Human Nature

Understanding Political Sentiment and the Political Climate with Brand Research

Brands and products affect emotions. The unconscious perception determines a great part of our consumption preferences and decisions. A fact that also applies to politics. **Stefanie Sonnenschein** and **Sören Scholz** explain what voters and soccer fans as well as parties and brands have in common.

Post-truth – a word which existed several decades without being noticed – became really popular last year, especially in the political context. The frequency of its usage increased rapidly, so the Oxford Dictionaries declared it to be the word of the year 2016, defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". In other words: it became common knowledge that even rational themes like politics are crucially influenced by emotions. In a different context, this finding was already learned long ago: in brand management. The unconscious perception determines a great part of our consumption preferences and decisions. Hence communication as well as product development have to take into account the unconscious, emotional perception. While conducting brand research and revealing unconscious per-ceptions in this context, we came up with an innovative idea: After having analyzed hundreds of brands, advertising materials, industries, markets – what if we treat parties like brands and analyze them with our approved method that captures the unconscious emotional impact? Said and done: As 2017 is a year full of elections

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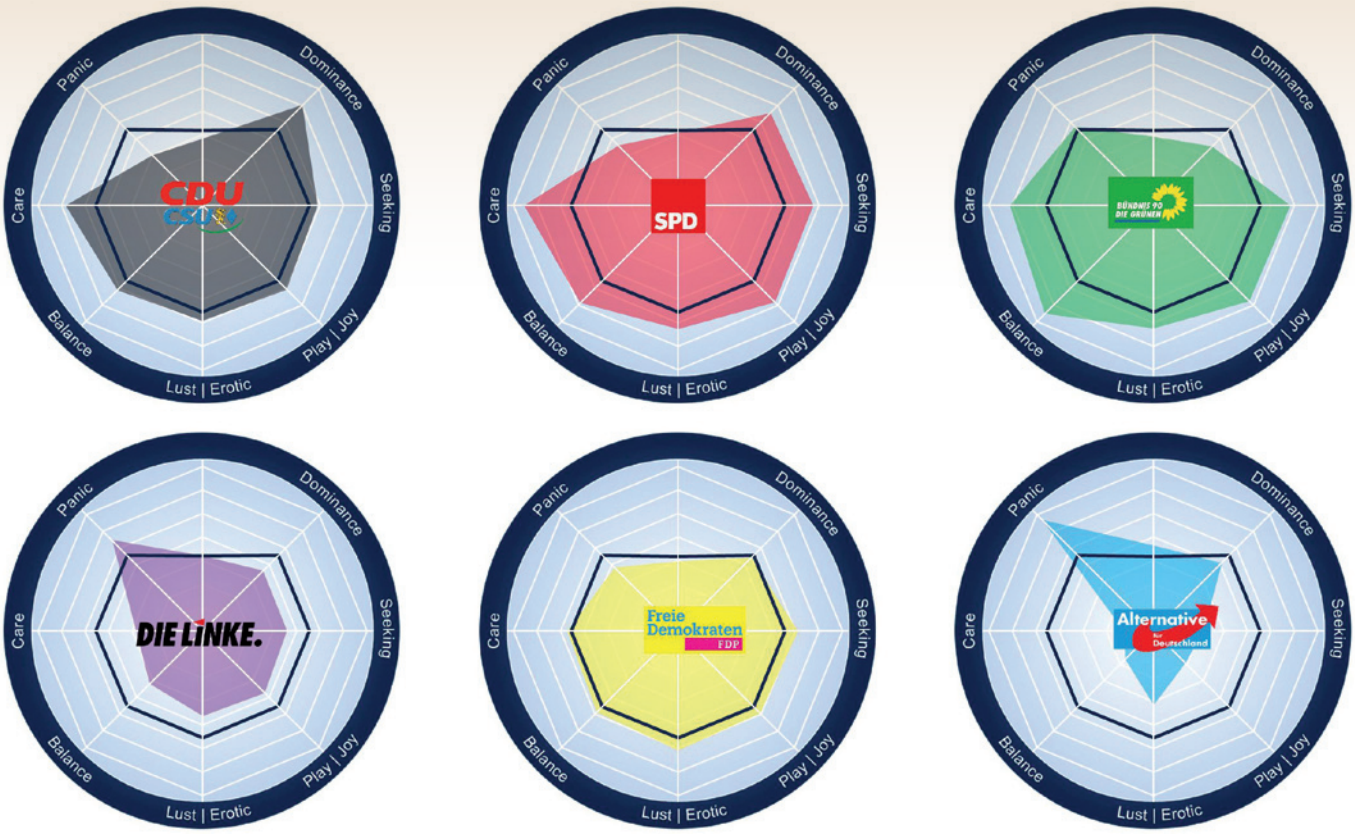


Fig. 1:
Emotional profiles

in Germany – especially the Bundestag elections – we chose these to be the main subject of the study, in particular the parties. We wanted to explore what elective citizens in Germany unconsciously – and hence also emotionally – associate with parties and their top candidates.

Tool and Study

We conducted an online survey with 2,661 representative elective citizens in Germany. To measure the subliminal level of perception, we used the Emotional Branding Monitor (EBM) – a method used for brand research for approximately ten years at Interrogare. The results of this method make it possible to identify the emotional profile of the analyzed brand, to compare its emotional positioning to the competition, to determine its implicit likability and its crucial factors – everything for optimizing the brand strategy, as well as communication, product or packaging design.

How does it Work?

The EMB is able to identify subconscious emotions by reaction time measurement. In a brand research context, the participants are shown a brand and several stimuli – pictures and verbal items – on their screen one at a time. The respondents have to indicate for each stimulus – by clicking on the "does fit" (A) or "does not fit" (K) key – whether they associate an image or term with the shown brand or not. The faster the reaction, the stronger the subconscious, emotional association. The used verbal items and pictures are validated and represent the seven scientifically proven basic emotions that make up the foundation in all human emotions. The technique used has a long track record of scientific and practical implementations, for example in marketing and social psychological research. It records subconscious, cognitively non-reflected associations and emotions, hence there is no distortion of results due to influences such as social desirability. Another advantage is that the way of answering is simple, fast and intuitive. The quality of results is ensured by a training module connected ahead, the rescaling of individual reaction speed, an elimination of outliers and a full randomization and avoidance of sequential effects. In this study, we simply modified it by showing a party or candidate instead of a commercial brand.

Subconsciously Linked

The results of the study show emotional profiles for parties and top candidates, as well as precise information on the strength of the associations with certain items. On this basis, statements can be made about how and how strongly parties and candidates are subconsciously linked with certain pictures and terms in the minds of the people. Above you are shown the emotional profiles of the six analyzed parties: CDU/CSU (grey), SPD (red), GRÜNE (green), LINKE (purple), FDP (yellow) and AfD (blue) (Fig. 1).

The governing parties CDU/CSU and SPD have the most similar emotional profiles. The most extreme profiles belong to those parties, which also polarize the most: LINKE (purple) and AfD (blue). Across all respondents, they are strongly associated with the terms skepticism and caution – thus parties not to be trusted much in the average perception of the elective German citizens. The emotional profile of the green party has a clear peak in the emotional system of balance, which derives from strong associations with terms like sustainability, simplicity or even friendship. FDP's profile is mostly similar to the average profile of all tested parties, indicating a lack of a unique selling proposition compared to the other parties.

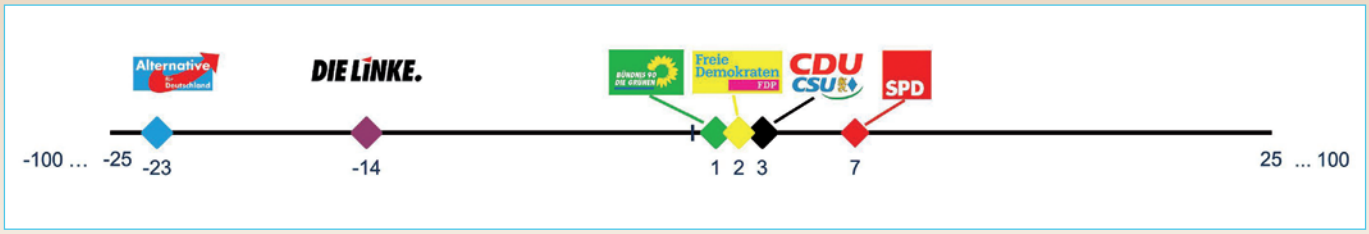


Fig. 2:
Party likability

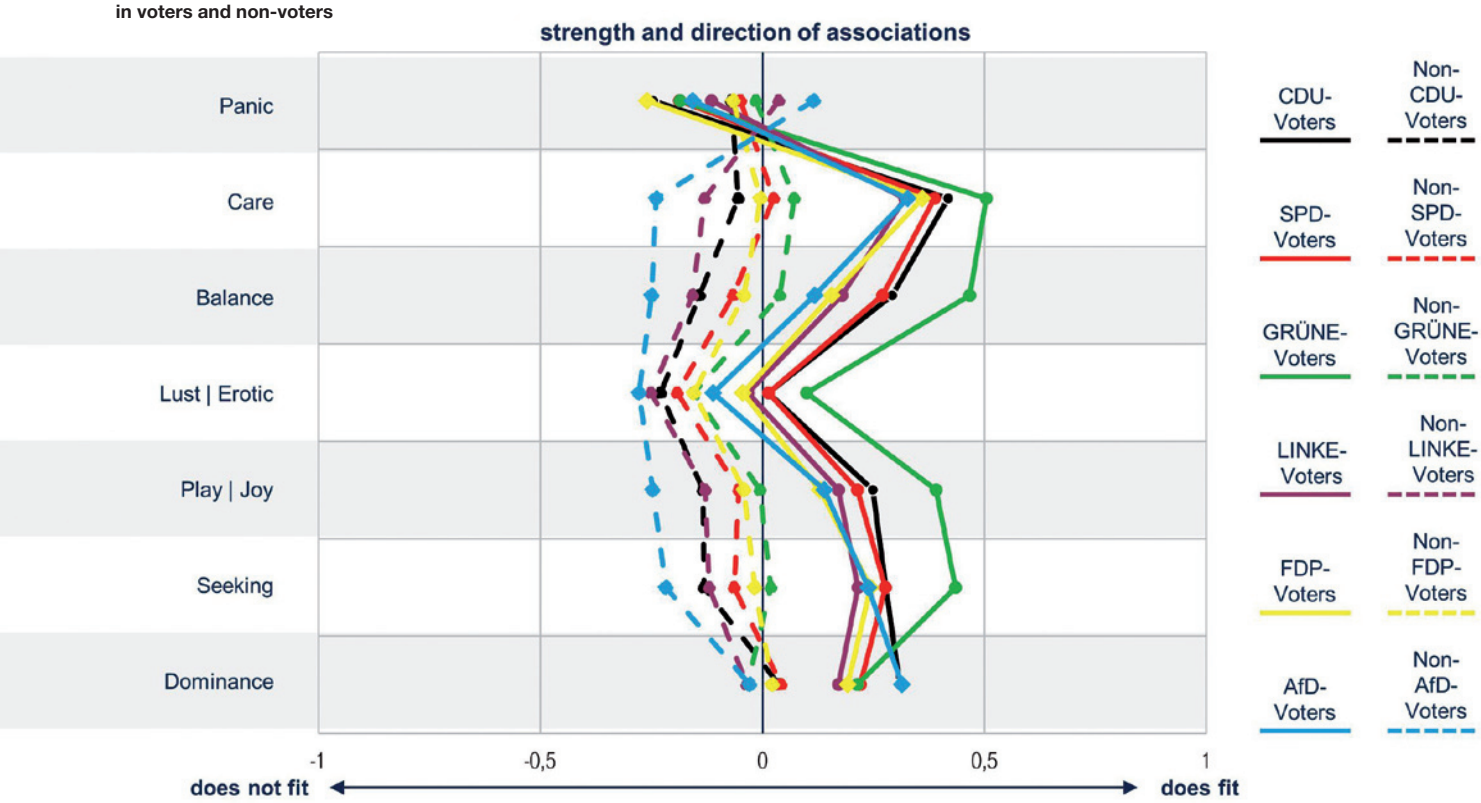
Overall Brand Likability

Besides the emotional profiles, we also collected data about the unconscious overall brand (or party) likability for parties and candidates. It reflects the above emotional profiles in a certain way: The SPD, which has the strongest emotional profile of all parties tested, is also implicitly perceived as the most likable. The two parties which were seen most critically also assume the most negative values in this context. The parties with the most elaborated emotional profile yield the highest overall implicit (brand) likability (Fig. 2). To that effect, the emotional profiles and overall brand likabilities for the parties reflect the last election results – and even more so – the survey results of the "Sunday question" ("Sonntagsfrage"), which measures the voting intention in the run-up to the elections.

Driven by Emotions

These results highly indicate that measuring emotions of voters may be a helpful tool in order to better understand political sentiment and the political climate. Having analyzed brands in various industries and markets ranging from highly emotional FMCG brands to rather rational B2B brands, these results are by no means a surprise for us. In fact, although elections should be made up by rational, conscious decisions, voters are still humans who are driven by emotions and emotional perceptions to a substantial part. A fact that has coined the term "post-truth" and could be witnessed in many recent elections, such as the Brexit in the UK

Fig. 3:
Party likability split up in voters and non-voters



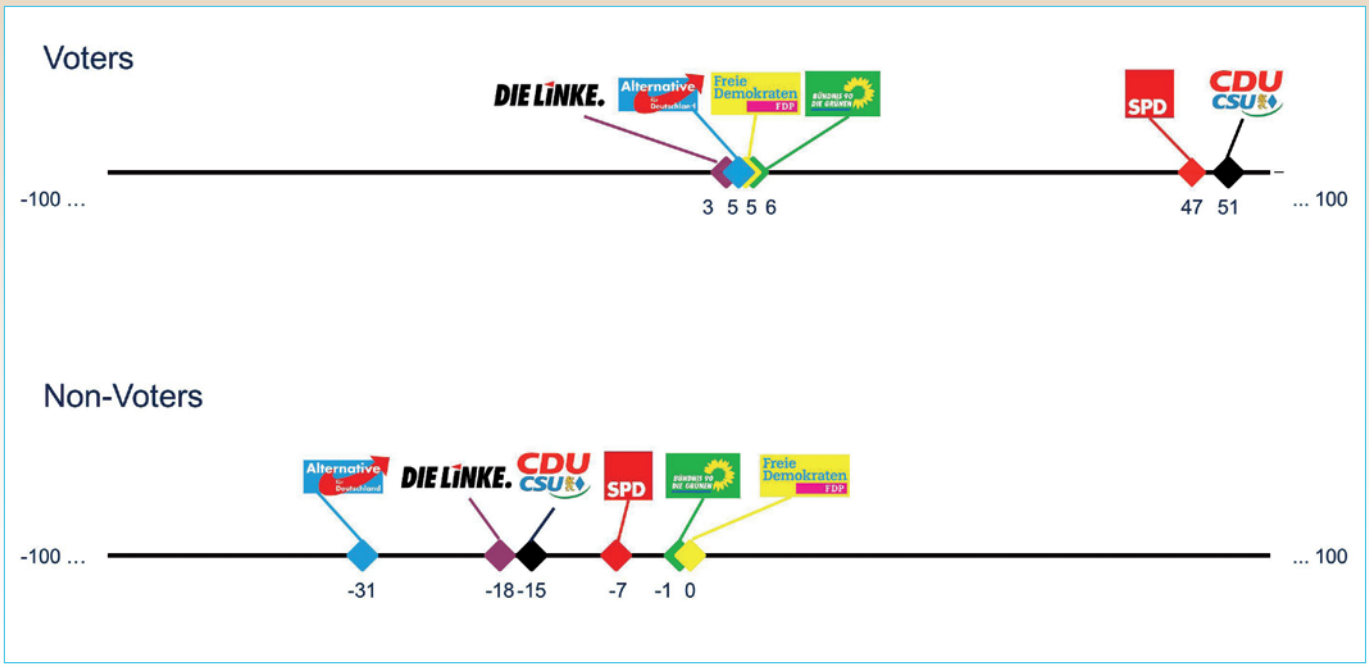


Fig. 4:
Party likability split up in voters and non-voters

and the US presidential elections in 2016. In other words, it is worthwhile to apply brand research tools seeking to understand the implicit, emotional perception of parties in the context of political research.

Substantial Differences

Despite this, we could also identify substantial differences in the perception of parties and commercial brands tested in other studies: In brand research, we usually find that non-users still rate other brands than their main brand benevolently or have at least neutral perceptions of brands they do not use. Particularly leading brands are usually perceived well by non-users in most markets. This does not hold for parties: The potential voters and supporters of a specific party usually feel a substantial antipathy for most of the other parties – yielding in negative ratings on the overall brand likability scale. We have not seen this result for a single commercial brand so far. The reason for this, can easily be seen when splitting the emotional profiles into voters and non-voters of each party (Fig. 3). For an easier legibility, the profiles are visualized as a vertical line-chart, where the dashed line stands for the non-voters, and the continuous line for the voters of the respective party. It is clear: voters and non-voters have almost opposite perceptions of a party.

Voters and Non-voters

Even more revealing are the results of the implicit party likability split up in voters and non-voters: From all parties tested, CDU/CSU yields the highest difference in overall party likability between voters and non-voters (Fig. 4). Concluding, voters do not perceive parties similarly to brands but rather show a rivalry like soccer fans: Being a supporter of one club (for example Borussia Dortmund) often implies not to like specific other clubs (for example FC Schalke 04 or Bayern Munich). Based on this result, one has to be cautious when simply trying to transfer branding strategies to the political context of parties. While brands can easily benefit from a co-branding partnerships (such as putting an Intel sticker on the new Dell computer or Louis Vuitton designing an exclusive set of suitcases and bags for the BMW i8), parties should have more concerns when joining forces.

This is supported by the fact that substantial parts of the German population are not in favor of a great coalition of CDU/CSU and SPD. Or, put in another context, who would want Borussia Dortmund and Bayern Munich to club together in the Bundesliga? ▪

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