an identity that an individual chooses to share are presented, and reputation and influence depend on how it resonates with other users (ibid: 113).

Van Dijck (2013) argues online personas are *equal* to personal brands. This is enforced during campaigning when public political discussion is also more active and of greater volume. Persona studies offers clear paths to consider how the construction of a personal brand can be negotiated and strategically produced by politicians working with their followers (Marshall et al. 2020, p. 201). My study of the parliamentary election campaign of 2019 examines which strategic choices politicians and constituents make when posting and commenting on Facebook, and how this makes persona as both self and political brand. I consider this intersection of political communications, public relations (PR), marketing communications, and persona studies an important viewpoint for the relationships between personal brands and political campaigning. The research examines 18 public pages of Finnish delegates and party leaders with a qualitative and quantitative content analysis of 16,157 posts and comments. The principal lines of enquiry consider how political personas are negotiated during election campaigns, with examination particularly of the intercommunications between professional and private dimensions of self.

Political parties, politicians, and other political actors are co-dependent brands built from policies being part of personal discourse and vice versa. Public discussion online affects those brands by offering and moulding perceptions through large-scale exposure. On social media, politicians no longer have to consider traditional media as gatekeepers because they can choose what content they publish themselves. However, none of the Finnish politicians studied

really provide meaningful access to backstage (Goffman 1959). Rather, they focus on how strategic persona display can aid their political roles. The most successful political personas (in terms of clicks, likes and shares) are often built through strong rhetoric, presentation, and presence, and only five candidates in the data offer any meaningful insights into their private backstage lives.

In this discourse, voters are viewed as consumers to whom political personas and their associated products – including the party and its policies – can be sold. Politicians' personal brands can simplify choices and tighten the relationship with the voter (Mokhtar 2017). As Van Dijck (2013, p. 202) describes, individual politicians and their personalities have been marketed as digital products since connectivity has turned “online social value to real rewards in offline world”, in this case in relation to votes. Political persona is therefore another aspect of publicly sold representation of self. However, this is not only constructed by the individuals themselves. The persona is collectively constructed and defines the politician and their value in relation to their interpersonal relationships with voters.

To consider this against Erving Goffman's (1959) idea of front and back stage performances, while politicians may have clear processes and strategies of what is presented and what is left out, they cannot control online discussions which can steer the focus and the negotiation of the persona. For Finnish politicians, the seemingly personal and authentic performances of self on social media are rarely carefully crafted staged performances but rather often small seemingly spontaneous glimpses, where private dimensions are a passing prop in the stage of professional self and performance negotiation. Genuine, spontaneous content is more likely to engage users on social media, but especially in case of politicians, such *illusions of authenticity* might just be enough (Enli 2015b; Enli 2009). There is a requirement of authenticity, but scepticism towards marketing and strategic selling challenges the impression and Finnish politicians seem aware of voter perception of the lack of authenticity of such exchanges. Constituents are, therefore important actors in the process of building political self-brands. While posts are controlled by both candidates and their marketing teams - allowing curation of content and impression management - constituents have significant power in terms of steering the discussion, pushing their own interpretations forward and choosing the focus. Discussion is highly dependent on former perceptions of the politicians and highlights the importance of persona being a process where earlier prints affect future ones. Therefore, politicians can - and should - evaluate which aspects of their persona are beneficial for their brand and might help them to interact with constituents as part of their professional work. In political communication, the process requires expertise from the politicians and their communication agencies in strategies for managing impressions. It also needs deep consideration of the power of the audience in steering it all.

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